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Global Bifurcation**

Robert M. Cutler

America-Israel-Azerbaijan

Stephen Blank

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In the Grip of Global Bifurcation

The EU and its Possible Futures

Robert M. Cutler

A dozen years ago, I led a three-week international scenario-planning simulation for Wikistrat involving 80 experts across three continents. Our aim was to forecast plausible trajectories for the European Union through 2030. We developed four distinct “Master Narratives,” each representing a structurally coherent future. One scenario, *Solidarity in Misery*, envisioned the EU maintaining its formal institutional unity while stagnating economically and compensating for this stagnation through increasingly fervent affirmations of symbolic European identity. As of 2025, this scenario most closely resembles the EU’s current condition.

The simulation did not just identify static end-states; it mapped causal sequences—policy pathways and decision-points—through which the EU might either entrench or escape each scenario. In the case of *Solidarity in Misery*, there were multiple routes to a more favorable future, marked by both economic dynamism and social cohesion. These routes, while varied in detail, shared broad structural characteristics. The scenario to which they pointed was called *Wealthy Europe*. Achieving it required a coordinated suite of interventions across fiscal, monetary, migratory, and geopolitical domains.

Today, more than a decade later, Mario Draghi’s September

Robert M. Cutler is Practitioner Member, Waterloo Institute for Complexity and Innovation, University of Waterloo. He was for many years a senior researcher in the Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at Carleton University. He is a past fellow of both the Canadian International Council and the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. The views expressed in this essay are his own.

2024 *Report on European Competitiveness*, and Ursula von der Leyen’s January 2025 programmatic uptake of it, together constitute a partial, incomplete expression of that pivot. The Draghi report accurately diagnoses many of the EU’s structural weaknesses, and von der Leyen’s agenda selectively embraces its headline recommendations. Yet the incomplete nature of this policy uptake, combined with persistent institutional inertia and new external shocks, raises the specter that the system may absorb and neutralize its own attempts at self-reform, even while ostensibly seeking transformation.

This article evaluates whether the Draghi–von der Leyen trajectory can credibly shift the EU out of the *Solidarity in Misery* trap. It measures current reforms not only against their stated goals but also, more rigorously, against the systemic criteria outlined by the earlier simulation’s projected escape pathways. Using a complex-systems lens, the analysis explores policy divergence, partial pivots, and latent fracture lines within the EU. It ultimately asks whether the Union is on the verge of meaningful transformation or

merely rationalizing its own managed decline.

From Simulation to Scenarios

The 2013 simulation was structured around a core principle from the science of complex systems: that institutional trajectories emerge from recursive, path-dependent interactions among structural constraints, agent strategies, and exogenous shocks. Over a structured three-week exercise, participants developed competing scenarios, which were then stress-tested against plausibility criteria and policy feasibility thresholds. The outcome was four “Master Narratives,” each projecting a structurally coherent future for the European Union.

One, *Solidarity in Misery*. In this scenario, the EU would survive austerity, crisis, and stagnation by cultivating a symbolic identity as a substitute for policy success. Institutional innovation would be frozen and weak growth, normalized. Brexit was not foreseen: it was supposed that no

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member state would exit the Union. EU publics would feel estranged but would continue to cling to the idea of “Europe.”

Two, *Torn Apart by Success*. Here, growth would return unevenly, and the resulting economic divergence would fracture solidarity. As the European core would advance and the periphery stagnate, institutions would lose credibility, and policy spillovers would become politically toxic. National interests would predominate as EU-skepticism rose.

Three, *Cold Peace*. This scenario is defined by a geopolitical retreat: the EU turns inward as external threats intensify, resulting in strategic paralysis. As a result, its international weight declines, and it becomes a custodial administrative zone for its members rather than a coherent global actor.

Four, *Wealthy Europe*. This was only scenario featuring both sustained growth and institutional cohesion. It would result from a coordinated pivot: geostrategic investment, institutional reform, and proactive social integration. The EU would become not only a rule-setter but a global standard-setter. This future would be characterized by a deepened monetary and banking union, integrated capital markets, adaptive migration policies

(notably conceptualized before the 2015 “Merkel moment”), and stabilized geopolitical alignment.

The structural integrity of *Solidarity in Misery* should not obscure its predictive accuracy. Though it did not anticipate the politically imposed economic lockdowns of the early 2020s, it did foresee a sluggish recovery, unresolved migratory tensions, an overreliance on symbolic integration, and a widening gap between formal institutional coherence and informal strategic fragmentation. Each of the four scenarios embedded pathways (sequences of interlocking policy decisions and institutional shifts) through which the EU could move toward or away from the integrated prosperity envisioned in *Wealthy Europe*. The *Solidarity in Misery* scenario was especially detailed, offering a multi-phase roadmap through which stagnation could be overcome via targeted reforms across fiscal, migration, energy, and monetary domains.

As of 2025, the *Solidarity in Misery* scenario remains the EU’s baseline condition. Any serious evaluation of the Draghi report and von der Leyen’s response must therefore be grounded not in abstract ideals but in the structured requirements of a credible pivot from stagnation to systemic transformation.

The Partial Pivot

The Draghi report and von der Leyen’s response would appear, at first glance, to signal a departure from the policy inertia that has long characterized the EU’s malaise. Yet their shared trajectory raises a critical question: Does this apparent shift represent a system-level realignment, or does it merely tweak existing problems without resolving them? This section examines that question by placing current developments against the simulation’s model of escape from stagnation. It draws out key points of convergence and divergence in order to assess whether these reforms initiate structural change or merely simulate its appearance.

According to the simulation’s results, the escape from *Solidarity in Misery* to *Wealthy Europe* required a sequenced and conditional integration of five policy vectors: geopolitical projection, banking and financial union, trade liberalization, coordinated migration management, and demographic stabilization. These were not modular components but

interdependent phases: pursuing one without resolving its prerequisites risked undermining the systemic transition. While the Draghi report is comprehensive, its recommendations are framed largely within a competitiveness paradigm. Von der Leyen’s “Competitiveness Compass” selectively incorporates some of its key proposals. Both documents sideline such core issue-areas as geostrategic positioning and a demographically-informed migration strategy.

The simulation emphasized geostrategic assertiveness as a necessary early-stage precondition. This element is either implicit or missing from the Draghi report, and von der Leyen amplifies it only modestly. Draghi’s fiscal recommendations focus on macro-level investment envelopes but omit differentiated migration dynamics and the political preconditions for intra-EU labor mobility. The simulation, by contrast, identified both of these as essential to a sustainable pivot. A second-order divergence is the absence of structural institutional reform. The idea of establishing a Eurozone Parliament with independent monetary-legislative

The European Union still possesses latent capacities for structural reinvention, but the window for self-correction is no longer open-ended.

capacity was under active discussion in Brussels policy circles at the time of the simulation and was central to the *Wealthy Europe* scenario. Draghi and von der Leyen, by contrast, anchor policy coordination in existing institutional geometries. This approach constrains the EU's capacity to adapt constructively, let alone transformatively.

Despite these divergences, there are partial convergences. Draghi's call for €800 billion per year in productivity-oriented investment aligns with the simulation's demand for a pan-EU growth envelope. Von der Leyen's support for capital market integration and joint borrowing echoes the simulation's roadmap toward financial union.

What emerges is a *partial pivot*: Draghi and von der Leyen seek to redirect European policy away from austerity and toward investment-led growth. The simulation posited that resolving fiscal divergence, energy fragmentation, and migration backlash required a specific sequence: first geopolitical consolidation, followed by institutional innovation, and only then capital pooling. While Draghi and von der Leyen embrace Capital Markets Union and Banking Union as goals, they do so out of sequence and without sufficient strategic anchoring. This recalls the EU's

founding period, when economic integration was expected to generate political unity downstream.

But today's global environment, unlike the postwar era, is multipolar, fragmented, and adversarial: market integration no longer guarantees political convergence, and financial instruments cannot by themselves substitute for an assumed shared strategic purpose that no longer exists. That inversion creates a structural asymmetry: the EU would attempt to grow and stabilize through financial means, but these efforts are unsupported by political or institutional alignment. Increased liquidity and rhetorical cohesion could be achieved; but in the absence of parallel reforms in representation, migration policy, and geopolitical stance, the risk is that stagnation is reproduced under new policy branding.

There are points of alignment between Draghi and von der Leyen, such as the former's call for investment-led growth and the latter's promotion of a European Savings and Investment Union and a re-empowered European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA). These points would reflect mild progress toward financial integration; however, this *partial pivot* lacks a coherent transitional logic. The internal bifurcation between North/

East and South/West Europe overlays economic, political, and institutional divides. The Draghi-von der Leyen program may manage disorder and prevent collapse, but it does not resolve this fundamental internal geoeconomic fragmentation. While this partial pivot reflects a shift in tone and intent, it does not resolve the deeper contradictions within the EU's structure. The following sections move from this simulation-informed reflection into a rigorous mapping of the EU's emerging fault lines across institutional, demographic, infrastructural, and strategic domains. This shift reflects the urgency of confronting structural misalignment at scale.

Internal Divergence and Strategic Exposure

The Draghi-von der Leyen agenda, though partially responsive to problems, fails to account for the extent to which the EU's internal fragmentation has become structurally embedded. The necessary conditions for coordinated transformation, as derived from the simulation, are being undermined not only by inaction but also by growing misalignment across the Union's demographic, institutional, and strategic foundations. This section examines how

internal divergence—once considered a manageable feature of enlargement—now exposes the EU to systemic vulnerability. The analysis proceeds through interlinked analytical domains: institutional logic, demographic constraint, infrastructural incoherence, and geopolitical drift. Together, these pressures erode the Union's capacity to act coherently in what is now a rapidly bifurcating international system.

The presumption that formal institutions could neutralize structural divergence among EU member states was never grounded in certainty. It was an “illocutionary act” of narrative construction—i.e., one where the focus is on the speaker's performance of an action by saying something rather than on the actual words used or their effect on the listener—anchored in the illusion that integration, once initiated, would be self-reinforcing. Now, that illusion is breaking down. The core contradiction is no longer between ideal and execution, but between institutional continuity and functional incoherence. The organizational architecture remains, but the logics of its parts diverge.

What has developed instead is a compound asymmetry where—from fiscal strategy to institutional culture to geopolitical

posture—divergences are layered in destabilizing divergences. The asymmetry follows a rough axis from North and East to South and West, although this convenient geographical shorthand does not capture the depth of the misalignment.

Northern and eastern countries—Poland, the Baltics, the Nordics—operate with a logic shaped by historical experience and institutional rigor. For them, fiscal prudence is not merely policy but a criterion for credibility. Given their geographic proximity to a strategic (indeed existential) threat, NATO is not an option but an axiom. These states align toward deterrence, rule coherence, and a vision of “Europe” as a security compact anchored in transatlantic discipline. The EU lacks a fully-fledged military arm, and its members increasingly treat the EU and NATO as complementary frameworks: the one governing economic and regulatory integrity, and the other ensuring collective defense. The formal distinction between them is functionally blurred in the strategic calculus. Notably, Denmark recently announced its departure from the EU’s “Frugal Four,” suggesting a shift even among fiscally conservative member states toward a more integrated understanding of European responsibility in both security and investment domains.

To the west and south, the situation is more fragmented. France advances a doctrine of strategic autonomy that is sometimes aspirational and sometimes instrumental, yet it is still wedded to American security guarantees, because NATO (and the U.S. nuclear and conventional deterrent, above all) continues to underpin European defense in ways that EU-led initiatives cannot yet replace. Germany remains suspended between industrial interdependence with China and normative commitment to Western alliances. Italy, Spain, and Greece oscillate within domestic cycles of economic constraint and social volatility, looking to Brussels for investment buffers but without any shared clarity on strategic convergence.

These divergent, even conflicting, state-specific institutional dispositions are rooted in differentiated historical and contemporary experiences of state formation, demographic pressure, and elite reproduction. Under such conditions, coordination is not just difficult but structurally complicated. Initiatives in defense procurement, capital markets, or fiscal stabilization are launched into a field where state-preference vectors no longer align. Execution fails because the premise for coordination is exhausted.

The demographic compression now constraining nearly all EU member states intensifies this misalignment. Fertility rates remain below replacement as age-dependency ratios rise year-on-year. The productive base narrows even as the demand for social expenditures expands. There is no longer a “window” in which to act; the window has become the frame.

A policy on migration from outside the European continent might have been a stabilizing instrument, but delay transformed it into a stressor on the system. The east rejects quotas on cultural and political grounds, as exemplified by the Visegrád Group’s opposition to the EU’s 2015-2016 quota system. Likewise, a 2016 referendum in Hungary rejected compulsory quotas. By contrast, the south faces the operational burden of first reception under the Dublin Regulation (2013), which sets out which EU member state is responsible for examining an asylum application. The south demands resource redistribution that rarely materializes. Italy and Greece’s calls for reform and the stalled Dublin IV proposal are cases in point.

The north hedges and calculating intake by labor needs but then filters entry through rigid conditionalities. Thus, Germany’s

2016 Asylum Package II (which mandates accelerated asylum decisions) and Denmark’s 2010 Ghetto Plan (which seeks to promote social integration) restricted family reunifications and imposed employment-based residency criteria. A rhetorical public solidarity persists, often through European Council commitments and voluntary relocation schemes (such as the 2019-2020 France-Germany initiative), but the operational logic results in the evasion of the main questions.

The Draghi report of 2024 acknowledges labor shortages but offers no framework to address the EU’s demographic crisis. Von der Leyen’s 2025 program refers to the European Skills Agenda and Talent Partnerships, but these nods toward workforce mobility lack coherence. Both Draghi and von der Leyen view human capital as reactive to market and political forces. With the New Pact on Migration and Asylum stalled and the European Labour Authority underfunded, no architecture links demographic trends to economic or social renewal.

Persistent regional divides now make it impossible to achieve consensus on what such a framework would even look like. Municipalities are left improvising, with initiatives in cities like Milan and Marseille

struggling for resources while national ministries are caught between economic shortfalls and electoral pressure. Declarations from Brussels, such as rhetorical European Parliament resolutions and superficial follow-ups to the 2015 Valletta Summit that brought European and African leaders together to discuss the migrant crisis, perpetuate the policy vacuum by substituting symbolism for strategy.

The same pattern is visible in the EU's energy and digital infrastructures. After Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Union scrambled to diversify its gas supply, ramping up LNG imports from the U.S., Qatar, and Algeria. A memorandum of understanding signed with Azerbaijan in July 2022 did result in a modest increase in piped gas volumes via the Southern Gas Corridor, but further expansion remains stalled by regulatory constraints—including EU bans on financing significant hydrocarbon fuel infrastructure—creating a procedural impasse despite strategic intent.

Dependency figures improved on paper, but there are lags in the physical integration of new supplies. There is no shared doctrine for energy flow: transmission grids still have limited cross-border

capacity. The EU's energy network is still a patchwork of national systems, bridged sporadically by underpowered interconnectors and distorted by legacy contracts and domestic priorities. "Infrastructure sovereignty" has been normatively declared in EU Commission communiqués and EU Energy Council statements, but this remains a slogan without material engineering. The 2023 RePowerEU plan and the Connecting Europe Facility have yet to resolve core interconnection and distribution gaps.

This inertia typifies the deeper incapacity to project operational coherence in other areas that demand shared sovereignty. The digital sphere follows a similar logic: the EU leads in innovative, normative regulatory frameworks (such as the Digital Markets Act, the Digital Services Act, and the AI Act), but it lacks the industrial base to support them. There is no coherent linkage between these frameworks and material build-out. Semiconductor production remains marginal, dominated by non-European firms; cloud infrastructure is fragmented; and platform power rests outside the continent. The 2023 Chips Act was announced as a corrective, but its scale and execution are not enough to close the gap with global competitors. Meanwhile, the foundational financial requirements for

a robust digital economy (such as a flexible tax environment, scalable capital markets, and operational freedom for innovation) are either lacking or actively constrained by the EU's internal structures. High energy costs for data centers and AI infrastructure, rigid regulatory environments, and inconsistent national incentives further undermine the ambition to be a serious digital actor.

The result is a growing disjunction between normative aspiration and material capacity, experienced as an illusion of control. The EU is caught between U.S. platform dominance and Chinese infrastructural expansion, trying to regulate what it neither invents nor produces. It has no industrial depth to enforce interoperability at scale or to ensure digital resilience. Semiconductor dependence remains chronic, and the European Cloud Initiative has failed

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to break the dominance of U.S.-based providers. EU legislative efforts such as the General Data Protection Regulation (2016) and the Digital Markets Act (2022) are brought forward, but they rest on a fragile technological base. The EU's "digital sovereignty" claims

are hollowed out by the regulatory superstructure's lack of material autonomy. These claims are reduced to periodic declarations that seek to mask the EU's structural exposure to external pressures.

This cumulative structural disalignment produces stratification rather than collapse. Legally and bureaucratically, the EU continues to issue directives, allocate funds, and convene summits, while the real drivers of integration—such as a shared strategic culture, investment priorities, and demographic planning—stall. Private capital, perceiving the absence of coherent long-term planning, flows instead to more predictable transatlantic and Indo-Pacific destinations.

Eastern and northern states strengthen defense policy through NATO channels, notably with increased joint procurement under the European Defence Fund and

closer operational alignment via Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a framework and process within the EU that deepens defense cooperation among member states willing to do so. In this manner, they bypass the Union's political core.

Southern states pursue ad hoc fiscal collaboration (e.g., the partial activation of the European Stability Mechanism) and irregular migration coordination under pressure from the Mediterranean route. In these ways, opt-outs, derogations, and delayed ratifications become normalized. The Union's procedural machinery holds, but its substantive cohesion erodes. Germany and France, as well as the EU Commission, characteristically waver between strategic posturing and tactical improvisation.

This behavior is hardly a deliberate redesign; it is, rather, an adaptive reflex to systemic disalignment.

Contradictions are not resolved through institutional innovation. They are instead absorbed through procedural flexibility. In this process, institutional memory substitutes for institutional future: past agreements are recycled and forward coherence is deferred. The system persists as a management framework for its own internal status quo, but it lacks the coherence either to project power or to shape external consequences. In periods of relative external calm, as we have seen until fairly recently, this condition suffices; however, as

is becoming increasingly evident under the new sustained pressure, it risks disintegration into practical irrelevance.

This internal drift carries geo-strategic consequences. The EU cannot operate as a strategic actor in a bifurcated world unless it achieves internal coordination

The EU cannot operate as a strategic actor in a bifurcated world unless it achieves internal coordination at scale.

at scale. The fiscal, demographic, infrastructural, and technological fractures described above constrain its agency. An EU incapable of

aligning its capital allocation, labor strategy, and industrial base can only react to external shocks, not shape them. The 2022 Strategic Compass and the 2023 Industrial Strategy, while symbolically ambitious, fall short of reconstructing the EU's internal capacity for external projection. This trajectory is not inevitable, but the window to disrupt it is narrowing.

Talk of "strategic autonomy" and "sovereignty" rings hollow without serious and workable platforms to sustain them. Slogans substitute for substance, fostering the illusion that administrative continuity is equivalent to systemic capability. Unless the

EU rapidly rebuilds its internal capacity along the model of the post-Single European Act momentum—when legal, economic, and political integration cohered into a system capable of projecting regulatory and normative influence—it will drift without a gravitational center: lacking leverage, it will eventually forfeit relevance. Already, the fragmentation of its internal logic is visible in the divergence of strategic priorities, fiscal postures, and regulatory alignments, rendering its international posture reactive. Yet it remains difficult to grasp from within the Brussels bubble, that an EU deprived of autonomous power will be reduced—is being reduced—to a procedural zone increasingly orchestrated from the outside by actors having greater strategic coherence.

These fragmented and asymmetric patterns of adaptation are not isolated developments. They are increasingly overdetermined by global structural dynamics that impose their own constraints upon the EU's agency. To understand how internal divergence intersects with external systemic bifurcation, the next section shifts from granular policy diagnostics to an integrated geopolitical systems analysis.

Strategic Drift, Institutional Incoherence

The EU's internal fragmentation does not merely complicate coordination. It now threatens the Union's capacity for strategic agency. This section examines how this persistent divergence has evolved into a deeper systemic failure. It is not a failure of institutional design per se, but of institutional functionality under global stress. As pressures intensify with the international system bifurcating between the Anglosphere and the Sinosphere, the EU's procedural machinery reproduces form without generating momentum. The analysis below traces that drift by explicating how the Union's structure lacks system, how its timelines lack synchrony, and how its strategic ambitions lack anchoring. It is not breakdown that results, but rather a simulation of coherence that masks a growing incapacity to act.

The European Union's internal fragmentation is no longer a concatenation of disaggregated frictions. It has consolidated into a patterned asymmetry that is structurally aligned with the deepening bifurcation of the global order. This is not metaphor; it is system geometry. The post-2022 international

topology—an emergent dual-core configuration dominated by the Anglosphere and Sinosphere—has become a gravitational field that orients the collision between the EU's internal political and economic tectonic plates. The Anglosphere is moving to absorb the EU's north and east; the Sinosphere conditions the hesitation of the EU's south and west. Strategic drift is no longer stasis but slow, cohesive, and directional segmentation.

Northern and eastern EU member states increasingly entrench themselves within U.S.-anchored defense and regulatory ecosystems. Digital architecture, energy security, cybersecurity doctrines, and capital mobility all bind them more deeply the transatlantic community. Western and southern EU member states, meanwhile, remain structurally ambivalent, dependent on Chinese trade volumes and global capital flows, yet still reliant on NATO for deterrence. France articulates strategic autonomy but backstops its posture with American guarantees. Germany hedges its position through technocratic caution, balancing a structural reliance on export markets—particularly China—with a restrained geopolitical posture constrained historical inheritance and dependent on U.S. security guarantees. The EU's institutional frame persists, but

its internal reference systems now diverge.

This failure of internal alignment is an embedded institutional disposition, yet it is not theoretical. Rather, it is a reflection of the emergent global bipolarity. The Union's forms superficially reproduce procedural continuity, but beneath this, strategic coherence is melting. Regulations and rhetoric maintain the illusion of unity, but geopolitical torque is shearing apart the operative logic of policy coordination. What emerges here is not collapse, but bifurcation within continuity: a legally intact but strategically disarticulated European Union, functionally divided and inertial in response.

Neutrality between the Anglosphere and the Sinosphere ceases to be a viable position and is exposed as a symptom of disconnection from the pace and direction of global systemic change. The EU's longstanding aspiration to act as a “regulatory superpower” now yields diminishing returns, as faster-moving technological blocs increasingly bypass its standard-setting influence, which rival normative frameworks now contest. Simultaneously, the gravitational pull of its single market is growing weaker amid global economic fragmentation, supply-chain

regionalization, and hesitation by external investors. Unless the EU reconstructs internal coherence, not as compromise but as strategic re-foundation, it will not hold its own center. The world has already for some time ceased to orbit around it.

The Draghi-von der Leyen reform agenda is not incoherent. In its diagnostic precision and conceptual ambition, it is one of the clearest technocratic syntheses of the European strategic condition in recent memory; but coherence on paper is not producing traction in institutional space. The flaw is not in the vision, nor is it in the vocabulary. The flaw is the absence of a meso-structural framework capable of binding the intent for reforms to their actual execution. In other words, the problem is that there is no solid middle layer of institutional structures, political coalitions, and operational mechanisms to connect high-level goals with concrete implementation. Ambitious plans are made, but dependable machinery to carry them out is lacking.

It is not any lack of ideas that has eroded the EU's strategic capacity. The system is simply unable to translate consensus into system behavior. Sectoral domains—capital markets, energy, digital regulation,

labor mobility—continue to operate in procedural silos that rarely interface with one another, each being governed by its own policy logic. The modular nature of the EU's governance design is effective under conditions of stability, but it becomes pathological under stress. There is no layer of policy-coupling architecture to convert cross-sectoral diagnosis into the coordinated delivery of results in times of geoeconomic unpredictability and geopolitical transformation.

The Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP), the Green Deal Industrial Plan, and other Draghi-inspired mechanisms represent forward motion in form, but their operational baselines remain brittle. They layer instrumentation on top of legacy mechanisms, within which initiatives are undercapitalized or launched without timeline-binding mandates or any irrevocable long-term political commitment by member states. The European Investment Bank, invoked as a possible sovereign lever, remains structurally constrained: its mandate is rooted in risk-avoidance, which is incompatible with systemic transformation. EU institutions absorb strategic ambition and reproduce it as symbolic output while expecting the member states to underwrite the substance, yet also while refusing to alter the

distribution of authority that would make such ambition executable.

Even when policy uptake occurs in speeches and communiqués, its execution detours into procedural sub-layers: the EU Commission directorates redistribute mandates; the EU Council configurations dilute timelines; the intergovernmental overlays negotiate opt-outs. The EU Parliament, structurally reactive and lacking original budgetary initiative, comments at the margins of strategic design. The execution of mandate and strategic vision dissipates in those interstitial spaces of distributed authority; without critical concentration, agency evaporates. The deeper condition is epistemological. EU governance assumes that to layer instruments will generate capability, whereas in practice it produces redundancy. No executive body has sufficiently strong power to coordinate across the given policy silos. No EU treasury exists to enforce resource convergence across multiple policy domains. The consequence is not inefficiency but the dissolution of policy coherence at the threshold of implementation.

This is no longer an episodic malfunction, but rather an issue with operational logic. Policy peaks at declaration and descends into the granularity of interinstitutional

negotiation. The system coordinates but its capacity for execution does not increase. Procedurally, “Europe” speaks in compound tenses, but its actions are perpetually deferred and its ambitions are codified in frameworks that expire before they consolidate. Yet the language is not the problem. What we have is a simulation of agency.

Institutional Europe is not only spatially fragmented but also temporally fractured. Its procedural cadence is out of phase with accelerated change in the global system, as well as with its own internal cycles. The EU produces timelines that it cannot inhabit; the budget allocations, ratification processes, and intergovernmental mandates all operate at wholly different rhythms. The Union cannot act in time because it does not share time; and as it defers action, delay dissolves into incoherence. Even theoretically synchronized strategic proposals disaggregate in contact with reality. Budgetary envelopes are negotiated one year, released another, and absorbed across multiple national timetables that are not fully synchronized. Electoral cycles interrupt ratification; political transitions vitiate momentum. This structural latency leads integrated programming to degrade into asynchronous improvisation. Even

the EU Commission’s high-profile initiatives cannot guarantee that member states will act within convergent windows.

The time gap between design and execution neutralizes intent; meanwhile, the global system has moved into a different time signature. The Draghi–von der Leyen program treats exogenous pressures like U.S.

industrial policy, Chinese infrastructural expansion, and monetary realignments away from the West as contextual challenges rather than structural drivers. But the bifurcation of the international system has become endogenous to the very operating environment within which the EU itself acts. The global phase shift proceeds without waiting on Brussels. Unless the Union constructs an institutional capacity to move at the tempo of the international system—not just faster but synchronized—it will remain unable to generate traction. Disconnected from the strategic realities of time in the real world, the EU becomes, to its increasing detriment, disconnected from geopolitical and geoeconomic consequence.

The most critical lacuna in the Draghi–von der Leyen framework is not a particular domain, but a constitutive substrate: labor, demography, and human infrastructure. The entire apparatus of competitiveness is constructed on an eroding demographic base, yet this erosion is not structurally addressed. Labor and migration, which should be treated as founda-

Disconnected from the strategic realities of time in the real world, the EU becomes, to its increasing detriment, disconnected from geopolitical and geoeconomic consequence.

tional levers of resilience, remain subordinated to security crises and political contingency. There is still no integrated mechanism for labor mobility, no shared protocol for migration strategy

in relation to demographic decline, and no fertility policy connected to strategic planning. The population base upon which all economic recovery narratives are built is treated as an exogenous variable.

That omission marks the system’s refusal to recognize that the human substrate is the ground for any rational technological ambition, let alone a feasible fiscal instrument or cohesive regulatory strategy. As migration policy remains reactive and political incentives reward delay, the EU’s narratives on productivity float untethered in cloud-cuckoo

land. “Strategic autonomy,” in this context, becomes a decorous incantation. How to be sovereign without an industrial base, a digital infrastructure, or a population strategy?

To pivot requires structural redesign across the three axes of lock-in, coupling, and alignment. First, the EU needs a fiscal instrument severed from domestic cycles: a Sovereign Investment Mechanism capable of executing across time. Second, it must build a meso-architecture, such as an Economic Security Council or a reformed Eurogroup, which binds sectoral policies into coherent motion with obligatory feedback loops. Third, it must align internal timelines and resource strategies with external system tempo. Until this happens, the European Union will retain form and even content, but at the cost of consequence. It will simulate sovereignty, circulate initiatives, and drift under the weight of its own unacknowledged misalignment.

Strategy Without System

The previous section traced how internal fragmentation, procedural overload, and institutional delay hollow out the EU’s

strategic capacity. However, not only is policy coherence lacking, so is institutional traction. This section shifts the focus from the Union’s internal malfunction to its failure to operate as a system—that is, to coordinate across sectors, keep up with the global pace of change, and align strategic intent with operational reality. The Draghi–von der Leyen agenda is conceptually robust, but it cannot overcome the organizational deficits without structural redesign. The following analysis outlines how fragmented governance, demographic neglect, temporal asynchrony, and incomplete alignment combine to prevent the EU from executing a true systemic pivot.

Just as disagreement weakens the EU’s strategic capacity, so this is also undermined by the absence of institutional mechanisms that could sustain policy coherence across sectors and cycles. The Draghi–von der Leyen agenda, for all its conceptual ambition, fails to embed reform in a durable procedural framework; and the absence of a durable procedural framework means that there is no overarching substantive framework. Its instruments are modular, provisional,

often reversible, subject to national discretion, and prone to fragmentation.

The EU’s modular governance design was well-suited for consensus-building under stable conditions, but system stress has rendered it maladaptive. Sectoral initiatives like capital markets reform or digital regulation advance in isolation without any unifying scaffolding. Past proposals for integrative frameworks, such as a Eurozone Parliament, were diluted or abandoned. The EIB’s continuing constraint by a risk-averse approach constrains its capacity for strategic investment, weakening its ability to address system-scale challenges.

This policy fragmentation vitiates any strategic feedback loops. The bureaucratic structure operates through procedural sub-layers to fragment Draghi’s ambitious proposals, disconnecting sectoral goals from the coherent delivery of the intended result. There is no institution charged with dealing with external shocks and technological acceleration. Directives are generated and funds are allocated, but there is no efficacious enforcement. Since no organizational body is

empowered to bind cross-sectoral policy into coherent action, inertia and routine predominate.

The structural critiques outlined above logically lead to a recognition that the EU’s economic and technological aspirations are built on an eroding demographic substrate. The Draghi–von der Leyen framework gives a nod to labor shortages and skills-based migration, but it continues to treat human capital as a reactive input rather than as the strategic pillar it should be. A more reasonably constructed EU would have some coherent structural architecture for integrating fertility policy (rates are falling), labor mobility (gaps are widening), and managed migration (separating its internal and external sources), not to mention rising age-dependency ratios.

But the EU, lacking that, continues to lose real resilience. The misalignment is not peripheral lack, but a core shortcoming. Without a deliberate rethinking of labor mobility and demographic design, the EU will be unable to sustain either growth or autonomy. Missed opportunities and emergent risks include the failure to establish

The EU’s economic and technological aspirations are built on an eroding demographic substrate.

a common migration framework, the reactive securitization of border policy, and the absence of differentiated national toolkits.

Frontline states like Italy, Greece, and Spain bear disproportionate burdens, while in other countries domestic politics obstructs consensus. At the EU level, political incentives favor delay, resulting in rhetorical commitments that dissipate into procedural fog. The failure clearly to separate internal from external migration—an imperative already clearly indicated by the 2013 simulation that I led—means that labor and migration are still not treated as formative levers shaping system capacity.

The EU's failure is a matter not just of procedure but also of timing. As established above, the Union's internal cycles lag behind the accelerating cadence of the global system. Yet the Draghi-von der Leyen agenda continues to frame exogenous pressures as contextual challenges, rather than acknowledging them as structural forces reshaping the terrain within which the EU operates. Recent external shocks highlight this asynchrony. Under the Biden Administration, the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act (2022) redirected capital flows toward American green industries, leaving EU initiatives sidelined.

Meanwhile, China's consolidation of supply chains, particularly in electric vehicles and critical minerals, has disrupted Europe's industrial ecosystems. Even the EU's energy pivot from Russian gas, initiated in 2022, has been fragmented: LNG terminals proliferate without coordinated transmission planning, price harmonization, or strategic procurement structures. Even strategically aligned projects, such as a necessary expansion of the Southern Gas Corridor, remain immobilized, and not by geopolitical risk, but rather by the EU's own regulatory paralysis. Such and similar developments reveal a structural misreading of the global tempo. The EU formulates intent but is overtaken by events.

The world's transition is characterized by phase shifts: nonlinear realignments that alter, relatively abruptly, the architecture of supply chains, investment flows, and industrial ecosystems. The EU is hesitantly trapped in procedural sub-cycles and incremental adjustments while the global system reconfigures itself in real-time. Without synchronization across critical domains, EU reforms will remain reactive and partial. The EU's machinery moves in half-steps, unable to match the velocity of external dynamics. The system is unable to integrate

internal coherence with external momentum.

Escaping the *Solidarity in Misery* attractor requires more than adaptation. It demands a systemic pivot, or what complexity theorists of complexity science term a "phase transition." The existing institutional scaffolding must be re-engineered along three interlocking axes: lock-in, coupling, and alignment.

Lock-in. The EU must uncouple its strategic investment capacity from the volatility of annual budget cycles and national bargaining. A European Sovereign Investment Mechanism, supranational and equipped with discretionary bandwidth and legal autonomy, is essential. Without this, investment strategies will remain hostage to short-term political calculations, and long-term transformation will remain structurally impossible.

Coupling. Sectoral initiatives—e.g., capital markets integration, digital sovereignty, labor mobility—persist as isolated policy islands. A meso-architecture, such as a reconfigured Eurogroup or an Economic Security Council, must translate horizontal priorities into vertically synchronized action. This intermediate layer would embed feedback loops that convert

fragmented reforms into systemic flows, creating coherence without which the EU's machinery will continue to function as a collection of silos.

Alignment. The EU must abandon the pretense that global bifurcation is an external condition to be managed and recognize it as an internal contradiction. Trade doctrine, technological standards, and energy strategy must all be reconfigured within a Euro-Atlantic framework. Hedged neutrality is no longer viable; partial convergence will not suffice. Euro-Atlantic alignment is not a concession but rather the architecture of the EU's future agency, if it is to have any. This is not to the exclusion of increased involvement in the Silk Road region, if it is coordinated with American strategies and policies.

These levers are the preconditions for a genuine EU-systemic transition. In their absence, the EU will remain a meta-stable hybrid, over-integrated for sovereign initiative but under-integrated for coherent agency. Without structural redesign, the *Wealthy Europe* scenario will remain a theoretical construct rather than a real possibility. The window for decisive action is narrowing.

Possible Futures

The preceding analysis has traced the erosion of the EU's strategic coherence across its institutional, demographic, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. This section turns from diagnosis to structured foresight, presenting three scenarios centered on the EU that extrapolate from current trends under conditions of continued global bifurcation. These scenarios are not speculative projections, but *adaptive equilibria*, i.e., stylized systemic outcomes that emerge from the interaction between unresolved internal fragmentation and accelerating external pressures. Each of them represents a plausible future for the 2030s, depending on whether the EU remains inert, disintegrates under pressure, or succeeds in executing a systemic pivot.

The baseline future scenario could be called "Enduring Stagnation." In it, the EU remains trapped by the *Solidarity in Misery* attractor until the 2013 simulation's horizon of 2030 arrives. Strategic drift continues beneath the surface of bureaucratic continuity. Draghi's structural vision is not outright rejected, but neither is it fully implemented; rather, it is deferred into procedural inertia. Von der Leyen's reforms are present in the public

discourse but remain unsupported by institutional redesign. The result of this stasis will be that key reforms falter. The Banking Union will stay incomplete, and capital-markets integration will stall amid regulatory divergence and taxation mismatches.

Likewise, common borrowing would be used episodically in crises but is never embedded as a sustained strategic mechanism. The Draghi agenda would live on as rhetoric, but binding instruments would remain absent. In this situation, demographic imbalances and labor market challenges will remain unaddressed, as migration policy remains fragmented and ineffective. Cost-sharing will remain elusive, and local authorities will remain overburdened. It is almost already baked-in that fertility will continue to decline and skills shortages will continue to persist: a formula for the further erosion of productive capacity and social cohesion. Externally, the EU would further deepen commercial entanglements with China while continuing to rely on U.S. security guarantees.

That is a precarious straddle in a further bifurcating world; it would, moreover, presuppose a reversal of current U.S. strategic thinking. Such a result would produce widening industrial vulnerabilities in

areas like pharmaceuticals and critical minerals. Following the pattern of other policy issue areas, claims of digital sovereignty may be sustained in rhetoric but will collapse under infrastructural dependence. By the early 2030s, nominal growth may even return on the back of global growth, but this would take place without a renewal of productivity or even any legitimacy recognized by the public. The general impression of the EU will be that it is strategically hollow, even if administratively coherent, a juridical container for managed irrelevance that still survives but is increasingly peripheral.

The second possible scenario could be called "Torn Apart by Failure." The 2013 simulation did not suggest that *Solidarity is Misery* was durable in the longer term. If such inertia prevails, then a critical exogenous shock like a sovereign debt rupture or an external military escalation (but not limited to those examples) would be able to rupture the fragile equilibrium. Today, we can say that the result of that would fuse together elements of the simulation's *Torn Apart by Success* and *Cold Peace* scenarios, signifying a cumulative trajectory of the EU system's erosion.

The resulting external shock will trigger fragmentation. Eastern and

northern member states will deepen their alignment with the U.S. and NATO. The Franco-German axis will fray, and even the recent idea for reinvigorating the Weimar Triangle with Poland will not save it. Southern states, frustrated by EU bureaucratic inaction, will pursue ad hoc fiscal and energy cooperation autonomously, bypassing Brussels with other "coalitions of the capable" coalescing around other critical policy issue-areas.

By the mid-2030s, the EU will function as a mosaic of overlapping regional groupings: Intermarium, Balto-Scandia, a Danubian Compact, a Mediterranean Core—to name just a few possibilities. Brussels will persist as an administrative hub for the increasingly disconnected polities of its increasingly divergent member states. However, the Brussels bureaucracy will become more of an archivist than an architect, a hollowed-out procedural shell continuing to mouth the rhetoric of unimplemented reform.

The movement out of *Solidarity is Misery* thus fails through drift: Draghi's report will become a retrospective artifact, a "what might have been" blueprint overtaken by events. At the same time, following past patterns, von der Leyen's partial reforms will dissipate into national improvisations, abandoned

amid mounting political risk. Throughout the policy universe, regulatory alignment will erode as opt-outs and legal ambiguities proliferate still further than they already have done.

The final possible outcome is “Achieving the *Wealthy Europe* Scenario.” A credible pivot from the *Solidarity in Misery* trajectory to a coherent, high-functioning future for the EU demands decisive structural reconfiguration. This transition cannot be triggered by discrete policies but only by an integrated, system-wide shift: a phase transition catalyzed by the realization that the EU’s current procedural machinery is incompatible with the bifurcating global system.

The necessary inflection point is political: a coalition of core EU member states converging around the establishment of a permanent, supranational investment authority, insulated from the volatility of intergovernmental cycles. This mechanism to normalize joint borrowing (not just as an episodic response to crisis) must be operational by 2027 or 2028, redirecting the Union’s fiscal architecture toward strategic investment in industrial modernization, energy diversification, and digital infrastructure. The 2027-2028 window is critical,

because it marks the start of the EU’s next Multiannual Financial Framework (i.e. budgetary) cycle in 2028-2034, the 2026 expiration of the pandemic-era Recovery and Resilience Facility (joint borrowing instrument), and the narrowing geopolitical window for institutionalizing the EU’s sustained strategic investment.

This pivot is more than fiscal. Demographic and labor-market policies would need to be reframed as structural drivers rather than reactive inputs. The distinction between internal skilled migration and unmanaged external flows would become embedded in a differentiated framework, and other demographic programs would be strategically coupled to industrial policy. This shift would put human infrastructure at the heart of the EU’s competitive and geopolitical agency, signaling a shift from managing demographic decline to proactive demographic regeneration.

Externally, the EU must decisively align with the Anglosphere: not as a subordinate, but as a co-architect of a Euro-Atlantic compact. “Strategic autonomy” would evolve into interdependent antifragility, underpinned by institutionalized defense coordination, technology partnerships, and a re-grounded energy doctrine. The integration

of regulatory power with an operational capacity would signal a departure from the hollow proceduralism characterizing the EU’s earlier attempts at sovereignty. By 2040, the EU in this scenario would not have erased its pluralism but rather orchestrated it into a dynamic system of *polycentric subsidiarity*: it becomes but a builder of coherent architectures that can participate in shaping the emergent global order.

Choosing a Future

If those are the plausible trajectories of the European project, then what are the structural conditions for the EU to reclaim its agency? The European Union is now at a sys-

tem-bifurcation point. The question is no longer about economic competitiveness or technocratic refinement but about the viability of what is called the “European project” as a coherent political system. The distinction between a *Wealthy Europe* scenario and a hollowed-out Union does not depend on whether individual reforms are adopted or delayed, but on whether the Union can refigure its systemic logic to match

the tempo of international-system change and reintegrate its own internal fracture lines. This is about re-anchoring Europe’s role in the world. Incremental adjustments will not suffice; a deliberate, sequenced phase transition is required.

Von der Leyen’s reform program has only partially addressed Draghi’s diagnosis of the EU’s core deficits, including underinvestment, competitiveness erosion, and institutional undercapacity. It all remains trapped in an operational logic that assumes a global equilibrium that has already dissolved. The bifurcated international system, with its competing infrastructural, financial, and technological ecosystems, demands from the EU a new institu-

tional circuitry capable of coupling together its own fragmented policy domains and aligning them with external realities.

Breaking from the *Solidarity in Misery* attractor demands decisive action across five interlocking domains. These are not stand-alone policy areas but structural levers, the integration of which will generate new systemic coherence for the EU.

What are the structural conditions for the EU to reclaim its agency?

One, *Strategic Autonomy and Euro-Atlantic Alignment*. The illusion of equidistance between China and the U.S. must be abandoned. Euro-Atlantic interdependence is not optional; it is the precondition for resilience. Industrial policy in AI, semiconductors, energy, and critical minerals must be co-designed with democratic partners. The European External Action Service (EEAS) must evolve from a symbolic appendage into an operational geostrategic actor, capable of encoding the EU's priorities into external alignments. This last would require member states to phase out their national foreign policy prerogatives.

Two, *Migration, Labor, and Demography as Systemic Drivers*. Population policy is economic strategy. Legal and irregular migration streams must be differentiated, with skilled migration linked to dynamic labor forecasts. Fertility support and labor retraining programs should be strategically coupled to industrial and technological renewal. Policy instruments must remain nationally differentiated but synchronized through common digital platforms and backed by EU-level fiscal support.

Three, *Fiscal-Political Integration with Autonomous Capacity*. The

EU requires a permanent, supranational fiscal instrument anchored in autonomous resources. Joint borrowing must be reframed as strategic investment rather than an emergency response. Disbursement must be performance-linked—to innovation, climate transition, and productive capacity—in order to mitigate politicization and secure durable legitimacy.

Four, *Monetary and Capital-Market Architecture as Systemic Infrastructure*. The Banking Union must be completed, with the European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA) endowed with supranational regulatory authority. Eurobonds should be institutionalized as not only safe assets but macro-financial stabilizers. A common deposit insurance mechanism, scaled by risk-based contributions, would close the credibility gap and support cross-border capital flow integration.

Five, *Institutional Sequencing and Democratic Legitimacy*. A differentiated parliamentary structure—potentially a Eurozone Parliament with fiscal oversight—should complement the broader European Parliament. Co-designed governance, grounded in polycentric subsidiarity, is essential for public legitimacy.

Strategic narratives must precede institutional mechanisms. The EU's architecture for renewal must be built on coherent stories that mobilize collective agency.

A Decision Space Closing

The 2013 simulation that I ran was not naive. *Solidarity in Misery* was, and remains, a meta-stable basin, i.e., a transitional attractor immobilizing strategic momentum without resolving the tensions it accumulates. Its stasis is not stability, but it disguises erosion. The appearance of system coherence camouflages the entrenchment of systemic incoherence.

The European Union still possesses latent capacities for structural reinvention, but the window for self-correction is no longer open-ended, as it seemed to be in 2013. The EU's institutional scaffolding remains intact, and its policy space has not yet collapsed; however, the phase has passed during which systemic readjustment could have been discretionary. It has now become imperative, lest the EU be defined by the passing of its era.

The international system has already restructured its basis. The bifurcation between the

Anglosphere and the Sinosphere is the operative configuration that constrains the EU's capacity for maneuver, defining the perimeter of its agency. External pressures and internal desynchronization now converge to close the window of opportunity for incrementalism. What once passed for cohesion is spoiling into stagnation; what seemed like as continuity now reveals itself as strategic drift. The inward-looking question—whether the Union stands at the threshold of renewal or is merely refining the grammar of its decline—is no longer sufficient. The real query is outward-facing and existential: Does the EU still exercise strategic initiative, or has its trajectory become externally scripted?

An EU that acts preemptively, with coherence and conviction, may yet co-author the architecture of the post-bifurcation international order. It may yet encode its priorities into the evolving topography of the international system. But an EU that hesitates by delegating decisions and mistaking process for power will persist only as an “archival” relic, viz., as a custodian of legacy mechanisms, administering decline long after its capacity for self-transformation has expired.

Coda

What the 2013 simulation foresaw as adaptive equilibria now reveal themselves in sharper focus. *Solidarity in Misery*, once a plausible interim state, has hardened into a structural attractor. Pathways out remain visible but systemic drift and external torsion increasingly obstruct them. In this closing moment, that simulation

is no longer merely a foresight exercise, but it has become a mirror. Scenarios are not just prophecies; they are also projections of choices. The EU may yet shift from being an object of global bifurcation to a co-architect of its future reconfiguration, but it will not have another chance to choose. Its chances for success will increase if its outreach to the Eastern Partnership countries and Central Asia is coordinated with its allies in North America. **BD**

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