



"From European Strengths to EU Power"

Policy Note - Democracy

European Democracy Under Pressure: Trust, Sovereignty, and Delivery in a Fragmented World

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A briefing informed by the discussions of the Third European Conclave, under the responsibility of the Conclave Executive Board members in their individual capacity.

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FOREWORD

THE CONCLAVE WAS CREATED TO ADDRESS THE UNTHINKABLE.

At a time when European debates were largely dominated by the management of successive crises, **the ambition of the Conclave was to create a space where Europeans could project themselves beyond the turbulence of the moment and reflect on the long-term future of the continent.**

Created with the support and participation of António Costa — now President of the European Council — and with the contribution of major European foundations and corporations, the Conclave brought together a small and diverse group of influential Europeans: prime ministers, entrepreneurs, researchers, trade unionists, civil society leaders, and citizens who had participated in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The first Conclave, held in November 2023, anticipated what many still considered unlikely: the return of the law of the strongest in international relations.

One year before the second election of President Donald Trump, participants analysed the emergence of a world increasingly shaped by geopolitical rivalry, imperial ambitions, and the growing risk of global disorder. The fifty first Conclavers reached a common conclusion: **Europeans could no longer remain spectators of global power dynamics.**

Europe would have to transform the European Union into a global, sustainable and responsible power, capable of acting in a world increasingly structured by the rivalry of major powers such as the United States and China. But this **European power would be different in nature: it would pursue no imperial domination and remain anchored in international law, multilateral cooperation and democratic legitimacy.**

SUCH A TRANSFORMATION WAS NOT PRESENTED AS AN OPTION BUT AS A NECESSITY. WITHOUT IT, EUROPEANS WOULD RISK BECOMING THE OBJECT RATHER THAN THE SUBJECT OF GLOBAL POWER COMPETITION.

The second Conclave, held in early 2025 in the presence of the Presidents of the European Council and the European Economic and Social Committee, as well as the Prime Minister of Belgium, translated this diagnosis into a concrete agenda.

The report “A Power Agenda for a Global, Sustainable, and Responsible Europe” proposed a series of strategic priorities: developing an independent European defence and security capacity, regaining scientific and technological leadership, and building a new partnership strategy with key global actors such as India, Brazil, and Canada.

Since then, many of these ideas have entered the European debate and begun to influence the agenda of European institutions and national governments.

Recent developments — from growing geopolitical instability to the threat of annexing Greenland, a European territory — have further accelerated this awakening. **The debate about transforming the European Union into a global power is no longer a taboo.**

[The third Conclave](#) therefore focused on identifying the key conditions for such a transformation.

- First, **Europe must seize its momentum for a bold growth agenda**. Discussions held in the presence of the President of the European Investment Bank, Nadia Calviño, highlighted the urgency of developing such an agenda. Competitiveness alone will not be enough. Without stronger growth, Europe risks a gradual decline that would weaken its capacity to defend its interests and fuel political fragmentation.
- Second, **Europe must ensure its technological and digital resilience**. Artificial intelligence, digital infrastructures and data ecosystems have become essential components of economic competitiveness, security and democratic sovereignty.
- Third, **Europe must renew its democratic model and reconnect citizens with the European project**, building a new generation of democratic participation adapted to the digital age and protected from external technological influence.

In this respect, we want to highlight an initiative of which many Conclavers have chosen to be Co-Founders, the [Europa Power Initiative](#), a unique societal, cultural and civic movement¹: its objective, to contribute to create the societal and political dynamics enabling the EU and Europe to transform into a new generation global, sustainable and responsible citizen-driven power and avoiding relegation to a protectorate completely resonates with the works and recommendations of the last Conclave.

These discussions confirm a central reality: Europe possesses extraordinary assets — scientific excellence, economic strength, democratic institutions, and a unique model of cooperation.

Among these assets is something historically unprecedented: **nearly half a billion free citizens who uniquely combine both national citizenship and European citizenship**. This dual democratic belonging constitutes one of the most powerful political innovations of modern history and gives Europe a singular capacity to act collectively while preserving the diversity of its nations.

Far from witnessing a civilisational decline, Europe may in fact be entering a new phase of expansion. For the first time in history, a political community is growing and attracting new members not through domination or strength relationships, but through **equality between states, the rule of law, fundamental human rights, shared prosperity, and sustainable development**. Through these principles, the European project seeks to give *civilisation* its fullest expression.

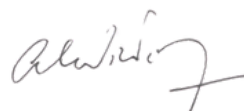
Europe must now develop the political will and strategic coherence necessary to transform these assets into power.

THE CONCLAVE WAS CREATED TO ADDRESS THE UNTHINKABLE.

Its ambition today is to help Europeans achieve what may soon become unavoidable: the emergence of a European power capable of shaping the future rather than suffering it.

Guillaume KLOSSA
Chairman of the Conclave

António VITORINO
Chairman of the Advisory Board



¹ Launched in 2025 at the initiative of a dozens of personalities including Philosopher Slavoj Žižek, Business Leaders Jean-François van Boxmeer and William Kadouch-Chassaing, Trade Unionist Ether Lynch, former EU Commissioners Mariya Gabriel, Nicolas Schmit and Margrethe Vestager with the engagement of 250 Co-Founders and the contribution of several European Parliament Representatives, including first Vice-President Sabine Verheyen, and Vice-President Younous Omarjee.

“From European Strengths to EU Power”

OVERVIEW

The Question of Power

Across the continent, citizens, institutions, and governments are rediscovering a question that had long remained implicit within the European project: the question of power. Where public debate understandably focuses on the urgency of crises, spaces for strategic reflection become indispensable. They allow us to step back from the immediacy of events and to consider the long-term direction of our collective project. This was and is the ambition behind the creation of the Conclave.

Conclave 2026

The third edition of the Conclave, which took place in Brussels in January 2026, focused on **Growth, Democracy, and Geopolitics** — with **digital capacity as a cross-cutting theme** — under the overarching perspective: *“From European Strengths to EU-Power.”* The exchanges resulted in four policy briefs.

The key recommendations of each thematic brief are outlined below.

Geopolitics

- Build a Post-American Order for Europe
- Support Ukraine and Defend Europe
- Engage Member States to Deliver on Shared Defense Priorities
- Boost European Defense Innovation
- Operationalise the Mutual Assistance Clause in the EU Treaty Article 42.7
- New Formats of Partnership and Cooperation in Trade and Public Goods

Growth

- Barriers Down for Firm Dynamics
- Single Markets for Services and Digital
- Free Way for a Capital Markets Union
- Increase Public Investment
- Allocate Defense Resources as a Catalyst for Productivity and Industrial Renewal

Digital Capacity

- Activate Demand and Procurement as the Fastest Sovereignty Lever
- Act Across the Full Digital Stack, Not Isolated Technologies
- Embed AI into Industrial and IoT Products Before the Next Product Cycle Closes
- Secure Democratic Resilience Through Sovereign Digital Public Infrastructures

Democracy

- Extend Qualified Majority Voting in Targeted Domains
- A European Sovereign News Infrastructure
- A Democratic Sovereignty Doctrine
- From Participation to Democratic Intelligence
- Trusted European Datasets to Strengthen AI Integrity

EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE: TRUST, SOVEREIGNTY & DELIVERY IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD

Rapporteur: Grégoire Roos, Director, Europe, Russia, and Eurasia at Chatham House

During the session on democracy, moderated by Philippe Etienne, former French ambassador to the United States and Germany, we addressed three questions in particular:

- **How to strengthen trust and citizen participation?** – Moderated by Aart Jan de Geus, former Minister of the Netherlands
- **What does the European democratic ideal mean in the context of new imperial wars?** – Moderated by Mariya Gabriel, former European Commissioner
- **How to preserve democracy in the digital age?** – Moderated by Erika Staël von Holstein, Managing Director of Re-Imagine Europe

Key recommendations include:

- **Extend Qualified Majority Voting in Targeted Domains**
- **A European Sovereign News Infrastructure**
- **A Democratic Sovereignty Doctrine**
- **From Participation to Democratic Intelligence**
- **Trusted European Datasets to Strengthen AI Integrity**

“La confiance est la première condition du progrès.”
Victor Hugo, Assemblée Législative, 1848

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The democracy session of Conclave 2026 reached a clear and decisive conclusion: **Europe’s democratic challenge is not only a matter of perception — it is also structural and performative. The European social contract is perceived as weakening.** Citizens increasingly assess democratic systems not on procedural integrity and transparency alone, but also on their **capacity to deliver security, prosperity, fairness, and agency in an increasingly hostile world.** The discussion confirmed that trust cannot be restored through narrative adjustments or institutional self-affirmation. Trust must be earned through visible delivery, operational transparency, and institutional innovation. All call for political audacity and risk-taking.

Three strategic transitions emerged:

1. **From communication to delivery:** Democratic legitimacy depends on tangible outcomes.
2. **From regulation to infrastructure:** In the AI age, Europe must construct sovereign democratic infrastructures rather than rely solely on legal frameworks.
3. **From participation to democratic intelligence:** Citizen engagement must become continuous, technologically enabled and institutionally consequential.

These findings not only confirm but also operationalise the warnings articulated in the Conclave Report 2023, which identified democratic fatigue and systemic polarisation as mounting risks¹. They also deepen the geopolitical framing of the Rapport du Conclave 2025, which situated Europe within an era of renewed strategic rivalry and declining multilateral stability².

Conclave 2026 therefore marks a **shift from diagnosis to construction.** The strategic question is no longer whether European democracy is under pressure, but **how Europe — and in particular the European Union (EU) — designs institutional, digital, and geopolitical architectures capable of sustaining democratic legitimacy in a fragmented world.**

Setting the Scene & Key Structural Challenges

Introduction

The session opened with a stark observation: the social contract between European citizens and democratic institutions is perceived as fraying. This erosion is not uniform across Member States, but it is structural and cross-cutting.

Participants underscored that trust is no longer a background condition. It is a contested asset. Citizens increasingly view institutions through a performance lens: do democratic systems protect them? Do they resolve concrete problems? Do they respond to insecurity in a timely and credible manner?

Performance Over Procedure

The legitimacy crisis identified in the session is fundamentally one of performance. Citizens are less persuaded by procedural legitimacy if outcomes fail to meet expectations. Economic precarity, housing shortages, migration management, and security anxieties shape political behaviour more directly than institutional theory.

A comparison was drawn with the private sector: companies adjust when they fail. Political systems often absorb dysfunction without visible corrective mechanisms. This gap generates the perception of stagnation and detachment.

The Conclave Report 2023 already warned that democratic resilience depends on citizens' perceived protection and agency¹. Conclave 2026 confirms that this perception gap has widened.

The Complexity vs. Simplicity Trap

Democratic governance is inherently complex. It requires negotiation, compromise, and legal safeguards. Yet the contemporary information environment rewards simplicity, outrage, and immediacy. Extremist narratives can be transmitted in one sentence. Democratic solutions demand explanation. This asymmetry creates a structural disadvantage for moderate politics.

Participants recalled the 2005 French Constitutional Treaty referendum and Brexit as emblematic moments when emotional perception overwhelmed factual argument. Feelings of loss of control, insecurity, and alienation outweighed institutional explanations. Fact-checking, while necessary, is insufficient. Emotional drivers must be addressed through policy performance.

Strategic Game Changers

→ **Democracy Must Deliver: Institutional Reform as Legitimacy Strategy**

The Democracy Session converged on a core principle: democracy must deliver. Delivery must be understood as a strategic objective. Institutional reform is therefore not technocratic adjustment — it is democratic policy.

Decision-Making Efficiency and Democratic Credibility

Unanimity requirements in key EU domains — foreign policy, taxation, enlargement — can delay responses to crises. While unanimity safeguards sovereignty, paralysis undermines credibility.

Concrete proposals discussed include:

- Extending Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in targeted domains.
- Strengthening the European Parliament's legislative initiative authority.
- Increasing transparency of trilogue negotiations.
- Creating structured legislative timelines to avoid opaque delays.
- Publishing clearer Council voting records to enhance accountability.

These measures are not merely procedural improvements. They are instruments to demonstrate responsiveness.

The Rapport du Conclave 2025 emphasised that Europe operates in a context of renewed power competition². Institutional inertia weakens Europe's geopolitical position. Delivery strengthens both domestic legitimacy and strategic credibility.

→ **Safeguarding Democracy in the AI Age**

Participants identified the digital environment as a structural arena in which democratic resilience is contested. Three risks were highlighted:

1. **Algorithmic Polarisation:** Recommendation systems create “cognitive enclosures” that reinforce prior beliefs and accelerate radicalisation.
2. **Sovereignty Asymmetry:** European public debate is mediated primarily through non-European platforms and datasets. This creates dependence and vulnerability.
3. **Regulatory Insufficiency:** The DSA and DMA represent major regulatory achievements, but regulation remains reactive while technological change is exponential.

Strategic Proposal: A European Sovereign News Infrastructure

The most innovative proposal emerging from the session was the creation of a pan-European sovereign news and information infrastructure. This would function not as a media outlet, but as a democratic backbone:

- Aggregating professional journalism from across Member States.
- Ensuring pluralism by design.
- Operating through decentralised governance.
- Providing AI-supported multilingual access.
- Functioning within a trusted European data space.

Its dual purpose:

- Provide citizens with accessible, high-quality journalism across languages.
- Supply European AI systems with reliable datasets grounded in European editorial standards.

This proposal builds on the 2025 Conclave's emphasis on strategic autonomy² and addresses the 2023 report's warnings regarding systemic information vulnerabilities¹. The EU must evolve from regulator to infrastructure builder.

→ **Europe, Power, and the Rule-Based Order**

Europe defines itself as a defender of a rules-based international order. Yet, this order is increasingly contested.

Participants examined how geopolitical competition reverberates domestically:

- Foreign political interference.
- Security-driven exceptionalism.
- Polarisation amplified by external actors.

The debate recognised that Europe faces pressure not only from adversaries but also from evolving strategic postures among allies.

Toward a Democratic Sovereignty Doctrine

Concrete proposals included:

- Establishing a European Democratic Non-Interference Framework.
- Creating common EU standards for responding to electoral manipulation.
- Embedding democracy-protection clauses into trade and security agreements.
- Developing coordinated EU responses to external political coercion.

The Conclave Report 2025 framed Europe's environment as one of renewed strategic rivalry². Conclave 2026 translates that framing into institutional safeguards. Democratic sovereignty must become operational doctrine.

→ Reinventing Citizen Engagement

The session moved beyond rhetorical participation to operational design.

The Flemish model of citizen assemblies was cited as a scalable example. Success depends on clear mandates, defined deliverables, and binding institutional response mechanisms.

Transparency was emphasised as foundational. Citizens rarely observe day-to-day parliamentary decision-making.

From Participation to Democratic Intelligence

Policy directions include:

- Institutionalising standing EU Citizens' Assemblies.
- Developing secure, interoperable digital participation platforms.
- Introducing visible feedback loops.
- Exploring ethical AI tools to enhance institutional listening while safeguarding privacy.

Participation must evolve from episodic consultation to continuous democratic intelligence.

→ Youth, Education, and Resilience

Education remains essential but insufficient. In an AI-mediated environment, structural safeguards must complement digital literacy. A sovereign European information infrastructure could serve as:

- A democratic reference point.
- A trusted dataset repository.
- A practical digital literacy tool.

Democracy must innovate structurally to remain resilient normatively.

→ From Regulator to Builder

The session concluded that the status quo is unsustainable. The EU must:

- Deliver visible outcomes.
- Build sovereign digital infrastructure.
- Clarify its geopolitical doctrine.
- Institutionalise meaningful participation.

The Conclave Report 2023 identified early warning signs of democratic erosion¹. The Rapport du Conclave 2025 framed Europe's strategic context². Conclave 2026 operationalises both. Trust is earned through performance, transparency, and innovation. European democracy must demonstrate effectiveness if it to survive accelerating shifts and shocks.

EU Digital Strategy & Democratic Sovereignty

- Democratic resilience requires sovereign digital infrastructure.
- Regulatory leadership must be matched by deployment capacity.
- European data spaces support both economic and democratic goals.
- Trusted European datasets strengthen AI integrity.
- EU must evolve from regulator to architect of digital commons.

Conclusion

The Democracy Session of Conclave 2026 confirmed that Europe's democratic challenge is no longer abstract. It is operational. Trust has become conditional, legitimacy performance-based, and resilience inseparable from sovereignty. In a geopolitical environment marked by strategic rivalry, technological acceleration, and societal fragmentation, democracy cannot rely on normative appeal alone. It must demonstrate effectiveness.

The EU therefore faces a strategic choice. It can remain primarily a regulator of systems designed elsewhere, or it can become a builder of the institutional, digital, and geopolitical infrastructures that sustain democratic self-government. Delivery, transparency, and structural innovation are not secondary reforms — they are the foundations of democratic credibility.

If Europe succeeds in aligning institutional performance, sovereign digital capacity, and meaningful citizen participation, it will not merely defend democracy. It will prove its continued viability in the 21st century and successfully build a credible and attractive third geopolitical way in a world poised to be increasingly shaped and fragmented by the rivalry between the United States of America and China.

References

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² Europanova, Rapport du Conclave 2025, 2025. <https://europanova.eu/rapport-du-conclave-2025/>

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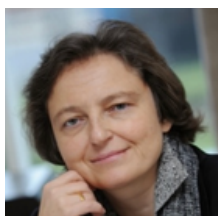
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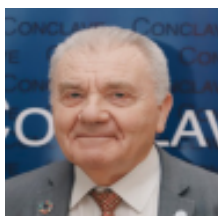
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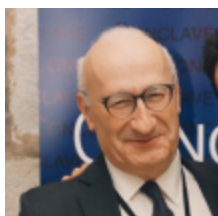
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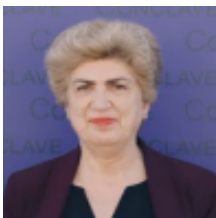
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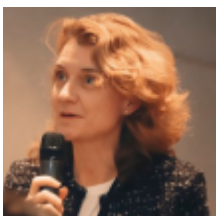
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We gratefully acknowledge the support of our partners, without whom this event would not have been possible.

The Conclave, as a new annual gathering, offers an open invitation to prospective partners passionate about shaping the future of Europe.

Our partner's participation is about becoming part of a movement that envisions a dynamic, forward-thinking Europe. By supporting this new annual tradition of strategic foresight and intellectual exchange, they contribute to a richer, more inclusive dialogue that reflects the diverse perspectives essential for a holistic European vision.

We extend our thanks to the Cabinet of Ms. Nadia Calviño, President of the European Investment Bank, and the Cabinet of Mr. Andrius Kubilius, EU Commissioner for Defence and Space.

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