

EUROPE AT THE CROSSROADS

Institutions and Migration Policies

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BİDGE Yayınları

Europe at the Crossroads: Institutions and Migration Policies

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PREFACE

Europe has never lacked theories about what it is becoming. From the earliest debates on federation and functional integration to later arguments over intergovernmental bargaining, multilevel governance, constitutional pluralism, postfunctionalism, and differentiated integration, the European project has repeatedly forced political science to revise categories that seemed secure when applied to the nation-state. Yet the problem addressed in this book is not simply that the European Union remains difficult to classify. That difficulty is familiar. The more consequential development is that the material environment of political authority is itself changing. Data infrastructures, platform economies, artificial intelligence, digital identity, algorithmic management, biometric border systems, demographic pressures, migration, and renewed industrial policy are altering the institutions through which power is organized. They do not replace parliaments, parties, ministries, courts, central banks, or states. They are being inserted into them, around them, and sometimes between them.

This book begins from a deliberately historical intuition. European political development rarely proceeds by discarding an old institutional order and replacing it overnight with a new one. The continent's political history is better understood through accumulation, adaptation, and layering. Empires coexisted with national movements; constitutional monarchies combined inherited authority with parliamentary representation; welfare states grew upon administrative structures designed for earlier purposes;

European integration itself placed supranational law beside national constitutional orders rather than simply eliminating them. The digital transformation should be approached with the same caution. The appearance of a new technology does not automatically create a new political regime. What matters is whether repeated technical innovations become embedded in rules, routines, organizations, expectations, and distributions of authority.

The argument developed across the following chapters is therefore not a technological prophecy. It is an institutional inquiry. The European Union has entered a political age in which technical architecture increasingly possesses political consequences. A standard governing data exchange may determine whether administrations can cooperate. A platform's interface may shape access to a market or a public sphere. A digital identity system may change how rights are exercised across borders. A semiconductor shortage may constrain industrial and security policy. A migration database may connect national border administrations more tightly than a new declaration of political solidarity would. The significance of these developments lies precisely in their ordinariness. Once infrastructure becomes routine, it often disappears from political attention even as dependence upon it grows.

For that reason, the first theme of the book is sovereignty understood not as a slogan but as a practical capacity. The modern state was never as self-contained as constitutional theory sometimes imagined, yet digitalization has made the distinction between formal authority and operational capacity impossible to ignore. A government may retain the legal competence to regulate a sector while depending on foreign cloud services, private platforms, imported semiconductors, or common European databases. Conversely, the European Union may lack several classical attributes of statehood while possessing extensive capacity to shape markets, technical standards, data practices, and cross-border administration.

The political question is no longer exhausted by asking who possesses final legal competence. One must also ask who controls the infrastructure through which that competence can be exercised.

A second theme concerns political representation. European integration has created one of the world's most elaborate transnational representative systems, yet electoral politics remains rooted in national organizations to an extraordinary degree. Europarties, parliamentary groups, common regulatory frameworks, and increasingly synchronized political conflicts coexist with nationally selected candidates, national media systems, domestic party careers, and distinct electoral publics. Digital platforms do not dissolve this tension. They may lower the cost of cross-border communication while strengthening national leaders; they may permit common campaign technologies while fragmenting citizens into algorithmically structured audiences; they may facilitate translation without creating a shared political identity. The future of European democracy will depend not merely on whether communication becomes more European, but on whether responsibility and political choice become more intelligible to citizens.

The third theme is economic power. For much of the postwar era, European political economy could be discussed through the institutions of industrial capitalism, organized labor, banking, national fiscal systems, competition policy, and eventually monetary integration. These remain essential, but platform capitalism has added a new institutional layer. Digital firms can organize marketplaces, determine visibility, establish technical standards, mediate payments, allocate work, and govern access to infrastructures used by both private and public organizations. The distinction between a market actor and an institutional rule-maker has accordingly become less stable. Europe's response has been characteristic but also novel: regulation remains central, yet it is

increasingly combined with industrial policy, economic-security instruments, semiconductor strategy, high-performance computing, labor rules for algorithmic management, and the prospective construction of new payment infrastructure through the digital euro.

Migration constitutes the fourth theme because it exposes the relationship among demography, political membership, labor markets, welfare institutions, borders, and European solidarity more clearly than almost any other policy field. Europe is aging, but demographic arithmetic does not dictate migration politics. Labor demand can coexist with restrictive electoral rhetoric. Common asylum rules can coexist with differentiated national implementation. Free movement can relieve shortages in one region while intensifying demographic decline in another. Temporary protection can demonstrate remarkable common capacity in one crisis while older disputes over responsibility remain unresolved in another. Migration therefore reveals a central characteristic of the European order: integration and differentiation often advance together.

These four empirical fields lead to the book's fifth and most theoretical concern. If European authority is increasingly exercised through regulatory stacks, interoperable infrastructures, platform governance, data systems, monetary networks, and differentiated forms of membership, do established theories remain sufficient? The answer developed here is intentionally restrained. Classical theories of European integration remain indispensable. Neofunctionalism still explains spillover; intergovernmentalism still explains bargaining; postfunctionalism still explains political resistance; multilevel governance still captures dispersed authority; historical institutionalism still illuminates path dependence; regulatory-state theory still explains a great deal about European power. New concepts are justified only when they identify mechanisms that these approaches leave under-specified.

The term “Algorithmic Union,” introduced cautiously in Chapter 1 and reconsidered in Chapter 5, is used in that spirit. It does not suggest that algorithms rule Europe, nor that artificial intelligence has displaced political judgment. Indeed, much of the empirical material concerns ordinary databases, interoperability standards, digital identity, automated matching, and regulatory procedures rather than advanced AI. The concept is most useful as a middle-range heuristic for examining integration through infrastructure: situations in which common technical systems and machine-readable rules create durable coordination without a dramatic constitutional transfer of sovereignty. Where existing theories explain the phenomenon better, the new term should be set aside.

Methodologically, the book therefore moves across boundaries that academic specialization often keeps separate. European integration theory is placed beside digital governance; party politics beside platform regulation; political economy beside cloud and semiconductor infrastructure; migration studies beside demographic change and administrative interoperability. This crossing of literatures is not intended to collapse their distinctions. On the contrary, the aim is to make those distinctions more precise by asking how different institutional transformations interact. The political consequences of the AI Act cannot be understood solely as technology regulation; the Migration and Asylum Pact cannot be understood solely as border policy; the Digital Markets Act cannot be understood solely as competition law; Europarties cannot be understood solely as parliamentary organizations. Each belongs to a wider transformation in the architecture of European authority.

The book also resists a common temptation in writing about contemporary technology: the temptation to confuse novelty with inevitability. The fact that a policy has been legislated does not mean it will be implemented smoothly. The existence of a technical system

does not prove that it will alter political behavior. The adoption of common rules does not guarantee convergence among member states. The rise of artificial intelligence does not imply that democratic politics will become algorithmic. Institutions possess friction. They are slowed by law, budgets, organizational routines, constitutional courts, administrative capacities, electoral conflict, public distrust, and the simple difficulty of making complex systems work across different jurisdictions. Delays and partial implementation are not peripheral details; they are evidence about the character of European integration itself.

For the same reason, this study does not offer a single forecast for Europe's future. Federalization, differentiated integration, regulatory deepening, infrastructural convergence, renationalization, and dependence on private technological systems are not mutually exclusive possibilities. Elements of each may coexist. The euro area can deepen while welfare remains national. Digital identity can become interoperable without producing a single European citizenship. Platform regulation can expand while technological dependence persists. Migration governance can become more European while political conflict becomes more national. The future European order may therefore be defined less by one final constitutional destination than by the management of overlapping authorities.

The democratic stakes of this transformation run through every chapter. Technical capacity can improve administration, but capacity without intelligible responsibility can deepen distance between institutions and citizens. Regulatory sophistication can constrain private power, but it can also create systems whose complexity is difficult to contest politically. Digital public services can reduce friction while making participation dependent on infrastructures that citizens barely understand. Europe's old legitimacy debate - who decides, on whose behalf, and through

which chain of accountability - does not disappear in the digital age. It becomes more demanding.

This is why political parties remain central to a book that devotes substantial attention to technology. Institutions do not acquire democratic meaning by functioning efficiently. They acquire it when political actors interpret them, contest them, defend alternatives, and accept responsibility for choices. A platform rule, migration database, industrial subsidy, or digital identity standard becomes politically significant when parties connect it to questions of liberty, solidarity, competitiveness, security, or sovereignty. The future of European government therefore depends not only on the growth of administrative capacity but on the ability of representative institutions to make that capacity visible and contestable.

The same principle applies to economic power. Public authority cannot be assessed only by the number of regulations adopted, just as private power cannot be measured only by market share. Dependence, interoperability, control over standards, capacity to exit, ownership of infrastructure, and access to data all shape the effective distribution of power. Europe may possess formidable regulatory reach while remaining materially dependent on non-European infrastructures. That tension is not an embarrassment to be explained away. It is one of the defining facts of the new political age.

The chapters that follow therefore proceed from institutional transformation to political representation, from economic power to migration and demography, and finally to theoretical synthesis. Chapter 1 examines sovereignty and the emergence of an infrastructural layer of European governance. Chapter 2 turns to parties, elections, and the possibility of politics beyond national borders. Chapter 3 analyzes platform capitalism and the transformation of economic institutions. Chapter 4 treats migration and demographic change as forces reshaping membership, welfare,

labor, and governance. Chapter 5 asks what kind of political order these developments produce and whether concepts such as layered sovereignty, democracy, techno-regulatory government, and the Algorithmic Union add analytical value.

Taken together, these chapters advance a simple but demanding proposition: the European Union's new political age will not be understood by searching for the moment at which the nation-state disappears, nor by assuming that every new technology produces a new regime. It must be understood through the gradual reconstruction of capacities, dependencies, boundaries, and forms of accountability. Europe has always been a laboratory of political forms because it has rarely allowed one principle of authority to settle every question. Digitalization, migration, platform capitalism, and demographic change do not end that history. They extend it.

The book is therefore written in the conviction that institutional complexity should neither be romanticized nor treated as failure. It is an object of explanation. The European Union may continue to frustrate categories designed for states and international organizations because its most characteristic feature is precisely the coexistence of different kinds of authority. The task is not to force that order into a predetermined constitutional mold, but to identify how it works, where it depends on others, where it acquires new capacities, and where democratic control remains weakest. Only then can the political significance of Europe's digital and demographic transformation be understood with the seriousness it requires.

CONTENTS

PREFACE	3
----------------------	----------

CHAPTER 1

FROM THE NATION-STATE TO THE ALGORITHMIC UNION: THE FUTURE OF SOVEREIGNTY AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN EUROPE.....	12
--	-----------

CHAPTER 2

POLITICS BEYOND BORDERS: THE DIGITAL AND TRANSNATIONAL EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION.....	45
---	-----------

CHAPTER 3

PLATFORM CAPITALISM AND THE NEW POLITICAL POWER: THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPE'S ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS	74
--	-----------

CHAPTER 4

EUROPE IN MOTION: MIGRATION, DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATION, AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS.....	101
--	------------

CHAPTER 5

BEYOND INTEGRATION: NEW THEORIES OF POLITICAL ORDER FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION	126
---	------------

CONCLUSION

EUROPE BEYOND THE OLD ALTERNATIVES.....	152
--	------------

REFERENCE INDEX	162
------------------------------	------------

CHAPTER 1

FROM THE NATION-STATE TO THE ALGORITHMIC UNION: THE FUTURE OF SOVEREIGNTY AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN EUROPE

Introduction

Europe has seldom changed its political order by abolishing the institutions that preceded it. More often, it has placed a new layer of authority beside an older one and allowed practice, litigation, administration, and economic necessity to decide how the boundaries between them would eventually be drawn. The European Coal and Steel Community did not dissolve the nation-state; the common market did not abolish national economies; monetary union did not turn the euro area into a classical federation. Yet each innovation altered what states could do alone, what they preferred to do together, and what citizens came to regard as an ordinary function of European government. The digital age should be approached in the same manner. The decisive question is not whether technology

will suddenly replace politics, but whether the infrastructures of data, identity, regulation, artificial intelligence, and cross-border administration are becoming a new layer through which European political authority is exercised.

This question matters because the inherited vocabulary of European integration was fashioned for another technological world. Neofunctionalism explained how cooperation in one sector could generate pressures for cooperation in adjacent sectors (Haas, 1958). Liberal intergovernmentalism emphasized national preference formation, interstate bargaining, and institutional delegation (Moravcsik, 1998). Multilevel governance described an order in which authority is dispersed across supranational, national, and subnational levels rather than monopolized by one sovereign center (Marks et al., 1996; Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Historical institutionalism added the insight that early institutional choices can create path dependence and make later reversal costly (Pierson, 1996). Postfunctionalism, finally, reminded integration theory that public identity, electoral conflict, and party competition can restrain elite-led institutional development (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). None of these traditions is obsolete. On the contrary, each remains indispensable. What requires reconsideration is the medium through which integration now proceeds.

A Union that regulates data protection, platform power, artificial intelligence, digital identity, interoperable public administration, semiconductor capacity, and transnational border databases is not merely legislating new economic sectors. It is increasingly specifying the technical conditions under which administrations, firms, platforms, and individuals can recognize one another and act across borders. Regulation (EU) 2016/679, the General Data Protection Regulation, established a common legal vocabulary for personal data. The Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act created new regulatory relationships with large digital

intermediaries. The Artificial Intelligence Act introduced a horizontal framework for the governance of AI systems. The Interoperable Europe Act addresses cross-border public-sector interoperability, while the European Digital Identity Framework establishes common requirements for digital identity wallets. In migration and border governance, the interoperability regulations, Eurodac, the Entry/Exit System, and the forthcoming ETIAS connect national administrations to shared European information infrastructures. Taken separately, these instruments are sectoral. Taken together, they invite a broader institutional question.

This chapter develops the concept of the Algorithmic Union as a provisional analytical framework for that question. The term is not presented as an established theory of European integration. A search of the relevant literature through September 2026 does not identify a settled school of European integration theory operating under that name. The concept is therefore used cautiously: it is a heuristic intended to bring into a common field several literatures that are usually discussed apart - regulatory state theory, digital constitutionalism, digital sovereignty, platform governance, algorithmic regulation, Europeanization, and the study of large-scale administrative infrastructures. The argument is not that algorithms have become sovereign, nor that European politics can be reduced to code. It is that an increasing share of European coordination is mediated by infrastructures whose rules are expressed not only in treaties and regulations but also in standards, databases, interfaces, identity protocols, and computational procedures.

The distinction is essential. A bureaucracy may use an algorithm without becoming an algorithmic state. A common database may improve cooperation without transferring constitutional sovereignty. A digital identity wallet may facilitate the exercise of rights without creating a new citizenship. The analytical problem is cumulative rather than categorical: at what point does the

multiplication of interoperable systems alter the practical distribution of authority in Europe? The answer cannot be supplied by technological enthusiasm. It requires historical comparison, institutional analysis, political economy, and democratic theory. The same infrastructure that promises efficiency can also produce dependence; the same harmonization that makes cross-border administration possible can reduce local discretion; the same regulatory reach that disciplines private platforms can reveal Europe's dependence on non-European cloud, semiconductor, and AI ecosystems. In that tension lies the political significance of the digital turn.

Sovereignty After the Nation-State: Layers Rather Than Succession

Sovereignty is one of those political terms whose apparent clarity has always exceeded its historical stability. In the classical language of the modern state, sovereignty suggested final authority within a bounded territory. Yet even the European state system was never as neat as the textbook formula implied. Empires, leagues, federations, confederations, dynastic unions, concordats, and international regimes continuously complicated the relationship between territory and authority. The European Union did not therefore invent divided authority; what it did was institutionalize division with an unusual degree of legal density and permanence.

The integration literature captured this transformation in different ways. Haas (1958) treated integration as a process in which functional cooperation generated pressures for further cooperation. Moravcsik (1998), by contrast, insisted on the centrality of national governments and domestic preference formation. Multilevel governance challenged the assumption that authority had to be located either at the national or the European level, arguing instead that policy-making could become dispersed across several

interacting jurisdictions (Marks et al., 1996; Hooghe & Marks, 2001). These approaches disagree on causes and actors, but they share an important implication: European integration cannot be described adequately by asking only whether sovereignty has been transferred from one level to another.

Digitalization deepens this difficulty because it introduces forms of authority that are neither easily territorial nor neatly institutional. A member-state ministry may remain legally responsible for a decision while relying on a European database, an EU-mandated technical standard, a cross-border authentication protocol, or a risk classification derived from Union law. In such cases, formal competence and operational capacity are no longer identical. The national administration possesses the legal authority to act, but the conditions under which it can act have been partly standardized elsewhere. This is not the disappearance of national sovereignty. It is the multiplication of dependencies within which sovereignty is exercised.

The point can be clarified by historical analogy. Monetary integration did not initially require a federal treasury, yet the creation of a common currency profoundly altered national economic policy. Schengen did not abolish national police powers, yet the removal of internal border controls changed the meaning of external border management. Digital integration may follow a comparable pattern. It can transform the practical environment of public authority before constitutional language catches up with institutional reality.

Historical institutionalism is especially useful here. Pierson (1996) showed that integration can create path dependencies: decisions taken under one political constellation alter the costs and possibilities available to later governments. Digital infrastructures can intensify such effects because interoperability produces network value. Once administrations, businesses, and citizens invest in a

common technical framework, withdrawal is not simply a legal choice; it becomes an organizational and economic project. A database can be repealed in law more quickly than the administrative practices, procurement chains, staff expertise, and cross-border routines built around it can be unwound.

This does not justify the dramatic claim that code has replaced the constitution. It suggests something subtler. Sovereignty in digital Europe is becoming increasingly infrastructural. Political authority still requires law, democratic authorization, and institutions, but its effective exercise depends more than before on the ability to define and maintain the systems through which information moves. The old question - who has the legal competence? - therefore needs to be supplemented by another: who designs, controls, and can alter the infrastructure through which that competence becomes effective?

From Market Integration to Institutional Interdependence

European integration has often advanced through an apparently modest vocabulary. Coal and steel were treated as sectors, the customs union as an economic device, the single market as a program of removing barriers. Yet each technical step reorganized political relationships. The digital field is developing in a similar fashion. Data protection, platform regulation, artificial intelligence, digital identity, and public-sector interoperability are presented through separate legislative instruments, but their interaction is creating an increasingly dense institutional environment.

Neofunctionalism offers an obvious starting point. If functional integration in one domain generates pressures in adjacent domains, the sequence from data protection to platform regulation, data governance, artificial intelligence, and interoperable administration can be read as a contemporary form of spillover (Haas, 1958). The GDPR established rules for personal-data

processing across the Union. Platform economies subsequently raised questions not only of privacy but of systemic risk, competition, market access, recommender systems, content governance, and gatekeeping power. The Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act were responses to these adjacent problems. The AI Act, in turn, confronts computational systems that depend on data and are increasingly embedded in products, services, workplaces, and administrations.

Yet it would be too easy to call every new regulation a spillover. Liberal intergovernmentalism offers a necessary corrective. Member states do not disappear simply because the Commission gains regulatory tools; national governments shape legislative bargaining and remain indispensable to implementation. The digital field also contains distributional conflict. Countries differ in administrative capacity, industrial structure, cybersecurity concerns, attitudes toward privacy, and dependence on particular technological suppliers. European rules emerge not from functional necessity alone but from political compromise among actors with unequal resources and interests (Moravcsik, 1998).

The institutional novelty lies in the combination of common law and distributed enforcement. The European regulatory state, as Majone (1994) observed, exercises significant authority through rule-making and specialized regulation rather than through the classic instruments of a centralized fiscal state. Digital governance enlarges this model. The Commission can exercise direct responsibilities in relation to certain very large platforms or designated gatekeepers, while national authorities retain important enforcement roles in data protection, market surveillance, consumer protection, public administration, and judicial review. The result is neither centralized government nor loose coordination. It is a layered administrative order.

The Interoperable Europe Act, Regulation (EU) 2024/903, is particularly revealing because it shifts attention from regulating private markets to connecting public administrations. Interoperability is often discussed as if it were merely a technical virtue - systems should be able to communicate, documents should be reusable, and public services should cross borders more easily. Institutionally, however, interoperability does something more. It narrows the range of technically viable administrative isolation. Once public bodies must design services with cross-border interoperability in mind, national administrative modernization becomes partly European in orientation.

Here the concept of Europeanization is useful. The classic literature asked how European rules reshape domestic institutions and policy practices. Digitalization adds an infrastructural mechanism to this process. A national agency may become Europeanized not only because it transposes a directive or implements a regulation, but because its databases, authentication methods, data formats, and interfaces must work within a European ecosystem. This is integration by architecture. It is less visible than treaty reform, but precisely for that reason it may be more continuous.

The prudent conclusion is not that digital policy has made supranational integration automatic. Rather, it has multiplied the number of points at which national and European administration meet. The more such points exist, the less plausible it becomes to think of European institutions as an external layer placed above self-contained national states. They increasingly form part of the operating environment of those states themselves.

Digital Sovereignty and the Political Economy of Dependence

The return of sovereignty to European policy language is one of the ironies of integration. For decades, the concept was associated

with the powers that states pooled, limited, or shared. In the digital era, European institutions and governments increasingly invoke sovereignty to describe what the Union must acquire collectively: control over data, technological capacity, resilient infrastructure, semiconductor supply, cybersecurity, and strategic autonomy. This is not a simple return to nineteenth-century statehood. It is an attempt to reconstruct political autonomy under conditions of technological interdependence.

Pohle and Thiel (2020) demonstrate why digital sovereignty remains an ambiguous concept. It may refer to state authority, individual self-determination, industrial capacity, control of infrastructure, the ability to regulate foreign firms, or resilience against technological dependence. The ambiguity is not merely conceptual weakness; it reflects the fact that digital power itself is distributed. A government may regulate a cloud provider without owning a cloud infrastructure. A union of states may set data standards while relying on foreign semiconductors. Individuals may enjoy strong privacy rights while the services they use are organized by platforms headquartered abroad.

The EU's comparative advantage has historically been regulatory rather than technological. Bradford's Brussels Effect describes how access to the European market can induce global firms to adapt to European standards, thereby externalizing EU regulation beyond its formal jurisdiction (Bradford, 2020). In the digital field, this logic has been visible in data protection, competition, platform governance, and AI regulation. It allows Europe to exercise influence even when it does not dominate the underlying technologies.

Yet regulatory sovereignty and infrastructural sovereignty are not interchangeable. The latter concerns the capacity to maintain the material and computational foundations of public and economic

life. Cloud computing, advanced semiconductors, high-performance computing, operating systems, cybersecurity tools, and foundation models have become strategic assets. The European Chips Act, Regulation (EU) 2023/1781, therefore belongs in a chapter on political institutions even though it is usually discussed as industrial policy. Semiconductor dependence can constrain foreign policy, defense, public administration, and economic security. The Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030 similarly links Europe's digital transformation to resilience and an open conception of digital sovereignty (Decision (EU) 2022/2481).

This is where political economy enters the institutional analysis. Platforms are not merely firms. Van Dijck et al. (2018) describe a platform society in which increasingly important social and economic interactions are organized through programmable infrastructures driven by data and algorithms. Lehdonvirta (2022) goes further by showing how platform companies can acquire institutional capacities that resemble those of public authorities: they set rules, adjudicate disputes, rank participants, and determine access to markets. For Europe, the problem is therefore not simply how to regulate successful companies; it is how to prevent private infrastructure from becoming the unaccountable constitution of digital life.

The Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act should be read partly in this light. They are attempts to reassert public authority within digital environments shaped by private architecture. Gorwa's (2019) concept of platform governance captures the multiple relationships involved: platforms govern users and markets, while governments attempt to govern platforms, often through co-regulatory or technically mediated arrangements. Europe's political problem is thus triangular. It must preserve the autonomy of member states and citizens, expand European regulatory capacity, and

constrain private actors whose technical infrastructures cross all territorial borders.

An Algorithmic Union that remained structurally dependent on foreign or private infrastructures would therefore contain a contradiction at its center. It could regulate algorithms without commanding the computational conditions under which they are developed and deployed. The future of European digital sovereignty will turn on whether regulatory power can be translated into technological capability without collapsing into protectionism or state-directed technological nationalism. The answer will determine whether Europe's digital rules remain primarily standards for others or become the institutional basis of a more autonomous political order.

The EU as a Digital Regulatory and Constitutional Order

The temptation in digital policy is to treat every regulation as a separate file. Lawyers distinguish legal bases, scopes, obligations, exceptions, and enforcement procedures; administrators build separate compliance structures; firms create specialized teams. Political analysis, however, must also ask what happens when these instruments accumulate. At that level, the European digital *acquis* begins to resemble a constitutional environment for the digital sphere.

The word constitutional should be used with discipline. The GDPR, DSA, DMA, Data Governance Act, Data Act, AI Act, and European Health Data Space do not constitute a constitution in the formal sense. They do not replace the Treaties, nor do they settle the ultimate distribution of sovereignty in Europe. Digital constitutionalism instead describes the effort to translate constitutional values - rights, accountability, due process, limits on power, and public oversight - into a technological environment

where private platforms and automated systems can structure behavior at enormous scale (Celeste, 2019; De Gregorio, 2022).

This perspective is especially important because digital power is often architectural. A platform's recommendation system, default settings, identity rules, ranking mechanisms, or interface can influence conduct without issuing anything resembling a legal command. Code and design can make some actions easy and others difficult. Public regulation must therefore reach beyond prohibited outcomes and engage with systems, processes, risk management, and technical documentation. The DSA's systemic-risk framework and the AI Act's risk-based governance exemplify this turn from regulating isolated acts to regulating technological environments.

The AI Act, Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, is perhaps the clearest example. Rather than attempting a single definition of acceptable artificial intelligence, it differentiates obligations according to categories of risk and use. Its importance is institutional as much as substantive. It creates a common vocabulary through which national authorities, EU bodies, companies, and courts discuss AI risks, conformity, transparency, human oversight, and prohibited practices. A regulatory vocabulary can itself be integrative: once actors across jurisdictions classify systems according to the same categories, policy disagreement occurs within a common institutional grammar.

The same logic applies to data. The Data Governance Act, Regulation (EU) 2022/868, and Data Act, Regulation (EU) 2023/2854, seek to shape how data are shared, accessed, and reused. The European Health Data Space, Regulation (EU) 2025/327, adds a sectoral layer with common arrangements for electronic health data; its staged application also reminds us that legal adoption and operational integration are different moments. A regulation can

establish the direction of travel years before infrastructures, national authorities, and professional practices are fully adjusted.

The Interoperable Europe Act introduces another constitutional question: can administrative interoperability become a principle of European government? Public institutions traditionally modernized their information systems according to domestic requirements. Cross-border interoperability asks them to consider European compatibility from the outset. This may appear managerial, but management becomes constitutional when it structures access to rights, public services, and administrative remedies across jurisdictions.

Digital constitutionalism therefore illuminates one half of the Algorithmic Union thesis: the normative control of digital power. Regulatory state theory illuminates another: the organizational capacity through which these norms are administered (Majone, 1994). Neither alone is sufficient. A digital constitution without administrative capacity would be rhetorical; regulatory capacity without constitutional restraint would be technocratic. Europe's emerging digital order lies precisely in the attempt - still incomplete and often contradictory - to combine the two.

Artificial Intelligence and the Transformation of Public Authority

Artificial intelligence creates an unfortunate temptation for political theory: it encourages spectacular predictions. Bureaucracies are imagined as autonomous machines, ministers as supervisors of algorithms, and legislatures as remnants of an analogue constitutional age. Such images are memorable and usually premature. Public administration has always relied on technologies of classification - files, censuses, registries, statistical tables, scoring systems, and databases. The novelty of contemporary AI lies less in

the existence of classification than in its speed, scale, inferential capacity, and opacity.

Yeung (2018) provides a more useful starting point with the concept of algorithmic regulation: systems that continuously collect information, generate knowledge computationally, and use that knowledge to manage risk or influence behavior. This definition directs attention to the architecture of decision-making rather than to the dramatic question of whether a machine has replaced a human official. An AI system may recommend, prioritize, detect anomalies, generate drafts, classify applications, or predict risk while a human retains formal authority. Yet formal authority does not tell us how much practical discretion remains. If officials rarely depart from automated recommendations, the location of effective judgment has shifted even though legal responsibility has not.

Citron and Pasquale's (2014) critique of automated scoring identifies the due-process problem that follows. Decisions based on opaque computational assessments can be difficult to contest because the affected person may not know what data were used, how variables were weighted, or why a score produced an adverse result. In public administration this becomes more than a consumer-protection issue. Administrative legitimacy depends on reasons, reviewability, equality before the law, and the possibility of correcting error.

For the European Union, the institutional significance of AI is twofold. First, Europe regulates AI through a common legal framework. Second, European and national administrations are themselves becoming users of AI and advanced analytics, although deployment varies widely across sectors and countries. These two processes should not be conflated. Regulating AI does not mean that European government has become algorithmic. The stronger claim

would require evidence that shared computational systems are increasingly coordinating public authority across jurisdictions.

The AI Act nonetheless creates conditions under which such coordination could develop. Common definitions, risk categories, documentation duties, governance arrangements, and supervisory practices can standardize how public authorities and private actors understand algorithmic systems. Standardization does not remove political choice; it organizes the categories within which choice is made. In European integration, that has often been enough to matter. The history of the single market is full of examples in which technical standards became politically consequential because they determined what could circulate and under what conditions.

The administrative use of generative AI adds another layer. Systems capable of summarizing files, drafting documents, translating legal texts, or assisting policy analysis can increase bureaucratic capacity. Yet they also create new dependencies on model providers, training data, cloud infrastructure, and procurement contracts. Public authority may become more efficient while becoming less technologically autonomous. This is the paradox of digital sovereignty at the administrative level: the state may increase its informational power by using systems it cannot fully audit or reproduce.

An analytically serious account must therefore distinguish four stages: regulation of AI, use of AI within individual administrations, cross-border standardization of AI governance, and genuinely shared algorithmic coordination. Europe is clearly advanced in the first and increasingly active in the second and third. The fourth remains more prospective. The Algorithmic Union should consequently be presented as a trajectory whose institutional foundations are visible, not as a completed form of government.

Migration and Borders as a Laboratory of Infrastructural Integration

If one wishes to observe European integration in its most material digital form, migration and border governance provide a better laboratory than many more celebrated areas of digital policy. Borders are traditionally among the clearest symbols of sovereignty. They determine entry, exclusion, territorial presence, and the practical reach of state authority. Precisely for that reason, the construction of shared European border-information systems is institutionally significant.

The interoperability framework created by Regulations (EU) 2019/817 and 2019/818 links major information systems used for borders, visas, asylum, migration, and law enforcement. Its architecture includes the European Search Portal, shared Biometric Matching Service, Common Identity Repository, and Multiple-Identity Detector. These instruments do not create a federal border police. They do something characteristic of the European method: they connect national and European authorities through common informational infrastructure.

The Entry/Exit System makes the transformation visible to travelers. Established by Regulation (EU) 2017/2226, it progressively began operating on 12 October 2025 and became fully operational at Schengen external border crossing points on 10 April 2026. It records entry and exit information for covered non-EU short-stay travelers and processes travel-document and biometric data, including facial images and fingerprints (European Commission, 2026a). The old passport stamp was a national physical mark. The new system is a European digital record. That change is administrative, but it is also political: the border becomes a point of entry into a common information architecture.

ETIAS demonstrates the need for caution in interpreting legislative ambition as operational reality. Regulation (EU) 2018/1240 created the European Travel Information and Authorisation System, but as of late September 2026 it was not yet operational; official EU information continued to place its launch in the final quarter of 2026 (European Commission, 2026b). Repeated delays are not incidental details. They show that infrastructure integration depends on procurement, testing, national preparedness, cybersecurity, training, and coordination. A regulation can be adopted in Brussels in a day; a continent-wide digital system must be made to work in airports, ports, land borders, police systems, and consulates.

Eurodac provides another example. The recast Regulation (EU) 2024/1358 broadens the system's role in asylum and migration management and connects it to the wider interoperability environment. Here, data infrastructure becomes part of the governance of mobility. The political significance lies not merely in the collection of biometrics but in the ability of authorized authorities to compare information across systems and jurisdictions under common legal rules.

This can be described as infrastructural Europeanization. Traditional Europeanization literature emphasized how EU law and policy alter domestic institutions. Digital border systems add a mechanism that is more operational: national authorities become dependent on common databases, identifiers, and matching services. The legal act establishes obligations, but the infrastructure gives those obligations a daily administrative form. Once border officers, asylum authorities, and security agencies work through the same connected information environment, European integration is reproduced through routine practice.

Yet the field also reveals the dangers of the Algorithmic Union more sharply than any other. Migration governance involves asymmetrical power. Those subjected to databases, risk indicators, biometric matching, or identity checks are often non-citizens with limited political voice. Errors can have severe consequences, and the logic of security can normalize forms of data processing that would be politically contested in ordinary social policy. The legitimacy of infrastructural integration therefore cannot be judged only by efficiency or interoperability. It must also be judged by accuracy, proportionality, reviewability, data protection, non-discrimination, and access to remedy.

Migration thus performs a double role in this chapter. It is evidence that integration can occur through technical systems without a federal constitutional transformation. It is also a warning that integration through infrastructure may advance faster than democratic debate about the values embedded within that infrastructure.

Digital Identity, Citizenship, and the Administrative Meaning of Europe

Political communities are experienced through symbols, but they are also experienced through documents. Passports, identity cards, licenses, certificates, tax numbers, health records, signatures, and registries connect the individual to public authority. Digital identity therefore belongs to political theory as much as to information technology. The European Digital Identity Framework illustrates why.

Regulation (EU) 2024/1183 amended the eIDAS regime and established the framework for European Digital Identity Wallets. The model is not a centralized European identity database. Member states are required to provide wallets according to common specifications, with the Commission adopting implementing rules

intended to ensure interoperability and security; official EU materials envisage wallet availability by the end of 2026 (European Commission, 2024). The institutional significance lies precisely in this combination of decentralization and common standards.

A wallet does not create European citizenship. Nationality remains governed by national law, and Union citizenship remains derivative of member-state nationality. It would therefore be theoretically careless to describe the EUDI Wallet as a federal identity card. Yet the absence of a new legal status does not mean the infrastructure is politically trivial. Citizenship is not only a formal status; it is also a capacity to exercise rights. If individuals can authenticate themselves, prove attributes, sign documents, access services, and present credentials across borders with less administrative friction, the practical experience of European rights changes.

This is where post-national membership becomes relevant, though the concept must be used carefully. European integration has long separated some rights from exclusive territorial belonging. Free movement, cross-border social entitlements, mutual recognition, and electoral rights in local and European elections already demonstrate that political membership in Europe is layered. Digital identity can reinforce this layering by making rights technically portable.

The institutional effect may therefore be cumulative rather than revolutionary. Each cross-border service that becomes easier to access reduces the administrative importance of internal borders. Each interoperable credential makes the Union more present in ordinary life. Political integration is often imagined through dramatic symbols - a flag, an army, a constitution, a federal tax. Administrative integration proceeds through less theatrical objects: a certificate accepted automatically, an identity attribute verified

across borders, a digital signature recognized by another administration.

This mundane dimension deserves attention because political orders are sustained by routine. A citizen may rarely read a treaty, but frequently interact with administrative systems. If those interactions become Europeanized, the Union acquires a form of everyday institutional presence. The Algorithmic Union thesis therefore does not depend on the emergence of a new European identity in the cultural sense. It concerns the possibility that European membership becomes increasingly operationalized through digital infrastructures.

There is, however, an inverse risk. Identity systems can also become infrastructures of surveillance or exclusion. The more attributes can be verified digitally, the greater the temptation to demand verification in contexts where it was previously unnecessary. Privacy-preserving design, selective disclosure, cybersecurity, and clear limits on data linkage are therefore not technical details but constitutional conditions. A digital identity architecture can facilitate freedom only if it does not quietly make identification compulsory everywhere.

Political Parties, Democratic Legitimacy, and the Problem of Invisible Power

European integration has always faced a paradox. Its most successful institutions are often those that operate with technical continuity, yet democratic politics requires visibility, contestation, and the possibility of replacement. Digital governance sharpens this tension because infrastructures work best when they disappear into routine. Citizens notice an identity protocol, a data exchange, or an algorithmic standard mainly when it fails. What is administratively elegant may therefore be politically obscure.

The debate over the EU's democratic deficit remains relevant for precisely this reason. Follesdal and Hix (2006) argued that the Union suffers from insufficient contestation over political leadership and policy direction. Schmidt (2013) refined the legitimacy debate by distinguishing input, output, and throughput. Digital administration may improve output by making services faster, coordination more effective, and enforcement more consistent. Yet it can weaken throughput if decision processes become difficult to understand, responsibility becomes dispersed, or individuals cannot discover why a system classified them in a particular way.

Algorithmic accountability is thus not merely a question of transparency in the narrow sense. A government can publish technical documentation and still remain politically unaccountable if responsibility is fragmented among ministries, EU agencies, contractors, cloud providers, and software vendors. Democratic accountability requires an answer to a simple question that complex systems often obscure: who could have decided otherwise? If no institution can plausibly answer that question, efficiency has come at the expense of political responsibility.

Political parties are indispensable here because they convert institutional questions into alternatives that citizens can contest. Postfunctionalism reminds us that integration is constrained by identity, public opinion, and partisan conflict once issues become politically salient (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). An Algorithmic Union that developed without party competition over its design would not transcend politics; it would suppress politics until opposition reappeared in more disruptive forms.

The digital transformation also changes party competition itself. Platforms organize political communication, recommendation systems influence visibility, and generative AI lowers the cost of producing persuasive political content. The regulatory decisions

taken by the EU in relation to platforms, political advertising, data use, and AI therefore shape not only markets but the informational environment in which democratic representation occurs. The regulator of the digital public sphere is inevitably also an actor in the institutional ecology of democracy.

This creates a delicate constitutional problem. The Union must be capable of limiting manipulation, covert targeting, systemic platform risks, and unlawful data use without becoming an arbiter of legitimate political opinion. The difficulty is familiar in European history: institutions created to protect democracy can themselves acquire powers that require democratic restraint. In the digital sphere, the danger is compounded by scale and speed.

Parties will also determine whether digital integration becomes a European political issue or remains technocratic policy. Europarties and European Parliament groups already organize transnational political competition, though national parties remain the principal channels through which voters understand European politics. If digital identity, AI regulation, platform governance, and technological sovereignty become salient electoral questions, party competition may Europeanize them. If they remain buried in implementation committees and technical standards, the administrative integration of Europe may outpace its political integration.

The democratic future of the Algorithmic Union therefore depends less on whether algorithms can be made explainable in an engineering sense than on whether their institutional use can be made politically contestable. A system is democratically governable when citizens can identify the rules, locate responsibility, challenge outcomes, and support parties that propose different arrangements. Without these conditions, digital capacity risks becoming another name for technocratic distance.

The Algorithmic Union as a Provisional Theory of Institutional Change

The argument can now be stated in more precise terms. The Algorithmic Union is not a claim that the European Union is governed by autonomous algorithms. It is a hypothesis about the changing infrastructure of integration. It refers to a mode of European political development in which supranational and cross-national coordination increasingly depends on shared data infrastructures, interoperable public systems, common digital identities, algorithmic or data-assisted regulatory processes, and technical standards that organize administrative action across jurisdictions.

The concept has several dimensions. The first is data infrastructure: shared or interoperable systems through which information can move between authorities. The second is algorithmic coordination: the use of computational processes to classify, prioritize, detect risk, or support decisions. The third is digital identity: common standards that allow individuals and organizations to authenticate themselves across borders. The fourth is regulatory integration: common rules governing data, platforms, AI, and digital markets. The fifth is technological sovereignty: the capacity to sustain the infrastructure on which these systems depend. The sixth is interoperable administration: the redesign of public services so that national systems can work together. The seventh is digital political economy: the relationship between public authority and platform, cloud, semiconductor, and AI markets. The eighth is democratic accountability: the capacity to preserve contestation, rights, and responsibility within increasingly technical systems.

Why invent a new term when regulatory state theory, multilevel governance, and digital constitutionalism already exist? The objection is serious. A new concept is justified only if it

identifies a relationship that existing concepts tend to separate. Regulatory state theory explains the EU's preference for rule-making and delegated expertise (Majone, 1994). Multilevel governance explains the dispersion of authority across levels (Marks et al., 1996). Digital constitutionalism explains the application of constitutional values to digital power (Celeste, 2019; De Gregorio, 2022). Platform governance explains relationships among states, firms, and users in digitally mediated environments (Gorwa, 2019). Digital sovereignty examines autonomy under conditions of technological dependence (Pohle & Thiel, 2020). The Algorithmic Union is useful only if it connects these literatures around a common institutional object: integration through infrastructure.

In that sense, the term should be treated as a middle-range theory rather than a grand theory of European integration. It does not explain why all integration occurs, nor does it replace intergovernmental bargaining, spillover, identity politics, or legal constitutionalism. It identifies a mechanism through which integration can deepen: the creation of technical systems that make cooperation routine, embed common classifications, and raise the practical costs of administrative divergence.

The mechanism resembles historical forms of state-building without reproducing them. Early modern states integrated territories through roads, taxation, cadastral surveys, postal systems, censuses, and standardized law. The modern welfare state expanded through registries, social-insurance numbers, statistical offices, and administrative files. The European Union cannot simply replicate this history because it lacks a centralized sovereign structure. Yet it can produce analogous effects through shared standards and interoperable systems. Infrastructure can integrate without fully centralizing.

The strongest empirical support for this proposition is found where technical systems connect multiple administrations: border and migration databases, digital identity, data spaces, interoperability frameworks, and EU-wide regulatory categories. The strongest counterevidence lies in implementation failures, national opt-outs, unequal capacity, cybersecurity risks, and dependence on private or non-European technology providers. These limitations are not peripheral. They determine whether algorithmic integration will consolidate or fragment.

The concept also has a normative implication. If infrastructure becomes a mechanism of integration, democratic theory must move upstream. It is not enough to review decisions after they are made. Political scrutiny must extend to procurement, data architecture, model design, interoperability standards, and the institutional choice to automate a process in the first place. Otherwise, crucial political decisions will be made in technical settings before parliaments and courts encounter their consequences.

For this reason, the Algorithmic Union is best understood as an invitation to study the politics of systems that are often treated as merely technical. Its value will depend on empirical testing. If common infrastructures remain marginal, weakly used, or easily reversible, the concept will add little to existing theories. If, however, they increasingly organize how member-state administrations act, how individuals exercise rights, and how markets are governed, then European integration theory will need to take infrastructure as seriously as it has taken treaties, courts, parties, and markets.

Alternative Futures: Integration, Differentiation, or Dependency

No serious theory of European institutional evolution should present one future as inevitable. The history of integration is full of abandoned plans, delayed systems, asymmetric bargains, crises that

accelerated integration in one field and halted it in another. Digital Europe will be no different. The Algorithmic Union is therefore one trajectory among several.

The first possible future is a digitally reinforced federalization. In such a scenario, common identity infrastructures, data spaces, AI governance, monetary technology, fiscal coordination, and European public services would gradually align with stronger democratic authority at Union level. The crucial change would not be technical but constitutional: European institutions would acquire clearer political mandates to govern infrastructures already operating across borders. Digital capacity would then support an increasingly federal political order.

A second future is the Algorithmic Regulatory Union described in this chapter. Constitutional centralization would remain limited, but administrative and regulatory integration would deepen. Member states would retain most features of sovereign statehood while operating inside common digital architectures. The Commission, agencies, national regulators, courts, and technical bodies would share authority. The political order would become more integrated in practice than its formal constitutional structure might suggest.

A third future is differentiated digital Europe. This may in fact be the most consistent with the Union's institutional history. Some states could participate deeply in particular infrastructures while others use opt-outs, transitional arrangements, or slower implementation. Digital identity, border governance, defense technology, health data, taxation, and AI may develop through different circles of participation. Differentiation would preserve flexibility but complicate the very interoperability on which digital integration depends.

A fourth future is renationalization combined with platform dependency. Governments might resist further European authority while remaining dependent on transnational private infrastructures. This would be a paradoxical restoration of formal sovereignty accompanied by weakened material autonomy. National capitals could reclaim legal discretion yet become more dependent on foreign cloud providers, platforms, semiconductor ecosystems, and AI models. In such a world, the principal alternative to European integration would not necessarily be strong national sovereignty; it could be fragmented public authority confronting concentrated private technological power.

The border systems of 2025-2026 illustrate why institutional forecasts must remain modest. The Entry/Exit System eventually reached full operation in April 2026 after a staged launch, while ETIAS remained pending in September 2026 despite years of planning (European Commission, 2026a, 2026b). The lesson is not that digital integration is failing. It is that infrastructure has its own temporality. Political decisions can be rapid; implementation across dozens of legal, administrative, and technological environments is slow.

The same is true of the European Health Data Space and digital identity. Adoption creates a legal framework, but the political consequences depend on later implementation, technical standards, national capacity, professional acceptance, public trust, and actual use. The history of Europe counsels patience with such processes. Institutions often acquire significance only after they have become routine.

The long-term question, then, is not whether Europe will become governed by algorithms. Political judgment, conflict, law, and representation will remain. The more consequential question is whether the systems through which Europeans are identified,

regulated, moved across borders, served by administrations, incorporated into markets, and protected from private power will become sufficiently interconnected to alter the meaning of European political authority. If they do, the next great institutional transformation of Europe may not arrive first as a constitutional proclamation. It may emerge quietly, through the architecture by which government works.

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CHAPTER 2

POLITICS BEYOND BORDERS: THE DIGITAL AND TRANSNATIONAL EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Introduction

European political parties have always occupied an awkward institutional position. They are indispensable to representative government, yet at the European level they have never quite resembled the mass parties, catch-all parties, cartel parties, or professional-electoral organizations known from national political systems. The European Union possesses a directly elected Parliament, transnational political groups, legally recognized political parties at European level, common rules on party funding, and increasingly dense regulation of the digital public sphere. Yet voters still cast their ballots primarily for national lists; candidates are selected mainly through national organizations; campaign narratives are filtered through national media systems; and the most consequential party reputations remain domestic. The result is a political order in which partisan cooperation is highly Europeanized

at the summit while electoral mobilization remains stubbornly national at the base.

This tension has existed since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, but the digital age gives it a new significance. European parties now operate in a political environment shaped by platform infrastructures, data analytics, cross-border political advertising rules, recommender systems, generative artificial intelligence, multilingual communication technologies, and Union-level regulation of electoral risks. A campaign message created in one national context may circulate instantly across borders; a platform rule adopted globally may affect campaign strategy in every member state; an EU regulation can impose common transparency obligations on political advertising; and artificial intelligence can reduce some of the linguistic costs that historically separated national political publics. None of these developments automatically produces a European party system. They do, however, alter the institutional conditions under which one might emerge.

The chapter therefore asks a deceptively simple question: can European party politics move beyond coordination among national parties toward a genuinely transnational structure of competition? The answer requires more than cataloguing Europarties. It requires distinguishing European political parties from European Parliament political groups, tracing the Europeanization of national organizations, examining the cleavage structures that have politicized integration, and locating digital campaigning within the longer history of party transformation. It also requires caution. The European Parliament elections continue to bear many features of the 'second-order' model first identified by Reif and Schmitt (1980), while recent scholarship on Europarties emphasizes both their organizational development and their persistent dependence on national members (Johansson & Raunio, 2024).

Digitalization complicates this already hybrid structure. Data-driven campaigning is not a single technology but a combination of data, analytics, personnel, software, platforms, and organizational routines that vary considerably across parties and countries (Dommett et al., 2023). Social media can strengthen national leaders as easily as it can empower European party families. Automated translation can lower linguistic barriers without creating shared political identities. Generative AI can reduce the costs of producing campaign material, but evidence from the 2024 European, French, and British electoral cycles does not support claims that AI-generated disinformation decisively altered election results (Stockwell, 2024). The politically significant development, then, is not a sudden replacement of party politics by algorithms. It is the gradual insertion of digital infrastructures into the organizational and communicative mechanisms through which parties represent, mobilize, and compete.

The analysis proceeds from institutions to cleavages, from party organization to leadership, and from electoral rules to digital platforms. It treats the Spitzenkandidaten experiment as a particularly revealing test of whether European elections can generate genuinely European executive competition. The contrast between 2014, 2019, and 2024 is especially instructive: the first cycle appeared to strengthen the parliamentary link, the second exposed its institutional fragility, while the third partially restored the connection when the European People's Party lead candidate Ursula von der Leyen was subsequently nominated by the European Council and elected by Parliament. The sequence shows why European party development is best understood neither as linear parliamentarization nor as permanent intergovernmental domination.

The argument developed here is that European party politics is becoming more transnational in infrastructure, regulation, agenda

setting, and elite coordination, while remaining predominantly national in electoral organization, candidate selection, public recognition, and political identity. Digitalization may intensify this uneven Europeanization. It can create common campaign environments without creating common electorates, and it can standardize political communication rules without standardizing political conflict. The future of European parties therefore lies not in the disappearance of national organizations, but in the changing relationship among national parties, Europarties, parliamentary groups, platforms, regulators, and citizens.

European Party Systems: Institutions Without a Single Electorate

The European Union's party architecture is easiest to misunderstand when the terms 'Europarty', 'political group', and 'national party' are treated as interchangeable. They are not. European political parties are transnational organizations composed largely of national member parties and other permitted members under EU law. Political groups, by contrast, are parliamentary formations inside the European Parliament. National parties nominate candidates, conduct most campaigns, and remain the organizations with which voters are most familiar. European political foundations occupy yet another institutional space, supporting research, training, debate, and political education. The European party system is therefore layered from the outset.

This architecture reflects the historical development of integration itself. The first direct European Parliament elections did not create European parties *ex nihilo*; they brought national parties into a transnational parliamentary arena. Bardi (2002) accordingly described EU party politics as involving both national and supranational dimensions. Later research has shown that transnational affiliation in Parliament is not merely administrative

convenience: ideology remains a major determinant of group membership, even if parliamentary incentives also matter (Bressanelli, 2012). Yet ideological affinity at the parliamentary level does not imply organizational unity outside it.

The legal framework has nevertheless strengthened Europarties over time. Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 1141/2014 gave a clearer European legal status and funding framework to political parties and foundations at European level. That regime has since been recast by Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2025/2445, which entered into force on 28 December 2025. The recast applies to funding for activities beginning with the 2027 budget year, so the older framework remains relevant to the financing history of the 2024 electoral cycle even as the legal architecture has moved on. The recast is significant because it confirms that Europarties are not informal clubs: they are recognized components of the Union's representative order, tied explicitly to Article 10(4) TEU and the formation of European political awareness.

Institutionalization, however, should not be confused with autonomy. Johansson and Raunio (2024) show that Europarties have developed organizational structures, resources, routines, and networks, but remain strongly dependent on national member parties. Their natural arena is Brussels and the interinstitutional sphere rather than the social worlds in which mass parties historically embedded themselves. This creates a paradox. Europarties may influence treaty reform, agenda setting, institutional appointments, and cross-national coordination while remaining barely visible to many citizens whose political preferences they are formally meant to express.

Programmatic research reinforces this point. Hackemann's (2023) comparison of Europarty and national-party manifestos in the 2019 European elections found limited congruence in issue salience

and policy prioritization in the German case. This does not mean that Europarties are irrelevant; rather, it demonstrates that programmatic influence is negotiated vertically, not simply transmitted downward from a European center. European party politics consequently resembles a federation of partisan networks more than a centralized party system.

The appropriate analytical starting point is therefore not that Europe lacks parties, but that it has parties at several institutional levels whose functions only partially overlap. National parties dominate recruitment and voter mobilization; parliamentary groups dominate legislative coordination; Europarties link national political families across institutions; European foundations produce ideas and networks. The question for the digital age is whether new communication and organizational infrastructures will tighten these layers into a more coherent system or merely make an already complex structure faster and more interconnected.

Europeanization Without Organizational Surrender

Europeanization offers a more precise vocabulary for this uneven development than the language of simple centralization. Ladrech (2002) proposed that the impact of European integration on political parties should be examined across programmatic change, organization, patterns of competition, party-government relations, and relations beyond national party systems. The framework remains useful precisely because it does not assume that Europeanization produces convergence in every dimension.

Empirical research has repeatedly found selective rather than comprehensive adaptation. Poguntke et al. (2007) argued that European integration can alter internal balances of power by strengthening party elites and EU specialists who possess access to European decision-making and specialized knowledge. Carter and Poguntke (2010), drawing on a fifteen-country study, similarly found

that party actors engaged at the European level can gain intra-party influence. Yet such developments do not necessarily transfer control of candidate selection, membership, electoral strategy, or public identity to Europarties.

This asymmetry is unsurprising. National parties perform functions that European organizations cannot easily reproduce. They are embedded in national electoral laws, campaign-finance regimes, public broadcasters, local branches, candidate-selection procedures, government formation, and systems of political patronage. In most member states, careers still rise through national parties. A politician may become a European Commissioner, an MEP, or a participant in a Europarty summit, but the path to that office normally passes through domestic organizations.

At the same time, European integration creates incentives for organizational adaptation from above. Leaders who participate in European Council politics, ministers who negotiate in the Council, and MEPs who work within transnational groups acquire information and networks that ordinary party members may not possess. This can create what the Europeanization literature calls an executive or elite bias. In practical terms, European integration can strengthen the relative autonomy of leadership even when the party itself remains nationally organized.

Digitalization may intensify this pattern. Campaign technologies, data infrastructure, common compliance regimes, and cross-border consultancy networks can be adopted centrally by party headquarters. The ability to coordinate messages rapidly across countries may strengthen executives and communications teams more than local branches. Yet digital tools can also enable decentralized participation, online membership, transnational activist networks, and low-cost collaboration. The organizational

effect is therefore contingent on how parties embed technology in their internal structures.

The key point is that Europeanization is not a zero-sum transfer from national to European parties. It is a reorganization of relationships. National parties can become more Europeanized while remaining nationally sovereign organizations; Europarties can gain resources while remaining dependent on members; party elites can become more transnational while voters remain nationally oriented. This layered adaptation forms the institutional terrain on which new cleavages and digital campaign practices operate.

From Left and Right to Integration and Demarcation

No party system can be understood without its lines of conflict. For much of twentieth-century Western Europe, party competition was organized around durable social and ideological divisions: class, religion, center-periphery relations, and the economic left-right axis. European integration initially developed within these inherited structures. Mainstream center-left and center-right parties often disagreed about policy while broadly accepting integration, leaving European issues relatively insulated from mass electoral conflict.

That permissive environment weakened as globalization, migration, European integration, and cultural change created new distributions of political winners and losers. Kriesi et al. (2008) argued that globalization contributed to an integration-demarcation cleavage that reorganized party competition around questions of openness, identity, migration, and supranational authority. Hooghe and Marks (2009) developed a related postfunctionalist account in which identity and mass politics constrain elite-led integration. Later work by Hutter and Kriesi (2019) emphasized the politicization of Europe during successive crises, while Hooghe and Marks (2019) located postfunctionalism alongside neofunctionalism and

intergovernmentalism as a grand-theoretical perspective on twenty-first-century integration.

Migration occupies a central place in this transformation because it links material and cultural anxieties. It concerns labor markets, welfare, security, borders, national identity, religious difference, and the authority of supranational institutions. Its political salience can therefore Europeanize conflict even without Europeanizing party organization. Parties in different countries may fight remarkably similar battles over migration while doing so through national institutions and national vocabularies.

The rise of populist and radical-right actors made this dynamic especially visible. Mudde's (2004) influential definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology opposing a 'pure people' to a 'corrupt elite' remains useful, but migration politics cannot be reduced to populism alone. Mainstream parties adapt positions, coalition strategies, and rhetoric in response to electoral competition; parties of the left face tensions between universalist norms and distributional concerns; liberal and green parties confront trade-offs between openness and security; conservative parties balance market integration, national sovereignty, and identity claims.

The European Parliament reflects these cross-cutting cleavages because its political groups aggregate national parties with differing histories and strategic incentives. Ideological compatibility is powerful but not perfect. The resulting party families are sufficiently coherent to organize parliamentary politics, yet flexible enough to contain national variation. This tension makes the EU especially suitable for studying whether new dimensions of conflict are becoming transnational before organizations themselves do.

Digitalization could become such a dimension, but the evidence does not yet justify describing it as an autonomous cleavage comparable to class, religion, or integration-demarkation.

Questions of AI regulation, biometric governance, digital identity, platform moderation, surveillance, and the digital euro can be mobilized through existing ideological conflicts: liberty versus security, openness versus sovereignty, market freedom versus regulation, technocracy versus democratic control. The prudent interpretation is that digitalization currently refracts older cleavages rather than clearly constituting a new one.

Postfunctionalism in the Digital Age

Postfunctionalism is often introduced as a theory of resistance to integration, but its deeper contribution lies in explaining why functional efficiency does not settle questions of political authority. A policy may be administratively rational, economically beneficial, or technically sophisticated and still encounter opposition if citizens interpret it through identity, sovereignty, or democratic legitimacy. This insight becomes increasingly important as European integration extends into digital infrastructures that are simultaneously useful and politically intimate.

Digital identity provides a clear example. A common technical framework can facilitate cross-border recognition and reduce administrative friction, but political debate may frame the same infrastructure as surveillance, centralization, or loss of national control. Biometric border systems may be defended as efficient instruments of security while criticized as technologies of exclusion or excessive data collection. AI regulation can be presented as European protection against opaque private power, or as bureaucratic interference with innovation. The political meaning of technology is therefore not contained in the technology itself.

Parties are the principal institutions through which such meanings become organized. They translate technical questions into ideological narratives. A digital policy that begins as an administrative measure can become politically salient when parties

connect it to national identity, individual freedom, migration, economic competitiveness, or distrust of elites. Postfunctionalism predicts precisely this kind of transformation: once integration touches questions linked to community and identity, permissive consensus gives way to constraining dissensus (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Yet one should not mechanically extend postfunctionalism to every digital controversy. There is not yet a stable, pan-European 'digital sovereignty cleavage' with clear social bases, party families, and durable voter alignments. Opposition to biometric systems may unite civil-liberties liberals and sovereigntists for very different reasons. Skepticism about platform regulation may come from market liberals, while criticism of large technology companies can come from both left and right. Digital politics currently produces coalitions that are often issue-specific and ideologically heterogeneous.

This ambiguity may itself be politically significant. The digital sphere offers parties new opportunities to recombine established conflicts. A sovereigntist party can criticize EU digital regulation as centralization while demanding stronger national control over foreign platforms. A green party can defend European digital rights while supporting supranational regulation. A social-democratic party can frame platform regulation as labor and competition policy. A liberal party can support European standards while resisting intrusive state surveillance. The same technological development can therefore be Europeanizing in one dimension and renationalizing in another.

Postfunctionalism thus serves less as a prediction of anti-digital backlash than as a warning against technocratic accounts of integration. If digital Europe is to become politically sustainable, its institutions cannot rely solely on output legitimacy. Parties will

contest who controls infrastructure, whose values are encoded in regulation, and which level of government should decide. Those conflicts will shape the future of transnational party competition as much as the technologies themselves.

Spitzenkandidaten: The Unfinished Europeanization of Executive Competition

Few institutional experiments reveal the strengths and limits of European party politics as clearly as the Spitzenkandidaten process. The idea was simple in appearance: European party families would nominate lead candidates before the European Parliament elections, voters would encounter competing candidates for Commission President, and the election outcome would influence the European Council's nomination under Article 17(7) TEU. In practice, this arrangement collided with the Union's dual sources of legitimacy - citizens represented in Parliament and member states represented in the European Council.

The 2014 cycle was widely interpreted as a breakthrough. Jean-Claude Juncker, the European People's Party lead candidate, ultimately became Commission President. For advocates of parliamentary Europeanization, the episode suggested that European elections could acquire an executive consequence similar to national parliamentary elections. Yet the success depended upon political circumstances rather than a formal change in the treaties.

The limits became evident in 2019. The European party families again nominated lead candidates, but the European Council rejected the logic that the presidency must go to one of them. Ursula von der Leyen, who had not been a Spitzenkandidat, was nominated and subsequently elected by Parliament. Crum (2022) interprets the episode as evidence of a structural limit to Parliament-centered accounts of EU parliamentarization: member-state leaders may share

authority with Parliament, but they are unlikely to surrender their treaty role in nomination entirely.

The 2024 cycle complicates any simple story of decline. The lead-candidate mechanism was again used by European parties, and the European Parliament hosted a debate among lead candidates in May 2024. Ursula von der Leyen participated as the EPP's lead candidate. After the elections, the European Council proposed her for another term and Parliament elected her. The process therefore produced an outcome aligned with the lead-candidate principle, even though the European Council retained and exercised its formal nomination power. The most accurate conclusion is not that Spitzenkandidaten 'failed again' in 2024, but that the procedure remained politically contingent and only partially institutionalized.

The three cycles form a useful sequence. In 2014, Parliament and Europarties pushed the boundaries of Article 17(7). In 2019, national leaders reasserted discretion. In 2024, the largest party family's lead candidate and the European Council's nominee happened to coincide. This does not settle whether a future Council would accept a lead candidate it politically opposed. Nor does it prove that voters chose primarily among competing candidates for the Commission presidency.

For party development, however, the process matters even when imperfect. Spitzenkandidaten gives Europarties a visible leadership-selection function, encourages cross-border debates, and provides a symbolic focus for European electoral competition. It also exposes the structural dependence of Europarties on national leaders and parliamentary arithmetic. The unfinished nature of the process is therefore not an anomaly; it is a concentrated expression of the Union's hybrid party order.

Transnational Lists and the Problem of a European Electorate

If Spitzenkandidaten seeks to Europeanize executive competition, transnational lists seek to Europeanize representation itself. The proposal is to supplement or partly restructure nationally organized European elections with candidates elected from a Union-wide constituency. Advocates argue that such lists could give Europarties direct electoral relevance, encourage pan-European campaigns, and force parties to formulate programs addressed to citizens beyond national boundaries.

The idea is institutionally attractive because it addresses one of the central contradictions of the current system. European Parliament elections choose a supranational legislature, but voters select among national party lists under national electoral arrangements. Europarties formulate manifestos and coordinate political families, yet citizens do not normally cast a ballot directly for a European party. A transnational constituency could connect European party labels to electoral choice more directly.

The obstacles are equally substantial. Electoral law touches deeply rooted national traditions concerning constituencies, thresholds, candidate selection, financing, and representation. Small and large member states have different interests; national parties may resist surrendering control over nominations; linguistic diversity complicates campaign communication; and electoral reform requires agreement beyond the European Parliament itself. Parliament has repeatedly advocated reforms, but as of September 2026 no Union-wide transnational list has been enacted for European elections.

The debate also raises a conceptual question: what exactly would transnational lists solve? They might Europeanize campaign incentives, but they would not automatically create a European public sphere. Candidates could remain unknown outside politically attentive circles. Large languages and media markets might

dominate. Voters might continue to interpret European choices through domestic conflicts. Institutional redesign can alter incentives, but it cannot manufacture political identity by decree.

Digital communication nevertheless changes the feasibility calculation. A candidate can now campaign simultaneously in several countries at far lower cost than in the age of print and national broadcasting. Automated translation and subtitling can reduce linguistic barriers. Cross-border livestreams and platform advertising can target audiences without physical party structures in every locality. These technologies do not eliminate differences in political culture, but they reduce some of the transaction costs that historically made genuinely European campaigning difficult.

For this reason, the politics of transnational lists should be viewed together with digitalization rather than as an isolated constitutional reform. The institutional question is whether European electoral rules and digital communication infrastructures could reinforce one another. If they do, Europarties may acquire incentives to behave more like parties before they acquire the social depth of national organizations. If they do not, transnational lists could remain an elegant institutional solution to a public sphere that does not yet exist.

Digital Campaigning: From Party Organization to Platform Dependence

The digital transformation of political campaigning did not begin with artificial intelligence. Long before generative models entered public debate, parties were adapting to websites, email, social networks, online advertising, databases, campaign analytics, and mobile communication. Gibson (2020) describes a long-term process in which digital tools moved from experimentation to professionalization and increasingly targeted forms of voter mobilization. Jungherr et al. (2020) similarly treat digital media as a

retooling of political practices rather than a simple replacement of older forms.

This distinction matters because technology changes organizations unevenly. Data-driven campaigning includes several components - data, analytics, technology, and specialized personnel - whose use varies across countries and parties (Dommett et al., 2023). The popular image of omniscient microtargeting often exaggerates both the quality of political data and the capacity of organizations to use it. Regulation, party resources, electoral systems, organizational culture, and professional expertise all shape what campaigns can actually do.

European party politics adds another layer of variation. National parties operate under different legal and organizational environments, but increasingly use the same global platforms. Meta, Google, YouTube, TikTok, and other intermediaries provide common infrastructures while national political cultures remain distinct. This creates a paradoxical form of convergence: parties may adopt similar campaign technologies without becoming organizationally Europeanized.

The EU has responded by regulating the common environment rather than the parties themselves. Regulation (EU) 2024/900 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising entered into full application on 10 October 2025. It requires political advertising to be identifiable and accompanied by information concerning sponsors, costs, and targeting or delivery techniques. The regulation is especially important because it addresses political advertising at EU, national, regional, and local levels through common standards. It does not Europeanize party ideology, but it Europeanizes important rules of digital campaigning.

The Digital Services Act provides another layer. In 2024 the Commission issued guidelines for very large online platforms and

search engines on systemic risks to electoral processes, including election-specific mitigation, cooperation with authorities and civil society, incident-response mechanisms, and measures concerning generative AI. These instruments locate election integrity partly within platform governance. Political competition remains partisan, but the conditions of visibility, amplification, targeting, and risk mitigation are increasingly regulated through a common European framework.

Organizationally, the most important consequence may be a shift in dependence rather than a simple shift in power. Parties become more capable of reaching voters directly, yet more dependent on platform architectures, advertising systems, data rules, and technical vendors they do not control. Digital campaigning can weaken traditional intermediaries while creating new ones. For Europarties, this creates both an opportunity and a constraint: common platforms make cross-border communication easier, but reliance on private infrastructures may produce a transnational campaign environment without transnational party autonomy.

Artificial Intelligence, Deepfakes, and the Politics of Anticipatory Regulation

Generative artificial intelligence has produced one of the sharpest gaps between political expectation and verified electoral evidence. Before the 2024 election cycle, public debate frequently anticipated a flood of synthetic political content capable of overwhelming voters, undermining authenticity, and destabilizing electoral competition. The technological capacity was real; the magnitude of observed electoral effects was much less clear.

The Centre for Emerging Technology and Security at the Alan Turing Institute examined viral AI-enabled disinformation and deepfakes during the 2024 UK, European Union, and French elections. The study identified sixteen confirmed viral cases in the

British general election and eleven in the EU and French elections combined. Its central finding was deliberately cautious: there was no evidence that AI-enabled disinformation or deepfakes meaningfully affected the election results (Stockwell, 2024). The report did not claim that the problem was trivial. It documented harassment, manipulation, foreign-linked activity, and risks to trust in the information environment. What it rejected was the stronger causal claim that AI had changed electoral outcomes.

That distinction is essential for serious analysis. Political technology is often judged first by imagined future capability and only later by evidence of actual use. Generative AI can lower the cost of producing text, images, video, translation, and personalized content. It can assist campaigns with drafting, rapid response, research, and multilingual communication. But the existence of these capabilities does not mean that voters are easily persuaded or that party competition is transformed immediately.

The EU's regulatory response is therefore largely anticipatory. The DSA election guidelines explicitly address generative-AI-related risks. Regulation 2024/900 creates transparency and targeting obligations for political advertising. The European Democracy Shield, presented by the Commission on 12 November 2025, places information-space integrity, election resilience, foreign interference, civic technology, media literacy, and democratic institutions within a broader policy framework. These measures treat synthetic media as one risk among several rather than as a singular explanation for democratic vulnerability.

For political parties, AI is likely to matter first as an organizational technology before it becomes an autonomous electoral actor. Translation, content generation, message testing, research assistance, volunteer coordination, and internal analytics can reduce campaign costs. Yet there is little verified evidence, as of

September 2026, that European parties have delegated core candidate selection or strategic decision-making to AI systems in a way that would justify speaking of existing 'algorithmic parties'. The term is better reserved for a possible future organizational model.

The most defensible conclusion is therefore neither alarmist nor complacent. AI expands the repertoire of campaigning and manipulation, but its political effects remain mediated by party organization, voter predispositions, platform distribution, journalistic verification, regulation, and social trust. The European response illustrates a broader feature of contemporary politics: institutions increasingly regulate anticipated technological risks before those risks can be measured with confidence.

Migration, Populism, and the Europeanization of Conflict

Migration demonstrates that political competition can become Europeanized without being centrally organized. National parties across the Union contest asylum, border control, labor migration, citizenship, integration, religion, welfare access, and relations with third countries. The institutional venues differ, but the issues recur across member states and increasingly interact with common EU policies.

Kriesi et al. (2008) locate immigration and European integration within the broader integration-demarcation conflict associated with globalization. Hutter and Kriesi (2019) show how European crises intensified politicization, while Hooghe and Marks (2009) explain why identity can constrain further integration. Migration is powerful politically because it connects territorial sovereignty to everyday questions of belonging. It can therefore turn abstract debates about EU authority into concrete judgments about who may enter, who decides, and which community bears responsibility.

Populist and radical-right parties have been particularly effective at linking migration to sovereignty and elite distrust, though the issue is not monopolized by them. Mudde's (2004) conceptualization of populism remains important because it distinguishes the populist logic of people versus elite from the substantive ideologies with which it can be combined. In Europe, immigration politics often intersects with nativism, cultural conservatism, welfare chauvinism, and Euroscepticism, but the precise combinations vary nationally.

The transnational dimension produces another paradox. Parties that campaign in defense of national sovereignty increasingly cooperate across borders. They coordinate within European Parliament groups, exchange campaign frames, attend common events, and learn from one another's strategies. Their cooperation does not necessarily imply support for supranational integration; rather, it demonstrates that transnational organization can be used to resist supranational authority. Europe therefore contains both integrationist and sovereigntist forms of cross-border partisanship.

Digital platforms reinforce this pattern by accelerating the circulation of narratives across national settings. A slogan, video, controversy, or visual frame developed in one country can be reproduced elsewhere without centralized party control. This is a form of political diffusion distinct from formal Europeanization. It operates through networks, activists, influencers, parties, and platforms rather than solely through EU institutions.

Migration consequently belongs at the center of a chapter on parties because it reveals the difference between a Europeanized issue space and a Europeanized party system. The former is already substantial: similar conflicts recur across borders and are increasingly linked through common institutions and media. The

latter remains incomplete: parties still compete primarily for national electorates and govern through national constitutional systems.

Toward a European Public Sphere?

The idea of a European public sphere has long hovered between democratic necessity and empirical skepticism. A representative political system normally presupposes some arena in which citizens encounter common issues, hear competing arguments, and recognize one another as participants in the same political contest. The EU has institutions of representation but only a partially shared communicative space. National media, languages, political histories, and electoral calendars fragment public attention.

European Parliament elections create periodic moments of synchronization. The 2024 elections recorded an aggregate turnout of 50.74 percent, the highest in twenty-five years and slightly above the 50.66 percent recorded in 2019. Yet turnout varied enormously across member states. The figure therefore suggests sustained engagement without erasing the national structure of participation. European elections remain simultaneously one Union-wide event and twenty-seven national electoral processes.

Digital platforms can make this duality more visible. A European political controversy may trend across several countries while being interpreted through different national frames. Cross-border communities can form around climate, migration, security, gender, economic governance, or support for particular leaders. But platform communication is not automatically deliberative; it can fragment audiences as readily as it connects them.

Artificial intelligence introduces a novel element through translation. For most of European history, linguistic difference imposed a significant cost on transnational party communication. Automated translation and subtitling now make it technically easier

for speeches, debates, campaign videos, and manifestos to circulate rapidly across languages. This could reduce one practical barrier to transnational campaigning. It does not eliminate cultural context, humor, political memory, or nationally specific institutions, but it changes the economics of multilingual communication.

The 2024 Eurovision debate among lead candidates illustrates both the possibilities and limits of European political communication. Candidates from several European political families debated economy and jobs, defense and security, climate, democracy, migration, borders, innovation, and technology in a European Parliament setting. Such events create a genuinely transnational campaign moment. Their political effect, however, still depends on whether national media, parties, and voters treat the event as relevant.

A European public sphere is therefore better understood as a variable network of overlapping publics than as a single continental conversation. Digitalization may thicken these networks by reducing communication costs and increasing simultaneity. Whether that produces common democratic accountability depends on parties: they must translate shared issues into structured alternatives rather than merely distribute content across borders.

Five Futures of European Party Politics

The institutional evidence supports several plausible futures, none of which should be treated as a prediction. The first is the Europeanized National Party model. National parties remain the central organizations of electoral democracy, but their programs, leadership networks, regulatory environments, campaign technologies, and parliamentary alliances become progressively Europeanized. This model fits much of the existing evidence because it combines deep cross-border coordination with national control over candidates and voters.

A second possibility is the Transnational Europarty model. Under this trajectory, Europarties would acquire more direct membership, campaign resources, recognizable leadership, influence over candidate selection, and perhaps a stronger role through transnational lists. Johansson and Raunio's (2024) work shows that Europarties already possess more organizational capacity than accounts of them as empty shells suggest. Yet their continuing dependence on national member parties indicates how far this model remains from a fully autonomous form.

A third future is the Platform Party model. Parties of different ideological families increasingly organize communication, mobilization, fundraising, volunteer coordination, and even internal participation through digital platforms. Ecker and Naumann (2026) describe a broader 'platformization of politics' in which digital infrastructures reshape the geographies and organization of political action. In Europe, such a model could develop transnationally even if the legal party remains national.

A fourth possibility is the Algorithmic Party. In its strong form, AI and data systems would become central to campaign strategy, message selection, organizational learning, resource allocation, and voter communication. As of September 2026, this is better treated as an analytical horizon than an empirical description of Europarties. Verified evidence supports growing digital and data-driven campaigning, but not the replacement of party judgment by autonomous algorithmic decision-making.

The fifth is the Fragmented Sovereigntist model. Cross-border coordination continues, but parties use it primarily to defend national autonomy, differentiated integration, or issue-specific coalitions. In this scenario the EU becomes a venue for transnational contestation without developing a unified transnational party system. Such a future would not represent the absence of Europeanization; it

would represent a Europeanization of conflict rather than organization.

These models should not be ranked as mutually exclusive destinations. Different elements can coexist. A national party may be organizationally domestic, digitally platformized, ideologically embedded in a transnational political family, and skeptical of supranational authority all at once. This hybridity is likely to remain a defining feature of European politics.

The broader lesson is that political parties are not passive passengers in Europe's digital transformation. They mediate it. They decide which technologies become issues, which regulatory conflicts become ideological, which European institutions receive public attention, and whether shared infrastructures acquire democratic meaning. The future of the European Union's political order will therefore depend not only on what its institutions can regulate or what its technologies can enable, but on whether parties can convert an increasingly integrated political environment into recognizable democratic choice. Politics beyond borders will emerge, if it does, not when national parties disappear, but when citizens can see transnational alternatives clearly enough to contest them.

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CHAPTER 3

PLATFORM CAPITALISM AND THE NEW POLITICAL POWER: THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPE'S ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS

Introduction

Europe's economic institutions were built for an age in which factories, banks, national currencies, vertically organized corporations, and territorial markets supplied the ordinary grammar of political economy. Even where European integration altered that grammar, it did so through recognizable instruments: customs liberalization, competition law, monetary union, common standards, agricultural policy, and the construction of a single market. The digital economy has not abolished those institutions, but it has placed alongside them a new set of infrastructures whose political significance is difficult to grasp with the vocabulary of industrial capitalism alone. Platforms organize transactions without owning all the assets involved; cloud providers become indispensable to firms and public administrations that they do not govern; data can be reused across sectors without being exhausted in the manner of a

conventional commodity; algorithms allocate attention, work, prices, and access; and semiconductor and computing capacity increasingly determine which actors can participate in artificial-intelligence markets at scale.

The resulting transformation is not merely technological. It concerns the location and form of economic power. A marketplace once governed largely through price, contract, and public regulation can now be organized by a private technical architecture that decides who may enter, how participants are ranked, which interfaces are available, which data may be transferred, and what conditions govern access. In this environment, the distinction between economic coordination and institutional rule-making becomes less clear. Srnicek's concept of platform capitalism identifies the platform as a business model whose value rests heavily on data, network effects, and intermediation, while Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism emphasizes the extraction and monetization of behavioural data. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal broaden the perspective further by showing how platform infrastructures penetrate domains that had previously been organized by public or sectoral institutions (Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). These perspectives overlap, but they are not interchangeable: one describes a business model, another a logic of accumulation, and the third an institutional transformation of social organization.

For the European Union, this transformation poses an unusual problem. Europe possesses formidable regulatory capacity, a large internal market, a central bank with monetary authority, and an increasingly dense body of digital legislation. Yet many of the technological infrastructures that organize its digital economy are controlled by firms headquartered elsewhere. The Union is therefore powerful and dependent at the same time. It can compel globally significant companies to alter practices inside the European market, but it does not automatically possess equivalent capabilities in cloud

infrastructure, advanced semiconductors, foundation models, operating systems, or consumer platforms. The central question of this chapter is consequently not whether the EU is powerful, but what kind of power it possesses and whether that power is changing.

The argument developed here is that Europe is moving from the classical regulatory state toward a more complex hybrid order that combines regulation, industrial policy, infrastructural investment, monetary experimentation, and economic-security policy. The shift is visible in the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the Chips Act, the AI-factory programme, the Platform Work Directive, the European Economic Security Strategy, and the digital-euro project. None of these initiatives by itself constitutes a new economic regime. Together, however, they reveal a widening conception of public authority: the Union no longer seeks only to correct market failures after they emerge; it increasingly attempts to shape the architectures within which digital markets, infrastructures, labour relations, and payment systems operate. The transformation is incomplete, contested, and institutionally uneven, but it is already sufficient to raise a larger question: is the European regulatory state becoming a techno-regulatory and selectively industrial polity?

Platform Capitalism as an Economic-Institutional Question

The importance of the platform economy lies first in its institutional form. Conventional firms coordinate production largely within an organization and transact with other actors through markets. Platforms, by contrast, create an infrastructure through which multiple groups interact. They may bring together advertisers and audiences, drivers and passengers, sellers and buyers, software developers and device users, or merchants and payment providers. Their economic advantage does not arise solely from the sale of a product; it often derives from controlling the conditions of interaction among other actors. This is why the concept of platform

capitalism is politically important. It identifies a form of private coordination whose power grows as economic and social activity becomes dependent on the architecture of the intermediary itself (Srnicek, 2017).

The logic is reinforced by network effects. A platform that becomes more useful as participation increases can accumulate advantages that are difficult for new entrants to reproduce. Data can intensify this dynamic because a large user base generates information that can improve services, advertising, recommendation systems, fraud detection, and product development. The result is not an ordinary monopoly in the nineteenth-century sense, with a single firm simply controlling a commodity. It is an ecosystem in which users, complementors, advertisers, developers, and service providers become linked to a privately governed technical environment. Nieborg and Poell (2018) describe platformization as the penetration of platform infrastructures and economic logics into broader spheres of production and distribution. The institutional consequence is that market participation increasingly depends upon rules embedded in technical systems rather than negotiated only through contract or established by public law.

Zuboff's surveillance-capitalism thesis focuses on a different dimension: the appropriation of behavioural data for prediction and commercial influence (Zuboff, 2019). The concept is useful because it identifies the political significance of information asymmetry and behavioural prediction. Yet it should not become a universal label for every digital business model. Subscription platforms, cloud providers, application stores, enterprise software companies, and digital-payment systems can exercise substantial infrastructural power even when their principal revenues do not arise from behavioural advertising. For European political economy, the more general question concerns control over infrastructures of intermediation.

The broader ‘platform society’ perspective makes this institutional point explicit. Van Dijck et al. (2018) argue that platforms have become embedded in sectors such as transport, health, education, news, and public communication, reorganizing relations among public values, markets, and institutions. Cohen (2019) develops an adjacent argument in legal and political-economic terms: informational capitalism does not exist outside law but is constructed through legal arrangements defining property, contract, surveillance, organizational power, and access to information. This observation is indispensable. Platform power is neither a natural consequence of technology nor the spontaneous outcome of consumer choice. It is shaped by institutional rules about data, competition, liability, labor, interoperability, and intellectual property.

European regulation therefore enters the platform economy not from outside but as part of the architecture that constitutes it. The political economy of the digital market is a struggle over who defines the terms of intermediation. That struggle provides the connection between platform capitalism and European institutional evolution.

Corporate Power and Quasi-Regulatory Authority

Large digital firms are sometimes described as new sovereigns. The metaphor is illuminating only if used with restraint. Corporations do not possess territorial sovereignty in the constitutional sense: they cannot generally legislate criminal law, levy taxes through public authority, or claim democratic legitimacy over a population. Nevertheless, some platforms exercise functions that resemble regulation within the domains they organize. Application stores establish entry requirements for developers. Search and recommendation systems determine visibility. Cloud providers define technical dependencies. Advertising platforms structure access to audiences. Operating systems determine

interoperability, default settings, and the permissions through which other services function. In these contexts, a private rule can have effects similar to public regulation even when its legal source is contract and code rather than statute.

Cohen (2019) is particularly useful for understanding this form of power because she treats informational capitalism as a legal-institutional order rather than merely a technological phenomenon. Private actors acquire infrastructural authority when economic dependence makes exit costly and when technical architecture permits them to set conditions for participation. This is not the end of the state. Rather, it is a redistribution of practical rule-making capacity between public institutions and privately controlled infrastructures.

The distinction matters because European digital policy increasingly targets not only anticompetitive outcomes but the architecture of private governance. Rules requiring interoperability, limits on self-preferencing, data portability, access for third-party services, or changes to default settings do more than punish misconduct. They challenge the power of a platform to determine unilaterally how an ecosystem operates. This is the underlying political logic of the DMA.

The situation is particularly visible in cloud computing. Cloud services are not merely storage products; they increasingly provide the computational environment in which firms and public bodies run applications, process data, and develop AI. In June 2026, the European Commission announced a preliminary view that Amazon Web Services and Microsoft Azure should be designated as gatekeeper services under the DMA, describing them as the two leading cloud-computing services in the EU and emphasizing lock-in, switching costs, ecosystem effects, and the growing importance of AI tools in cloud procurement (European Commission, 2026b). At

the time of writing, this was a preliminary position rather than a final designation. Its significance lies in what it reveals about the evolution of European regulation: infrastructure that once appeared to be a business-to-business technology service is now treated as a possible locus of systemic market power.

Corporate infrastructural power therefore cannot be assessed only by market share. The relevant questions concern dependency, interoperability, switching costs, control over standards, and the capacity to shape the behaviour of other economic actors. A platform may exercise substantial institutional influence even without monopolizing every downstream market. This is why Europe's regulatory response increasingly focuses on gateways, ecosystems, and structural conditions rather than on price alone.

The European Union as a Regulatory Economic Power

The European Union's principal economic strength has long been regulatory rather than proprietorial. Majone's classic account of the European regulatory state described a polity that exercises authority through rule-making, independent agencies, competition policy, and market-correcting institutions rather than through centralized public ownership or a large federal budget (Majone, 1994). That diagnosis remains powerful, but the digital economy extends its significance. Rules now reach into the architecture of platforms, data flows, artificial intelligence, and interoperability itself.

Bradford's Brussels Effect explains why such rules can exert influence beyond European territory. Firms seeking access to a large and relatively affluent market may find it economical to comply with stringent EU rules across their wider operations, especially where production or technical systems are costly to fragment (Bradford, 2020). Digital regulation has become one of the most visible arenas in which this dynamic is tested. Yet the Brussels Effect should not be

confused with technological sovereignty. A polity may be able to regulate foreign-owned firms effectively while remaining dependent on them for critical infrastructure. Regulatory reach and productive capacity are analytically distinct.

The digital regulatory stack makes this distinction clear. The GDPR governs personal data; the Digital Services Act imposes duties on intermediary services and systemic obligations on very large platforms; the DMA regulates gatekeepers; the Data Governance Act and Data Act structure access, intermediation, and use of data; and the AI Act creates common requirements for artificial-intelligence systems. The cumulative effect is an increasingly dense legal environment that shapes how digital markets can be designed and operated. In this sense, European economic authority is becoming architectural: law increasingly specifies the conditions under which technical ecosystems must function.

The DMA is especially important because enforcement is centralized to an unusual degree in the Commission. By the end of the 2025 reporting period, seven gatekeepers - Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Booking, ByteDance, Meta, and Microsoft - were subject to the DMA in relation to 23 core platform services (European Commission, 2026a). This does not mean that the Union controls these firms. It means that a supranational institution has acquired a direct and continuing supervisory relationship with a small group of companies that organize crucial parts of the digital economy.

The result is a new type of public-private institutional relationship. The Commission does not merely investigate episodic infringements; it conducts regulatory dialogue, receives compliance reports, runs specification proceedings, monitors technical changes, and can impose penalties. The economic constitution of the digital market is therefore increasingly shaped by continuous supervision.

This is a meaningful extension of the regulatory-state model, because the object of regulation is no longer simply market conduct but the design of digital ecosystems.

The Digital Markets Act and the Turn from Ex Post to Ex Ante Governance

Classical competition law is reactive. Authorities identify a relevant market, establish dominance or anticompetitive conduct, gather evidence, and impose remedies after a violation is demonstrated. In fast-moving digital markets, this process may take years, while the market structure that prompted the investigation can evolve much faster. The DMA responds to this temporal mismatch by imposing ex ante obligations on firms designated as gatekeepers. It does not replace competition law; it supplements it with a regime designed to be clearer, faster, and more administrable (Cr  mer et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2024).

This shift is institutionally significant because it changes the burden of governance. Under conventional antitrust, authorities must repeatedly prove that specific conduct is unlawful within a detailed economic and legal framework. Under the DMA, certain obligations apply because a firm has been designated as a gatekeeper in respect of specified core platform services. The regulatory question moves from ‘has this conduct produced an anticompetitive effect?’ toward ‘does this gatekeeper comply with obligations designed to preserve contestability and fairness?’ The economic analysis does not disappear, but it enters at different stages of the regulatory process (Fletcher et al., 2024).

The Commission’s 2026 annual report on DMA implementation provides early evidence of how this model operates. It describes regulatory dialogue on interoperability, choice screens, data portability, alternative distribution channels, advertising data, and user consent. It also records a EUR 200 million non-compliance

fine imposed on Meta in 2025 in relation to its ‘Consent or Pay’ model under Article 5(2) DMA (European Commission, 2026a). These developments should not be interpreted as proof that the DMA has transformed digital market concentration. They do, however, show that ex ante regulation is altering the terms on which large platforms must design and justify their services in Europe.

The distinction between compliance and structural change is crucial. A gatekeeper can modify interfaces or contractual conditions without losing its ecosystem advantage. Conversely, apparently modest technical changes can have significant competitive effects if they reduce switching costs, improve interoperability, or enable alternative distribution channels. The economic consequences of the DMA will therefore require longitudinal evidence. By September 2026, the institutional shift is clearer than the market outcome.

The evolving treatment of cloud services underscores this uncertainty. In 2025 the Commission opened market investigations concerning AWS and Azure even though they did not meet the DMA’s quantitative thresholds for designation, and in June 2026 it reached a preliminary view that they should be designated qualitatively (European Commission, 2026b). The episode reveals the adaptive nature of the regime: the Commission is testing whether a framework initially associated with consumer-facing digital platforms can address infrastructural services whose power rests on enterprise dependency, switching costs, and AI ecosystems.

In this respect the DMA is more than a competition instrument. It is an experiment in institutional timing. It attempts to regulate markets before path dependence becomes irreversible. Whether this experiment succeeds will depend on enforcement capacity, judicial review, market adaptation, and the ability of regulators to distinguish innovation from strategic enclosure.

Data as an Economic Institution

Political economy traditionally organizes analysis around capital, labor, land, money, and the institutional arrangements through which these resources are owned and exchanged. Data fits awkwardly into this taxonomy. It can be copied at low marginal cost, reused by multiple actors, generated as a by-product of other activities, combined to create new informational value, and rendered economically useful only through complementary infrastructures such as computing, software, organizational routines, and legal rights. To call data ‘the new oil’ is therefore rhetorically convenient but analytically poor.

The European response reflects this complexity. The Data Governance Act and Data Act do not establish a simple property regime in which data is treated like a conventional commodity. They create rules concerning access, intermediation, reuse, portability, and conditions for sharing. The underlying institutional problem is how to create economic value from data while preventing excessive enclosure, unfair contractual leverage, and fragmentation. In this sense, the EU is trying to constitute data markets rather than merely liberalize them.

This is where platform capitalism and European regulation intersect most directly. A platform’s advantage often derives from its privileged position in collecting, combining, and analysing data generated by users and business partners. The DMA’s data-related provisions aim to reduce some of these asymmetries by giving business users and end users greater control over data and by limiting some forms of cross-service combination. The Commission’s 2026 implementation report explicitly links data accumulation to entry barriers and market contestability (European Commission, 2026a).

Yet data is not valuable in isolation. The rise of generative AI demonstrates that data, compute, models, cloud infrastructure,

specialized chips, and skilled labor form an interdependent production system. This makes ‘data sovereignty’ insufficient as a stand-alone economic objective. A polity may possess legal rights over data but lack the computational infrastructure needed to exploit it. Conversely, a cloud provider may control the computing environment without owning all the underlying datasets. Digital political economy is therefore increasingly concerned with bundles of complementary assets rather than single resources.

The Common European Data Spaces project can be read in this context as an attempt to create sectoral institutions for trusted sharing across domains such as health, manufacturing, mobility, energy, and public administration. Whether these spaces become major economic infrastructures remains uncertain. Their importance for the present argument lies in the institutional ambition: Europe seeks not only to constrain private data extraction but also to organize conditions under which data can circulate for public and economic purposes.

AI, Semiconductors, Cloud, and the Return of Industrial Policy

For much of the late twentieth century, the European integration project was associated with competition, market opening, and limits on national industrial favoritism. The contemporary turn toward semiconductors, advanced computing, batteries, critical materials, cloud services, and artificial intelligence marks a partial departure from that orientation. The Union has not abandoned competition policy, but it increasingly accepts the proposition that strategic capacity may require public coordination and investment.

The European Chips Act is emblematic. Regulation (EU) 2023/1781 establishes a framework for strengthening the European semiconductor ecosystem and explicitly combines research, investment, resilience, monitoring, and crisis-response mechanisms. Its political significance extends beyond chips. Semiconductor

policy treats productive capacity as a matter of security and strategic autonomy rather than leaving its geographical distribution entirely to market forces. The Union is therefore experimenting with an industrial-policy logic that sits uneasily, but not necessarily incompatibly, alongside its traditional regulatory identity.

The developmental-state literature provides a useful contrast. Johnson's analysis of Japan emphasized a state bureaucracy capable of coordinating industrial transformation through targeted instruments, information, finance, and long-term strategy (Johnson, 1982). The EU is not a developmental state in this classical sense: it lacks a unitary government, fiscal capacity is distributed, and industrial policy remains shared with member states. Nevertheless, the comparison clarifies what is changing. Europe is becoming more willing to identify strategic technologies and to mobilize public resources around them.

Artificial-intelligence infrastructure makes this change particularly visible. The European Commission reports that 19 AI Factories and 13 associated antennas are being established around EuroHPC supercomputing capacity, with overall Commission, member-state, and associated-country investment in supercomputing infrastructures and AI Factories reaching EUR 10 billion over 2021-2027 (European Commission, 2026c). These initiatives attempt to connect compute, data, universities, startups, industry, and public investment. Their existence does not prove that Europe has overcome the scale advantages of American technology firms. It does show that computing infrastructure has become an explicit object of European industrial strategy.

Cloud dependence remains the more difficult problem. Pohle and Thiel (2020) emphasize that digital sovereignty is an ambiguous political concept encompassing multiple claims to control, autonomy, and self-determination. In the cloud context, sovereignty

cannot be achieved simply by passing rules. Switching costs, skills, procurement practices, software ecosystems, and AI-service integration all create structural dependencies. The Commission's 2026 attention to AWS and Azure under the DMA underscores the point: cloud infrastructure has become too central to be treated as a neutral background service.

This produces a hybrid strategy. Europe regulates dominant infrastructures, subsidizes selected strategic sectors, builds public computing capacity, and seeks diversified supply chains. It is therefore moving beyond the classical regulatory state without becoming a centralized developmental state. The institutional form that emerges is better understood as a layered combination of regulation and selective capacity-building.

The Digital Euro and the Institutional Reach of Central Banking

Money is the most politically sensitive infrastructure considered in this chapter because it sits at the intersection of public authority, private banking, payments, and everyday economic life. The digital euro project therefore raises questions that go beyond payment technology. A central bank digital currency would constitute a new digital form of central-bank money available for retail use, distributed through regulated intermediaries but ultimately anchored in the Eurosystem.

The project has advanced materially, but it has not reached issuance. The ECB completed the preparation phase in October 2025 and moved to a new phase focused on technical readiness, market engagement, and support for the legislative process. The ECB states that if the necessary regulation is adopted in 2026, a pilot can begin in the second half of 2027 and the Eurosystem could be ready for a potential first issuance during 2029. The final decision to issue remains contingent on legislation and a later Governing Council

decision (European Central Bank, 2025). In July 2026, the ECB selected 36 payment service providers to participate in the pilot (European Central Bank, 2026).

This timetable is institutionally important. The digital euro is neither an experiment at the margin nor a launched currency. It is a policy infrastructure being prepared in parallel with legislation. The Council agreed its negotiating position in December 2025, and the European Parliament's Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs adopted its report on the proposed regulation in June 2026. The project therefore sits at a point where monetary design, legislative bargaining, and technical architecture interact.

Tucker's analysis of central-bank legitimacy provides a useful framework. Independent central banks exercise delegated authority precisely because monetary decisions can benefit from insulation from day-to-day politics, but the expansion of their functions raises questions about mandate boundaries and accountability (Tucker, 2018). A digital euro would not convert the ECB into a retail bank in the conventional sense, and the current design relies on payment service providers rather than direct consumer accounts at the ECB. Nevertheless, the Eurosystem would become more directly involved in the infrastructure through which households and merchants make digital payments.

This possibility explains the sensitivity surrounding privacy, bank disintermediation, holding limits, offline use, and the role of intermediaries. The digital euro is explicitly presented by the ECB as a complement to cash, not a replacement, and official materials emphasize privacy and resilience. It should therefore not be conflated with cryptocurrency or described as programmable state money without evidence. The political issue is subtler: if private digital payments become increasingly concentrated in non-European platforms or card schemes, public digital money can be understood

as an attempt to preserve monetary sovereignty and strategic autonomy within the retail-payment system.

The digital euro thus reveals a larger change in economic institutions. Central banking in the digital age concerns not only interest rates and financial stability but the architecture of payment itself. Whether that architecture eventually strengthens the ECB's direct institutional presence in citizens' economic lives will depend on design, adoption, legislation, and public trust.

Platform Work, Algorithmic Management, and the Reorganization of Labor

The platform economy transforms not only markets but the organization of work. Ride-hailing, delivery, domestic services, freelancing, and other forms of digitally mediated labor demonstrate how an application can perform functions once distributed among supervisors, schedulers, dispatchers, and personnel departments. Rosenblat's study of Uber illustrated how informational asymmetries and algorithmic systems can structure drivers' work while preserving the formal appearance of flexible self-employment (Rosenblat, 2018).

The wider literature on algorithmic management shows that this logic extends beyond platforms. Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin (2020) identify a range of mechanisms through which algorithms can direct, evaluate, and discipline workers. Their analysis is important because it rejects the idea that automation simply replaces human management. Algorithms become management technologies: they can allocate tasks, recommend actions, record behaviour, rate performance, and structure rewards or sanctions.

Directive (EU) 2024/2831 on improving working conditions in platform work is therefore an institutional response to a new form

of managerial power. The Directive addresses employment-status determination and establishes rules concerning algorithmic management, transparency, human oversight, data processing, and remedies. Member states must transpose it into national law by 2 December 2026. As of late September 2026, its European-wide labor-market effects cannot yet be evaluated because the transposition deadline has not passed.

This timing matters analytically. European legislation can change the legal constitution of a market before researchers can observe its economic consequences. The Platform Work Directive potentially redistributes power between platforms and workers by limiting the opacity of automated management and by strengthening routes through which employment relationships can be recognized. Yet platforms may adapt organizational forms, contracts, and technical systems in response. Regulation initiates an institutional contest; it does not predetermine its outcome.

Migration adds another layer. Platform labor in many European cities intersects with migrant employment, labor-market segmentation, and cross-border mobility. The digital interface can lower entry barriers into certain forms of work while simultaneously exposing workers to precarious conditions, opaque rating systems, and weak bargaining power. Evidence varies greatly across sectors and member states, so the relationship should not be generalized into a single European model. Nonetheless, it demonstrates that the digital economy links technological governance to older questions of labor status, migration, social citizenship, and collective representation.

The deeper institutional transformation lies in the return of the employment relationship as a regulatory question. Platform firms initially presented themselves as neutral intermediaries connecting independent users. European labor regulation increasingly asks

whether control exercised through software is nevertheless control. In political-economic terms, the question is old; only the managerial technology is new.

Economic Security and the Geoeconomic Turn

The European single market was constructed under the assumption that economic openness and interdependence were generally sources of prosperity and, indirectly, political stability. Recent crises have complicated this assumption. The pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine, supply-chain disruptions, energy insecurity, semiconductor shortages, and intensifying technological rivalry between the United States and China have encouraged European institutions to treat some forms of economic dependence as potential security risks.

The European Economic Security Strategy of June 2023 formalized this change in vocabulary. The joint communication identifies risks to supply chains, critical infrastructure, technology security and leakage, and the weaponization of economic dependencies, while seeking to balance protection, promotion of competitiveness, and partnership (European Commission & High Representative, 2023). Economic policy is thus increasingly evaluated not only through efficiency but through resilience, vulnerability, and strategic exposure.

Blackwill and Harris (2016) define geoeconomics as the use of economic instruments for geopolitical purposes. The EU's position is distinctive because authority is distributed across supranational and national levels. Trade policy is strongly Europeanized, but export controls, investment screening, industrial subsidies, taxation, and national-security competences involve different combinations of institutions. As a result, European geoeconomic strategy is less centralized than that of a unitary state.

This institutional fragmentation does not make the geoeconomic turn insignificant. On the contrary, it helps explain the proliferation of coordination mechanisms. Semiconductor subsidies, foreign-investment screening, economic-security assessments, supply-chain monitoring, and technology controls increasingly connect economic policy to strategic objectives. The border between competition policy and security policy is therefore becoming less distinct.

The difficulty is to avoid turning ‘economic security’ into a justification for indiscriminate protectionism. Strategic autonomy can mean resilience and diversified dependency rather than self-sufficiency. Pohle and Thiel’s warning about the conceptual ambiguity of digital sovereignty applies here as well: political language can unite very different policy goals under a single label (Pohle & Thiel, 2020). The task for European institutions is to distinguish genuine vulnerabilities from ordinary interdependence and to do so without destroying the benefits of the single market and external openness.

Economic security thus represents not the end of market integration but its politicization. The European economy is increasingly understood as a system whose infrastructures, dependencies, and technological capacities have strategic consequences.

From Regulatory State to European Techno-Regulatory State?

The cumulative evidence suggests that the classical regulatory-state model remains necessary but no longer sufficient. The EU still relies heavily on rule-making, competition enforcement, standards, and delegated expertise. Yet the Union now also invests in supercomputing, coordinates semiconductor strategy, prepares a public digital-payment infrastructure, regulates algorithmic

management, and explicitly evaluates technological dependencies through an economic-security lens.

One might describe this emerging configuration as a European techno-regulatory state. The term should be treated as a heuristic rather than a declaration of a new theory. Its purpose is to identify the combination of three forms of authority. The first is regulatory: the capacity to set binding rules for firms and markets. The second is infrastructural: the capacity to organize or support technical systems on which economic activity depends. The third is strategic-industrial: the capacity to direct resources toward technologies considered important for autonomy or security.

The concept has obvious limitations. The EU is not a state, its budget remains limited relative to national economies, implementation often depends on member states, and many critical infrastructures remain privately owned. Hall and Soskice's varieties-of-capitalism perspective reminds us that European economies possess different institutional complementarities, industrial structures, financial systems, and labor-market traditions (Hall & Soskice, 2001). A common digital strategy therefore operates through heterogeneous national capitalisms rather than replacing them.

This heterogeneity creates distributive conflicts. Industrial policy can favor member states with greater fiscal capacity. Regulation can impose different adjustment costs across sectors. Cloud-sovereignty initiatives may benefit particular providers. AI infrastructure may cluster geographically. A European techno-regulatory project therefore contains a familiar political question: who pays, who gains, and which territories acquire strategic capacity?

The same concern applies internationally. Regulation may project European standards abroad, but a rules-based advantage is

not the same as productive leadership. The Brussels Effect can coexist with technological dependence (Bradford, 2020). Europe may successfully govern platforms owned elsewhere while continuing to rely on foreign cloud, chips, and AI systems. A credible account of European economic sovereignty must therefore measure capability as well as regulation.

For this reason, the most defensible claim is evolutionary rather than categorical. Europe is not abandoning the regulatory state. It is layering industrial, infrastructural, and security functions onto it. The resulting polity is more interventionist than the regulatory Europe of the 1990s, but less centralized than the developmental states that inspired classical industrial-policy theory.

Alternative Futures of the European Economic Order

The future of Europe's digital political economy remains open. At least four trajectories can be distinguished, not as predictions but as analytical scenarios. The first is a European Digital Regulatory Power. In this scenario, the Union remains strongest in law and market governance. The DMA, DSA, AI Act, data legislation, and competition policy continue to shape global corporate behaviour, while Europe remains dependent on non-European firms for important technological infrastructures. Regulatory sovereignty deepens without corresponding technological autonomy.

A second possibility is a European Techno-Industrial Power. Here, investments in semiconductors, supercomputing, AI factories, cloud infrastructure, research, and payment systems gradually reduce strategic dependencies. The EU does not become technologically autarkic; rather, it acquires enough capability to negotiate interdependence from a stronger position. This would require sustained investment, more integrated capital markets, coordination of national industrial policies, and institutional

mechanisms capable of translating research strength into commercial scale.

The third possibility is Platform-Dominated Europe. Public regulation remains extensive, but private technological ecosystems continue to set the practical terms of digital economic life. Compliance becomes a cost of doing business rather than a transformation of market structure. Cloud, AI, app-store, advertising, and payment infrastructures remain concentrated, and European firms build on top of systems controlled elsewhere. In such a scenario, regulation may protect rights and constrain abuses without fundamentally redistributing infrastructural power.

The fourth is Fragmented Economic Europe. Member states increasingly pursue national technological and industrial strategies, subsidy competition intensifies, and common European policy becomes more difficult. The single market survives, but strategic technologies become arenas of national competition. Such fragmentation could weaken Europe externally even as governments seek greater sovereignty domestically.

Current developments contain elements of all four scenarios. The DMA illustrates regulatory power; AI Factories and the Chips Act illustrate industrial ambition; cloud concentration demonstrates persistent private infrastructural power; and unequal fiscal capacity among member states creates pressures toward fragmentation. The central political question is therefore how these tendencies will be combined.

The broader conclusion is that the new European economic order cannot be understood through the opposition between market and state alone. Digital capitalism produces institutions that are simultaneously markets, infrastructures, and systems of governance. The public response accordingly operates through an equally hybrid set of instruments: regulation, investment, standards, competition

law, monetary infrastructure, labor law, and security policy. Europe's political economy is becoming more institutional precisely because technology makes apparently technical systems politically consequential.

The transformation of Europe's economic institutions thus mirrors the institutional evolution discussed in the preceding chapters. Political authority increasingly works through infrastructures that were once treated as neutral instruments. Platforms govern access, clouds organize computational dependence, algorithms manage labor, data structures market power, and payment systems embody monetary sovereignty. The EU's answer has been neither nationalization nor laissez-faire. It has been to construct a layered regime of public constraints and selective capacity-building around private technological systems.

Whether this regime will eventually amount to a coherent European techno-regulatory order is still uncertain. What is already clear is that the old distinction between economic policy and technological policy has become difficult to sustain. In the digital age, control over economic institutions increasingly depends on control over the infrastructures through which economic life itself is organized.

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CHAPTER 4

EUROPE IN MOTION: MIGRATION, DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSFORMATION, AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Introduction

Europe has rarely been as immobile as its political maps suggest. Long before the institutions of the European Union acquired their present form, the continent was shaped by emigration, imperial circulation, labor recruitment, forced displacement, border revision, return migration, and the movement of minorities across changing jurisdictions. What is distinctive in the twenty-first century is therefore not that Europe has become a continent of migration, but that migration now intersects with demographic aging, labor-market restructuring, welfare-state pressures, digital border systems, supranational law, and increasingly polarized party competition at the same time. The result is an institutional problem rather than a merely demographic one. Migration affects not only who lives in

Europe, but also how European states define membership, distribute social rights, recruit labor, organize borders, allocate responsibility, and negotiate authority between national and Union levels.

This distinction matters because public debate often treats migration as a sequence of emergencies. The vocabulary of crisis has been repeatedly applied to asylum arrivals, irregular crossings, labor shortages, displacement from war, and political disputes over burden-sharing. Yet institutions are rarely transformed by a single emergency alone. They change when repeated pressures become sufficiently durable to alter administrative routines, legal categories, electoral incentives, fiscal choices, and the expectations of citizens. Hollifield's concept of the migration state captured an enduring liberal dilemma: advanced economies benefit from openness to trade, capital, and labor while political systems remain organized around territorial membership and the capacity to regulate entry (Hollifield, 2004). In the European Union, this tension is intensified because economic integration is supranational, citizenship is layered, border governance is partially shared, and migration policy remains divided among Union rules, national discretion, local implementation, and external cooperation.

The demographic setting has made this institutional tension harder to ignore. On 1 January 2025, the median age of the EU population had reached 44.9 years, while the total fertility rate for 2024 fell to 1.34 live births per woman (Eurostat, 2026a, 2026b). On 1 January 2026 the Union's population was estimated at 452.0 million, and Eurostat reported that since 2012 negative natural population change had been offset by positive net migration (Eurostat, 2026c). These figures do not imply that immigration is a mechanical remedy for population aging. Demography does not dictate policy, and political communities do not behave like actuarial models. They do, however, establish the structural background against which decisions about labor recruitment, social insurance,

regional decline, family policy, integration, and border control acquire new significance.

This chapter therefore treats migration as a political-institutional variable. Its concern is not to reduce the phenomenon to electoral backlash, humanitarian responsibility, or labor supply, but to examine how these dimensions interact. The argument developed here is that migration can simultaneously deepen Europeanization and reinforce national political boundaries. The 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, which entered into application in June 2026, illustrates this dual movement: it establishes common procedures, databases, responsibility rules, and a permanent solidarity mechanism, yet implementation remains profoundly dependent on member-state administrations and politically contested forms of flexibility (European Commission, 2026a). Likewise, the unprecedented use of temporary protection for people displaced from Ukraine demonstrated that the Union can mobilize common legal instruments rapidly when political agreement is sufficiently broad, while the persistence of divergent national integration regimes reveals the continuing force of national institutions.

The central question, then, is not whether migration will make Europe 'more integrated' or 'less integrated' in any simple sense. It is whether the combined pressures of demographic change, mobility, displacement, labor demand, political contestation, and administrative digitalization are producing a new institutional equilibrium. That equilibrium may involve more shared European rules but also more differentiated implementation; more cross-border rights but also sharper distinctions between categories of migrants; more demand for labor migration but also more restrictive politics around asylum; and more sophisticated administrative coordination but also new debates about rights, surveillance, and democratic accountability. Europe is in motion not only because people move. Its political institutions are moving with them.

Migration as a Political-Institutional Variable

Migration becomes institutionally important when it ceases to be treated as an exceptional movement of persons and begins to alter the ordinary functions of the state. The transformation can be observed in several arenas at once: ministries create specialized units, municipalities expand integration services, labor ministries redesign recruitment channels, welfare agencies define eligibility rules for newcomers, courts reinterpret rights, parties reposition themselves, and supranational institutions attempt to standardize procedures that were once almost entirely national. The institutionalization of migration is therefore less visible in spectacular moments of border politics than in the accumulation of administrative routines.

Classical migration theory offers only partial guidance for this problem. Push-pull accounts identify conditions encouraging movement, and the new economics of labor migration shifts attention from individual choice to household strategies. Segmented labor-market theory, by contrast, explains why advanced economies repeatedly create demand for migrant workers in occupations characterized by instability, low status, difficult conditions, or chronic recruitment problems (Piore, 1979; Stark, 1991). These approaches explain movement and labor demand, but they do not by themselves explain why similar demographic or economic pressures generate very different political responses across European states.

Institutional analysis adds the missing dimension. Hollifield's migration-state framework emphasizes that openness is mediated by law and politics, not merely by markets (Hollifield, 2004). Historical institutionalism further suggests that earlier choices structure later possibilities: once states develop asylum procedures, family-reunification rules, citizenship pathways, biometric databases, or municipal integration systems, subsequent

reform occurs through inherited institutional channels rather than on a blank slate (Pierson, 1996). This helps explain why comparable migration pressures can produce divergent outcomes in Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Poland, or Hungary. Each state responds through a historically specific configuration of citizenship law, welfare arrangements, administrative capacity, party competition, and relations with the EU.

The European dimension adds yet another layer. Migration is one of the clearest examples of a policy field in which formal competences are neither wholly national nor fully supranational. Free movement for EU citizens belongs to the core of integration, while third-country admission, asylum, border control, return policy, and integration are distributed across different legal bases and levels of authority. The result is a system in which migration continuously tests the boundary between national sovereignty and shared European governance. It is precisely for this reason that migration should be treated not as a separate social issue but as a field through which the changing architecture of European political authority can be observed.

Demographic Transformation and the Politics of Population

The demographic transformation of Europe is often presented through a handful of arresting indicators: declining fertility, increasing median age, population loss in some regions, and the growing fiscal burden of pensions and healthcare. These indicators are real, but their political meaning is not self-evident. The EU's median age of 44.9 years in 2025 concealed substantial variation, ranging from 39.6 in Ireland to 49.1 in Italy (Eurostat, 2026a). Fertility also differed considerably across member states even as the Union-wide rate fell to 1.34 in 2024 (Eurostat, 2026b). There is therefore no single European demographic condition, only

a common trend expressed through nationally and regionally distinct trajectories.

Political demography is useful insofar as it reminds us that population structures affect the distribution of political interests. Aging societies confront questions about pension financing, health expenditure, labor-force participation, housing, family support, and the electoral weight of different age cohorts. Yet demographic determinism is particularly dangerous in migration politics. A state facing labor-force contraction does not automatically adopt an expansive immigration policy. It may instead raise retirement ages, increase female labor-force participation, invest in automation, reform family policy, or accept slower growth. Hungary illustrates the broader principle: demographic concern can coexist with restrictive immigration politics because demographic preferences are mediated by identity, ideology, and electoral strategy.

What migration changes is the range of institutional options. Eurostat's estimate that positive net migration has compensated for negative natural population change in the EU since 2012 is especially significant because it shows that migration is already embedded in Europe's demographic reality rather than merely proposed as a future solution (Eurostat, 2026c). Yet the contribution of migration varies by age, skill, family formation, duration of stay, and spatial distribution. Foreign-born populations may be younger on average than native-born populations, but their long-term demographic effect depends upon settlement patterns, labor-market integration, fertility convergence, onward migration, and return.

The political issue is consequently one of institutional adaptation. Demography places pressure on pension systems, municipalities, hospitals, schools, and employers; migration can relieve some pressures while generating others. A worker recruited to a care sector may reduce an immediate staffing shortage, but

successful settlement requires housing, language learning, recognition of qualifications, and family integration. A declining rural region may need workers but fail to attract migrants who prefer metropolitan labor markets with established networks. In this sense, demographic policy and migration policy cannot be designed separately. The future challenge is not simply how many migrants Europe 'needs,' a question that is frequently posed too crudely, but how institutions can connect population change with labor, territory, welfare, and membership without assuming that demographic arithmetic can substitute for politics.

Migration, Labor Markets, and the Competition for Skills

The economic case for migration is strongest where demographic change intersects with identifiable labor demand. Europe's aging population affects sectors such as healthcare and long-term care, while agriculture, construction, hospitality, logistics, and selected manufacturing industries have long relied on migrant labor. At the same time, competition for engineers, researchers, medical professionals, and digital specialists has intensified. Migration policy therefore increasingly operates at two ends of the labor market: it supplies workers to sectors characterized by difficult recruitment conditions and it attempts to attract highly skilled workers in globally competitive occupations.

Segmented labor-market theory remains relevant because it explains why migrants often enter sectors that native workers leave or avoid (Piore, 1979). This pattern should not be romanticized as complementarity. Occupational segmentation can become a durable hierarchy, particularly where residence status, language barriers, recognition of qualifications, subcontracting, or informal employment constrain mobility. Eurostat reported that in 2025 the over-qualification rate was 41.4% among non-EU citizens, compared with 30.2% for citizens of other EU countries and 20.0%

for nationals (Eurostat, 2026d). The institutional problem is therefore not only whether migrants enter employment, but whether European labor markets use their qualifications efficiently.

The recast EU Blue Card Directive represents one attempt to treat skilled migration strategically. Directive (EU) 2021/1883 revised the framework for admitting highly qualified third-country nationals, with the broader aim of making the Union more attractive in global competition for talent. The logic connects directly with the economic transformation discussed in Chapter 3: a Europe concerned about technological sovereignty, AI capacity, health-system resilience, and industrial renewal cannot separate those ambitions from the international mobility of skills. Universities, research institutes, hospitals, and technology firms are part of the migration system whether migration ministries acknowledge it or not.

Nevertheless, a skills strategy cannot be reduced to recruitment. The emigration of doctors, nurses, engineers, and younger workers from Central and Eastern European member states can relieve shortages in destination economies while weakening sending-state institutions. Internal EU mobility thus redistributes human capital within the Union. The political economy is paradoxical: free movement is one of European integration's greatest achievements, yet it can intensify demographic and administrative asymmetries between regions. The language of 'brain drain' captures only part of this process, because mobility may generate remittances, return migration, professional networks, and circulation. Even so, when the loss of skilled workers becomes persistent, free movement itself acquires a distributive dimension that European cohesion policy must confront.

The more durable lesson is that migration is neither simply a substitute for domestic labor nor an external addition to it. It is part

of the institutional organization of European labor markets. Recruitment rules, qualification recognition, residence security, family rights, social protection, and mobility between employers all affect whether migration produces temporary labor extraction or longer-term economic incorporation.

Welfare States, Solidarity, and the Politics of Deservingness

No institution reveals the politics of membership more clearly than the welfare state. Welfare systems translate abstract citizenship into concrete entitlements: healthcare, unemployment protection, family benefits, pensions, housing support, and social assistance. Migration therefore raises questions not only about fiscal effects but about the moral boundaries of solidarity. Who belongs to the community of contributors and beneficiaries, and at what point does residence become a claim to equal social protection?

The concept of welfare chauvinism addresses this boundary by describing preferences for maintaining welfare protection while restricting access for migrants or other out-groups. Recent comparative evidence cautions against assuming that such attitudes follow a uniform pattern. Bell, Valenta, and Strabac (2023a) found that the most exclusionary forms of welfare chauvinism were comparatively limited in Nordic cases, even while citizenship was often treated as an important threshold for equal benefits. Their broader European analysis similarly emphasizes the importance of perceptions, political context, and the strength of far-right populism rather than simple objective economic deterioration (Bell, Valenta, & Strabac, 2023b).

This finding has two implications. First, the welfare consequences of migration cannot be inferred from fiscal aggregates alone. Age structure, employment rates, earnings, household composition, and duration of residence all matter. Second, political responses are mediated by institutional design and narratives of

deservingness. A universalistic welfare state may generate strong solidaristic norms, but it may also intensify political debate about the boundaries of inclusion precisely because benefits are extensive. A more contributory system may place greater emphasis on employment history. Southern European systems, where families often carry a larger share of welfare provision, create different integration dynamics again.

European integration complicates the matter because social policy remains overwhelmingly national while labor mobility and migration are increasingly transnational. EU citizens exercising free movement possess important coordination rights, while third-country nationals enter differentiated legal categories. This layered structure reinforces the central argument of the chapter: Europeanization does not erase national institutions; it rearranges the conditions under which they operate. Welfare states remain national systems, but they increasingly govern populations whose employment histories, family ties, and legal statuses cross borders.

The future of welfare solidarity therefore depends less on a binary choice between open and closed borders than on whether states can maintain credible links among contribution, entitlement, integration, and equal treatment. Where migrants remain structurally concentrated in low-wage or precarious employment, political debates about welfare may reproduce labor-market inequality. Conversely, where institutions facilitate stable employment and upward mobility, the boundary between 'migrant' and 'member' can become less politically salient over time.

Migration, Party Competition, and the Reorganization of Political Cleavages

Migration has become one of the issues through which broader transformations in European party competition are expressed. It is tempting to describe this simply as the rise of anti-

immigration parties, but such a description is too narrow. Migration affects the strategies of mainstream conservatives, social democrats, greens, liberals, and radical parties alike because it intersects with questions of sovereignty, welfare, security, cultural identity, labor markets, and European integration. It is therefore less a single issue than a political junction at which several cleavages meet.

Postfunctionalist theory is particularly relevant. Hooghe and Marks (2009) argued that European integration moved from an era of permissive consensus toward constraining dissensus as questions of identity entered mass politics. Migration intensifies this process because decisions once managed administratively - border control, asylum responsibility, residence, citizenship - become highly visible electoral questions. The wider globalization cleavage described by Kriesi and colleagues likewise helps explain why migration can be linked to economic openness, cultural liberalism, and supranational governance in a single political conflict (Kriesi et al., 2008).

Still, causality must be handled with care. Electoral support for radical-right parties cannot be attributed mechanically to migration levels. Perceived migration, media salience, local economic conditions, trust in institutions, party entrepreneurship, and the credibility of mainstream competitors all shape electoral outcomes. Hungary is again instructive because immigration can be politically salient even where actual immigrant settlement is comparatively limited. Conversely, areas with long histories of immigration do not necessarily exhibit the strongest anti-immigration voting. Political construction matters alongside demographic reality.

Migration also Europeanizes party competition indirectly. National parties may remain organizationally dominant, as Chapter 2 argued, yet they increasingly debate similar questions: external borders, asylum responsibility, welfare access, labor recruitment,

and relations with third countries. The content of political conflict becomes European even when the organizations conducting that conflict remain national. In this sense, migration contributes to a shared European political agenda without necessarily producing a unified European electorate.

The institutional consequence is significant. When migration becomes electorally salient, governments carry domestic political constraints into Council negotiations, and EU compromises return to national arenas as evidence for or against European cooperation. Migration thus creates a feedback loop between national party competition and supranational governance. It can generate demand for common action while simultaneously narrowing the political space in which common action is negotiated.

Citizenship, Political Membership, and the Limits of Post-National Europe

Citizenship is the institution through which the political community defines who may claim the fullest set of rights. Marshall's classical account distinguished civil, political, and social dimensions of citizenship, but the European Union has transformed the territorial simplicity of that model (Marshall, 1950). An EU citizen can reside in another member state, access important social and economic rights under EU law, and vote in municipal and European Parliament elections there without becoming a national citizen of the host state. At the same time, the right to vote in national elections generally remains tied to nationality. Political membership is therefore layered but not post-national in any complete sense.

Soysal's influential account of post-national membership argued that rights increasingly attach to universal personhood and residence rather than nationality alone (Soysal, 1994). Europe certainly offers evidence for this claim: human-rights law, long-term residence, EU free movement, and social-rights coordination

weaken the idea that nationality is the sole source of rights. Yet the persistence of national naturalization rules demonstrates the limits of the thesis. Access to national elections, passports, diplomatic protection, and unconditional residence continues to depend heavily upon national citizenship.

Civic integration policies reveal how states have responded. Joppke (2007) identified a convergence across Western Europe toward language requirements, integration courses, and tests that condition entry, permanent residence, or naturalization. Such policies are often presented as mechanisms of incorporation, but critics interpret them as instruments for selecting and disciplining membership. Either way, they demonstrate that migration changes the institutional meaning of citizenship: membership is increasingly administered through measurable competencies as well as legal residence and descent.

Political participation follows a similarly uneven pattern. Naturalized citizens may possess full formal rights but participate at different rates depending upon socioeconomic status, party mobilization, discrimination, and the openness of political organizations. Migrants without national citizenship may be active in municipalities, unions, associations, diaspora organizations, or consultative bodies while remaining excluded from national elections. Brubaker's warning that diaspora should be understood as a category of practice rather than an automatically coherent group is important here (Brubaker, 2005). Transnational political ties vary dramatically across communities and generations.

The European future is therefore likely to remain one of layered membership rather than the disappearance of nationality. The institutional question is how far residence-based rights, EU mobility rights, and national citizenship can be coordinated without producing permanent hierarchies of political voice.

The Pact on Migration and Asylum: Integration Through Managed Differentiation

The Pact on Migration and Asylum represents the most substantial redesign of the EU's asylum and migration framework in decades. Adopted in 2024 after years of negotiation and entering into application on 12 June 2026, the package consists of ten legislative files intended to connect border screening, asylum procedure, responsibility allocation, solidarity, crisis management, reception, and information systems into a more coherent framework (European Commission, 2026a, 2026b). Its importance lies not only in individual rules but in the institutional architecture they create.

Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 on asylum and migration management replaces the previous Dublin responsibility framework with revised allocation rules and a permanent solidarity mechanism. The mechanism is mandatory in the sense that member states must contribute to solidarity, but flexible in the form contributions can take: relocation, financial contributions, or alternative operational support may all be used under the system. This design embodies the central compromise of European migration governance. Responsibility is Europeanized, but national governments retain choice over how they participate.

Other instruments deepen administrative integration. Regulation (EU) 2024/1356 establishes screening rules at external borders; Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 harmonizes important parts of the asylum procedure; Regulation (EU) 2024/1358 recasts Eurodac and expands the role of biometric and migration-related data; Regulation (EU) 2024/1359 creates crisis and force-majeure rules. Together, these instruments link legal harmonization to shared administrative infrastructure. The Pact is therefore not simply an asylum reform. It is a reorganization of the relationship among borders, databases, responsibility, and solidarity.

Yet it would be premature to describe the Pact as a completed supranational settlement. The first weeks of application in summer 2026 already demonstrated that implementation depends on national administrative capacity and Commission monitoring. The Commission's July 2026 assessment emphasized progress but also the need for further operational work in responsibility transfers and national procedures (European Commission, 2026c). The Pact's real political significance will therefore emerge through implementation rather than legal adoption alone.

Conceptually, the Pact is best understood as managed differentiation. It establishes common obligations and common technical systems while accommodating national variation in solidarity contributions and implementation. This makes it neither a federal asylum system nor a return to purely national control. Instead, it institutionalizes the hybrid character of European migration governance. The long-term test is whether this flexibility stabilizes cooperation or reproduces political disagreement in a more elaborate legal form.

Externalization, Migration Diplomacy, and the Politics Beyond the Border

European migration policy increasingly operates beyond European territory. Visa policy, readmission arrangements, development assistance, border-management cooperation, financial support, and political partnerships with neighboring states have all become instruments through which the Union and its member states seek to influence migration before people reach the external border. This process is usually described as externalization, but the term covers arrangements of very different legal and political character.

Some cooperation is embedded in formal agreements; other arrangements are political declarations, operational partnerships, funding instruments, or diplomatic bargains. The distinction matters

because accountability and legal enforceability differ. A readmission agreement negotiated within a formal legal framework cannot simply be equated with an informal commitment concerning border control. Nor should every form of cooperation with a transit state be interpreted as 'outsourcing' asylum. The empirical task is to identify which functions are transferred, financed, coordinated, or conditioned, and under what legal authority.

Migration diplomacy adds a second perspective. States situated along important routes may possess bargaining power because destination states value their cooperation. The EU-Türkiye relationship after the 2015-2016 refugee crisis is a prominent example of how migration, financial assistance, visa questions, and wider diplomatic relations can become intertwined. Similar patterns appear in European engagement with North African partners. Yet the language of 'weaponization' should be used carefully: deliberate coercive manipulation of migration is analytically different from ordinary bargaining under conditions of interdependence.

Externalization also creates a democratic problem. When migration control shifts outward, political responsibility may become less visible. Decisions that affect access to asylum, mobility, or return can involve European institutions, member-state authorities, third-country governments, international organizations, and private contractors. The geographical displacement of control may therefore also displace accountability. In the institutional evolution of Europe, the border is becoming less a line than a network of legal, diplomatic, and technological practices extending beyond the territory of the Union.

Forced Migration, Temporary Protection, and Differentiated Crisis Response

The contrast between the refugee movements of 2015-2016 and the displacement from Ukraine after February 2022 has become

one of the most revealing episodes in contemporary European migration governance. In the earlier crisis, institutional disagreement centered on responsibility allocation, relocation, secondary movement, and the limits of the Dublin system. In 2022, by contrast, the Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time, providing an immediate collective framework for people fleeing Ukraine rather than requiring each person to pass through the ordinary asylum procedure before receiving protection.

By July 2026, approximately 4.43 million people fleeing Ukraine were under temporary protection in the EU, according to Eurostat (Eurostat, 2026e). The Council subsequently adopted Implementing Decision (EU) 2026/1912, extending the protection framework until 4 March 2028. The durability of this regime matters institutionally. Temporary protection, originally designed as an emergency instrument in 2001, has become a large-scale system supporting access to residence, employment, education, and welfare across multiple member states.

The comparison with 2015-2016 should not be reduced to a claim that Europe was generous in one case and restrictive in another. The legal categories, geopolitical context, geography of displacement, expectations of return, existing diaspora networks, public attitudes, and security environment differed substantially. What the comparison does demonstrate is that institutional capacity is politically contingent. The EU possessed a legal instrument for mass displacement long before 2022, but its activation depended on agreement among governments about the character of the crisis and the appropriate response.

Securitization theory remains useful here, though it requires nuance. Huysmans (2000) showed how migration became connected to internal security, identity, and welfare in the development of European governance. Stritzel (2007) later emphasized the

importance of context and audience in securitization processes. The Ukrainian case demonstrates that forced migration need not be framed primarily as a threat to internal order; it can also be embedded in a narrative of geopolitical solidarity and collective security. The same policy field can therefore be securitized in different directions.

This variation matters for institutional theory. Crisis does not have a single integrative or disintegrative effect. It can generate common instruments, expose institutional weaknesses, or strengthen differentiated responses. What matters is the interaction between existing legal capacity, political framing, and interstate agreement.

Internal Mobility, Regional Inequality, Gender, and Sending-State Politics

A migration chapter confined to third-country immigration would miss one of the most consequential movements in contemporary Europe: mobility within the Union itself. Free movement redistributes labor, skills, tax bases, family structures, and demographic capacity between member states. Western and Northern labor markets have benefited from workers from Central and Eastern Europe, while some sending regions have experienced persistent population decline and shortages in healthcare, education, and skilled trades.

The institutional effect is uneven because mobility follows opportunity. Migrants, whether EU citizens or third-country nationals, tend to concentrate in metropolitan and economically dynamic regions where jobs, networks, transport, and services are available. This can mean that immigration raises the population of already successful cities without reversing depopulation in rural or peripheral regions. Migration policy therefore intersects with cohesion policy: attracting people to a country is not the same as attracting them to the regions that most need demographic renewal.

Gender further complicates the political economy of mobility. Global care-chain scholarship has demonstrated how paid care in wealthier societies can depend upon migrant women whose own households reorganize care across borders (Hochschild, 2000; Parreñas, 2001). Europe's aging societies intensify demand for long-term care precisely as family structures change and domestic care supply becomes constrained. Migration can fill this gap, but it may reproduce gendered and transnational inequalities when migrant workers experience low pay, insecure residence, or limited opportunities for occupational mobility.

Sending-state politics also extends beyond economics. Emigration creates diasporas that may vote, remit money, influence campaigns, or maintain political networks across borders. Yet Brubaker's conceptual caution remains essential: diaspora is not a single corporate actor (Brubaker, 2005). External citizens differ by generation, destination, class, political orientation, and intensity of homeland attachment. The institutional challenge for sending states is to maintain democratic links with mobile citizens without treating them as a homogeneous political constituency.

Europe's mobility regime thus redistributes both opportunity and institutional strain. Destination states gain workers and taxpayers but must provide housing, education, integration, and infrastructure. Sending states gain remittances and transnational networks but may lose young and skilled populations. The Union gains a flexible labor market but must confront the territorial inequalities that mobility can deepen.

Alternative Futures: From Fortress Europe to an Integrated Mobility Union

The institutional future of European migration cannot be described responsibly as a single trend. The evidence examined in this chapter points to several trajectories that may coexist. A

managed-migration Europe would treat labor admission as an explicit instrument of demographic and economic policy while maintaining distinct humanitarian protection channels. A restrictive or 'Fortress Europe' trajectory would intensify border control and externalization while remaining selectively open to skills and sectors deemed economically necessary. A differentiated Europe would preserve common legal frameworks but allow member states substantial variation in implementation and political ambition. A demographic-competition model would see states compete more aggressively for students, health professionals, engineers, and younger workers. An integrated-mobility model would attempt to coordinate internal free movement, external labor migration, asylum, demographic strategy, and regional policy more systematically.

These are ideal types rather than predictions. Indeed, the EU already contains elements of each. The Pact strengthens common border and asylum rules; the Blue Card represents managed high-skill migration; member states continue to diverge sharply on citizenship and integration; the Temporary Protection regime demonstrates collective capacity; and internal free movement redistributes labor across a demographically uneven Union. The future is therefore likely to be institutionally mixed.

The most important constraint is political legitimacy. A migration regime cannot endure solely because employers need workers or demographic models indicate population decline. It must also command sufficient public acceptance, protect legal rights, distribute responsibilities credibly, and avoid creating permanent populations whose economic participation is disconnected from political membership. Conversely, a system focused almost exclusively on restriction may satisfy short-term political demands while undermining labor-market needs, humanitarian obligations, or relations among member states.

The deeper transformation lies in the normalization of migration as a permanent field of statecraft. Europe is moving away from the assumption that migration can be handled episodically through exceptional measures. The Pact, digital border infrastructures, labor-migration instruments, municipal integration systems, and temporary protection all point toward a denser institutional order. Yet this order is not necessarily more liberal or more restrictive in a uniform sense. It is more differentiated, data-intensive, politically contested, and administratively interconnected.

This is why migration belongs at the center of any account of Europe's new political age. It is where demographic arithmetic meets the politics of identity; where labor markets meet citizenship; where municipal administration meets supranational law; where humanitarian protection meets border security; and where national electoral competition enters directly into European bargaining. Migration does not simply move people across institutions. It forces institutions to reveal what they are for, whom they include, and how far political authority can be shared across borders.

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CHAPTER 5

BEYOND INTEGRATION: NEW THEORIES OF POLITICAL ORDER FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

Introduction

The European Union has always been easier to describe than to classify. It is plainly more than an international organization, yet it remains something other than a state. It possesses a legal order with direct effects, a parliament elected by citizens, an executive-like Commission, a court capable of binding national authorities, a central bank for the euro area, a common commercial policy, shared border and asylum instruments, and a regulatory capacity whose effects frequently reach beyond Europe. At the same time, taxation, welfare, policing, coercive force, citizenship, and much of public administration remain deeply rooted in the member states. The familiar argument over whether Europe is moving toward federation or preserving national sovereignty has therefore persisted not because scholars have failed to notice institutional change, but

because the object itself has continued to change without arriving at a settled constitutional endpoint (Hix, 1999; Walker, 2002).

The previous chapters have shown that this indeterminacy is becoming more pronounced rather than less. Digital regulation has created dense common rules for data, platforms, artificial intelligence, identity, and administrative interoperability. Party competition is simultaneously Europeanized and nationally anchored. Platform capitalism has forced the Union to combine regulation with industrial policy, economic-security instruments, and attempts to reduce technological dependency. Migration and demographic change have produced common asylum rules, shared digital infrastructures, and new forms of solidarity while preserving strong national differences in welfare, citizenship, and political inclusion. These developments do not point in one constitutional direction. They point toward a political order composed of overlapping forms of authority whose boundaries differ by policy field.

That observation requires a change in theoretical emphasis. Classical integration theories remain indispensable. Neofunctionalism explains important forms of spillover; liberal intergovernmentalism continues to illuminate interstate bargains; postfunctionalism captures the politicization of identity and the limits imposed by mass politics; multilevel governance describes the dispersion of authority; historical institutionalism explains path dependence and layering; differentiated integration captures variation in participation and obligation; and regulatory-state theory remains central to understanding the Union's capacity to govern through rules rather than ownership (Haas, 1958; Moravcsik, 1998; Hooghe & Marks, 2001, 2009; Pierson, 1996; Majone, 1994). The difficulty is not that these theories have become obsolete. It is that the contemporary Union increasingly presents phenomena that were peripheral to the worlds in which many of them were formulated:

digital identity, interoperable databases, platform infrastructures, algorithmic regulation, cloud dependence, biometric border systems, and a form of economic security in which technological standards and supply chains are instruments of political power.

This chapter therefore shifts from a theory of integration to a theory of political order. Its aim is not to invent terminology for its own sake. On the contrary, new concepts are useful only where they identify mechanisms that established theories treat as secondary or invisible. The principal claim is modest: the EU is increasingly governed through institutional layering. Constitutional authority, regulatory capacity, administrative interoperability, technological infrastructure, monetary coordination, party competition, and differentiated membership do not converge into one sovereign center. They accumulate around one another. The theoretical challenge is to explain this accumulation without mistaking complexity for federalization, technology for sovereignty, or regulation for complete political control.

Within that framework, the concept of the Algorithmic Union is reconsidered. It is best treated not as a grand theory of European integration but as a middle-range heuristic for a specific mechanism: the production of supranational coordination through shared digital infrastructures, interoperable data systems, algorithmically mediated regulation, and common technical standards. Even this narrower formulation must compete with established alternatives. Where regulatory-state theory, historical institutionalism, multilevel governance, or differentiated integration already explain the evidence, no new vocabulary is needed. The theoretical value of the Algorithmic Union lies only in those cases where infrastructure itself becomes a mechanism of integration.

Why Integration Theory Is No Longer Enough

European integration theory was built to answer a particular historical question: why and how did sovereign states transfer, pool, or share authority in institutions beyond the nation-state? Haas's neofunctionalism emphasized functional spillover and the capacity of supranational institutions and organized interests to create pressures for further integration (Haas, 1958). Hoffmann's intergovernmentalist critique insisted that national governments retained decisive authority, particularly where questions of identity and 'high politics' were concerned (Hoffmann, 1966). Moravcsik later reconstructed the state-centered argument through liberal intergovernmentalism, linking domestic preference formation, interstate bargaining, and institutional delegation (Moravcsik, 1998). Each of these approaches continues to illuminate contemporary European politics.

Yet the object of inquiry has changed in a way that complicates the original debate. A modern administration does not exercise power only through statutes, budgets, and bureaucratic commands. It also operates through databases, authentication systems, technical protocols, risk classifications, automated matching, payment infrastructures, and digital standards. These systems may coordinate national administrations without transferring a formally enumerated competence in the traditional constitutional sense. The Interoperable Europe Act, the European Digital Identity framework, Eurodac, and the Entry/Exit System provide different examples of this phenomenon. The EES became fully operational across Schengen external border crossing points on 10 April 2026, illustrating that shared infrastructure can become part of the routine exercise of border authority without turning the EU into a centralized border state (European Commission, 2026a).

Multilevel governance comes closer to this reality because it does not assume a single hierarchical center. Marks and Hooghe showed that authority in the Union is dispersed among supranational, national, and subnational actors rather than simply transferred from one level to another (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996). But the digital transformation adds a further question: through what material and informational mechanisms is this dispersed authority exercised? An institution that controls a database architecture, technical standard, or interoperability protocol may shape administrative behavior even when it does not issue every final decision. MLG identifies the multiplicity of levels; it does not necessarily specify the infrastructural channels through which those levels become mutually dependent.

Postfunctionalism supplies another indispensable corrective. As integration becomes politically salient, identity and mass politics can constrain elite bargains (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Migration, sovereignty, digital identity, and even technological regulation can become objects of electoral contestation. There is therefore no technological path by which infrastructure silently eliminates politics. The point is almost the opposite: technical integration can generate new political questions precisely because it moves authority into less visible institutional forms. Integration theory remains necessary, but the contemporary research problem increasingly concerns the character of the political order that integration has produced.

The European Union as a Political Order

Treating the Union as a political order begins by refusing the assumption that every polity must be measured against the completed nation-state. Hix argued that the EU could be studied as a political system because it possesses processes of executive, legislative, judicial, electoral, and regulatory politics that can be

analyzed with the ordinary tools of political science (Hix, 1999). This move was theoretically important because it shifted attention from the question of whether integration would continue toward the practical question of how authority already operates.

The EU's political order is nevertheless unusual. There is no single European government that monopolizes taxation, welfare, coercion, citizenship, and administration. Nor is the Union merely a venue in which governments negotiate. Supranational institutions have autonomous legal and regulatory capacities; national authorities implement common law; the ECB exercises monetary authority for the euro area; courts interact across jurisdictions; and private actors operate within regulatory frameworks that are increasingly European. Walker's constitutional pluralism captures part of this arrangement by conceptualizing post-Westphalian constitutional sites as heterarchical rather than strictly hierarchical (Walker, 2002). The value of the concept is not that it denies hierarchy altogether, but that it recognizes that legal and constitutional authority may be distributed across sites whose claims cannot always be reduced to one final source.

This political-order perspective also clarifies the relationship between uniformity and differentiation. The euro area, Schengen, migration governance, defense cooperation, digital regulation, and social policy do not involve identical memberships or identical depths of integration. Differentiation is therefore not merely an unfinished stage on the road to uniformity. It may be a durable characteristic of the Union. Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, and Rittberger's work on differentiated integration is especially useful here because it treats variation in integration as a systematic phenomenon rather than an anomaly (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, & Rittberger, 2015).

The theoretical implication is substantial. If the EU is an open-ended political order, its institutions can deepen in one dimension while remaining limited in another. A common digital identity architecture need not imply a common nationality law. A digital euro project need not imply fiscal union. Common migration databases need not imply a centralized asylum administration. The political order is composed of partly autonomous institutional layers whose interactions are more significant than any single constitutional label.

Sovereignty after the Nation-State

Sovereignty has survived European integration largely because its meaning has changed. The old image of sovereignty as an indivisible capacity located in a territorially bounded state was already difficult to sustain in a Union characterized by direct effect, primacy, monetary integration, and common regulation. Digitalization adds another complication. Control over data, cloud infrastructure, technical standards, semiconductor supply, digital identity, payment systems, and AI models can affect the practical autonomy of governments without necessarily altering their formal constitutional competence.

The literature on digital sovereignty has emerged from this problem. Pohle and Thiel describe digital sovereignty as a contested concept that brings together state authority, individual autonomy, technological capacity, and control over digital infrastructures (Pohle & Thiel, 2020). Bradford's account of the Brussels Effect demonstrates a related but distinct form of power: the capacity of European regulation to influence global market behavior because firms value access to the EU market and often standardize compliance across jurisdictions (Bradford, 2020). These forms of power show that sovereignty can be exercised through rule-setting

and market access even where productive capacity remains elsewhere.

Yet it would be misleading to equate regulatory reach with complete sovereignty. Chapter 3's examination of cloud, chips, and AI showed precisely the opposite: Europe can regulate infrastructures on which it remains materially dependent. This creates a tension between regulatory autonomy and infrastructural autonomy. The Chips Act is significant not because it proves that Europe has achieved semiconductor sovereignty, but because it signals an attempt to supplement regulatory power with industrial capacity. The digital euro project makes a similar point in monetary form. In October 2025 the Eurosystem moved into the next phase of the project, while the ECB continued to state that a final decision on issuance would follow the legislative process; a pilot is planned for the second half of 2027 (European Central Bank, 2025, 2026). The institutional question is therefore not whether sovereignty has disappeared, but how different kinds of sovereignty are distributed across functional domains.

This disaggregation should be used carefully. If every policy capacity is labeled a separate sovereignty, the concept loses analytical value. The more defensible approach is to distinguish formal constitutional authority from practical capacities that condition the exercise of that authority. Digital, monetary, technological, and infrastructural capacities matter because they can enlarge or constrain political choice. They do not replace sovereignty; they shape what sovereign decisions can accomplish.

From Multilevel Governance to Layered Sovereignty

The phrase 'layered sovereignty' appears attractive in this context, but it is not a new coinage. Roguski used the term in 2019 to analyze sovereignty in cyberspace, distinguishing the physical, logical, and social layers of the digital environment and arguing that

territorial authority operates differently across them (Roguski, 2019). Any application to European integration must therefore acknowledge this prior use and make clear that the proposed extension concerns institutional layers of authority rather than the jurisdictional architecture of cyberspace itself.

Used in this narrower and explicitly derivative sense, layered sovereignty can help describe the coexistence of national constitutional authority, supranational regulation, monetary authority, digital infrastructure, and private technical power. Consider identity. National governments remain the principal issuers of citizenship status, yet the European Digital Identity framework standardizes cross-border authentication and credentials. Consider migration. National administrations still perform border and asylum functions, but Eurodac and other shared systems provide a common information layer. Consider monetary authority. National political systems remain constitutionally distinct while the ECB exercises common monetary authority for the euro area. The layers are neither equal nor mutually exclusive; they overlap and interact.

This differs from multilevel governance in emphasis. MLG identifies levels of governance and the dispersion of authority among them. Layered sovereignty, if used at all, should identify domains of authoritative capacity that cut across those levels. A digital identity layer can link European standards, national wallets, private relying parties, and individual users. A border-data layer can link EU agencies, national police and border services, and common databases. A regulatory layer can link the Commission, national competent authorities, courts, and private platforms. The relevant structure is therefore both vertical and functional.

The concept must nevertheless pass a strict redundancy test. Where multilevel governance already explains a phenomenon, 'layered sovereignty' adds little. Its value arises only when the

coexistence of distinct infrastructures and competences creates practical authority that cannot be mapped adequately as a simple hierarchy of territorial levels. It should therefore be used as a descriptive bridge, not as a claim that the Union possesses several fully sovereign entities stacked on top of one another.

Digital Federalism and Infrastructural Integration

Federalism provides a different route to the same problem. Classical federal systems divide authority constitutionally between central and constituent governments. The EU shares some federal characteristics but lacks others, and the federal analogy has always been politically and analytically contested. Digitalization introduces the possibility of functional federalization without full constitutional federalization: common systems may make administrations operate as parts of one technical environment while their constitutional foundations remain separate.

The Interoperable Europe Act illustrates the logic. Regulation (EU) 2024/903 seeks a high level of public-sector interoperability across the Union, encouraging public administrations to design trans-European digital public services that can work across borders (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024a). This is not a federal constitution. Yet interoperability can generate a federal-like functional effect: a national service becomes usable within a common European administrative space because systems share standards, interfaces, or data structures.

The same logic appears in the EUDI Wallet, common data spaces, border-information systems, and potentially digital payments. It is tempting to call this 'digital federalism.' The term, however, is already used in broader debates about the distribution of digital competences in federations, so an EU-specific version would require careful definition. Its distinctive claim would be that federal-

like coordination may emerge through shared infrastructure even when formal competence remains divided and politically differentiated.

There are strong limits to this analogy. Technical interoperability does not provide the democratic architecture normally associated with federal government. Nor does it ensure fiscal solidarity, uniform administrative capacity, or common political accountability. In fact, functional integration can intensify the legitimacy problem if citizens experience a common infrastructure without clearly knowing which level is responsible for its design, operation, or errors. Digital federalism is therefore most useful as a hypothesis about administrative convergence, not as a description of the Union's constitutional form.

From the Regulatory State to a Techno-Regulatory Polity

Majone's regulatory-state thesis remains one of the most durable accounts of European authority because it identified a form of governance that did not require the fiscal and coercive capacities of the traditional state. European institutions could exercise significant power through market-making rules, independent agencies, standards, and competition policy (Majone, 1994). The digital age has not displaced this model. It has expanded it.

The GDPR, DSA, DMA, AI Act, Data Governance Act, Data Act, and related instruments constitute a regulatory architecture in which the Union sets rules not merely for transactions but for the operation of data-intensive markets and technological systems. The DMA is especially instructive because it establishes ex ante obligations for designated gatekeepers rather than relying exclusively on slow ex post competition enforcement (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022). The Commission's 2026 DMA reporting continued to describe the regime as an active supervisory structure over designated core platform

services, demonstrating the emergence of a standing European capacity to shape digital market conduct (European Commission, 2026c).

At the same time, Chapter 3 demonstrated that the Union has moved beyond a purely regulatory posture. The Chips Act, AI infrastructure initiatives, economic-security strategy, and industrial subsidies indicate a partial return of industrial policy. Levi-Faur's broader concept of regulatory capitalism is useful here because it highlights the proliferation of regulatory arrangements and expert authority across state and society rather than assuming a simple retreat of the state (Levi-Faur, 2005). Yet the contemporary EU increasingly combines regulation with investment, infrastructure, industrial strategy, and geopolitical risk management.

The term 'techno-regulatory polity' is therefore preferable here to a claim that a wholly new state form has emerged. It describes a political order in which technology becomes both the object and the instrument of regulation. Standards, interoperability, data access, compute capacity, supply chains, and platform design become matters of public authority. The concept remains an extension of the regulatory-state tradition, not a replacement for it. Its usefulness depends on showing that industrial and infrastructural tools now operate alongside rule-making in ways that Majone's original formulation did not centrally anticipate.

Platform State, Private Infrastructure, and Public Authority

Any account of digital political order must also confront the fact that crucial infrastructures are privately owned. App stores, cloud services, search engines, advertising systems, operating systems, social networks, and payment interfaces can structure access to markets and information. This does not make their operators sovereign states. It does, however, mean that public

authority increasingly operates within environments whose architecture is partly determined by private firms.

The emerging literature on the 'platform state' directly addresses this transformation. Cristofari and Gerbaudo argue that states and platforms share forms of infrastructural and meta-organizational power and that the platformization of government may allow states to reclaim capacities through digital infrastructures (Cristofari & Gerbaudo, 2025). Their work matters for the EU because it prevents the term from being presented as an original European concept. More importantly, it shifts analysis away from the simplistic claim that platforms replace states. The question is how public and private infrastructures become mutually dependent.

Mann's distinction between despotic and infrastructural power provides a useful theoretical foundation. Infrastructural power concerns the capacity of the state to penetrate society and implement decisions throughout its territory (Mann, 1984). The EU lacks the territorial centrality of the nation-state, but some of its digital initiatives can be interpreted as attempts to construct supranational infrastructural capacity. Identity standards, border databases, platform rules, and interoperability requirements extend the practical reach of common rules through systems used by national administrations and private actors.

The democratic problem is obvious. If public goals depend on privately controlled cloud, app, or AI infrastructure, formal regulatory authority may coexist with material dependency. The DMA and DSA can constrain platform behavior, but they do not automatically transfer ownership of infrastructure to European institutions. Platform-constrained Europe is therefore a useful counter-scenario to the more optimistic concept of digital sovereignty: a political order may possess extensive legal authority

while remaining dependent on private technical systems for the execution of that authority.

Demoicracy, Representation, and Post-National Politics

Digital and infrastructural integration cannot solve the EU's democratic question. If anything, they make it more difficult. The Union's authority can deepen through technical systems without producing a single European demos, a unified party system, or a common national identity. The demoicracy literature offers a particularly useful way to conceptualize this condition. Nicolaïdis defines European demoicracy as a union of peoples who govern together but not as one, while Cheneval and Nicolaïdis develop the possibility that several demoi can exercise popular sovereignty concurrently (Cheneval & Nicolaidis, 2017; Nicolaïdis, 2013).

This perspective fits much of the evidence from Chapter 2. European political parties and parliamentary groups have developed real organizational and regulatory structures, but national parties remain central to candidate selection, campaigning, and political identity. The Europeanization of competition does not require the disappearance of national democratic arenas. Similarly, Chapter 4 showed that migration and citizenship produce layered forms of membership without eliminating national citizenship as the decisive gateway to full political rights.

Demoicracy therefore provides a counterweight to theories that treat integration as incomplete because it has not produced one people. It allows shared rule and national democratic autonomy to coexist conceptually. Digital integration can be interpreted within this framework if common infrastructures serve multiple demoi rather than constructing a single digital demos. The EUDI Wallet, for example, can reduce administrative barriers to cross-border rights without creating one European nationality. Common political-

advertising rules can regulate a shared electoral environment without creating one European electorate in the national sense.

Yet democracy also sharpens the accountability problem. If authority is exercised jointly by several demoi through supranational institutions and technical systems, democratic responsibility can become difficult to assign. Schmidt's distinction among input, output, and throughput legitimacy remains useful: efficient digital administration may strengthen output while weakening throughput if rules, algorithms, or institutional chains become opaque (Schmidt, 2013). A viable digital political order therefore requires not only effective infrastructure but also intelligible responsibility.

The Algorithmic Union as a Middle-Range Heuristic

The concept of the Algorithmic Union can now be stated more cautiously than in Chapter 1. No established use of the term as a theory of European integration has been identified in the literature examined for this book. That absence does not establish absolute originality, nor does it by itself justify a new theory. The concept earns a place only if it identifies a mechanism that existing theories do not adequately specify.

The strongest candidate is infrastructural coordination. An Algorithmic Union, in this restricted sense, is a mode of European integration in which common rules are increasingly implemented through shared data architectures, interoperable administrative systems, digital identity mechanisms, automated matching and classification, and algorithmically mediated regulatory processes. 'Algorithmic' is therefore not synonymous with artificial intelligence. Much of the empirical foundation consists of databases, interoperability protocols, risk classifications, and machine-readable rules rather than autonomous AI. This terminological restraint is essential because otherwise the concept would exaggerate the role of

machine learning in institutions whose transformation is often driven by more mundane digital systems.

The concept has several dimensions with different levels of empirical support. Regulatory integration is strongly supported by the digital legislative stack. Administrative interoperability is supported by the Interoperable Europe Act and large-scale justice and home-affairs systems. Digital migration governance is increasingly visible through Eurodac and the fully operational EES. Digital identity is institutionally established but still too early for strong claims about political membership. Digital economic governance is supported by the DMA and DSA. Monetary infrastructure remains prospective because the digital euro has not been issued. Digital political representation is the weakest dimension because the European party system remains heavily mediated by national organizations.

The theory's scope conditions are therefore narrow. It should apply most strongly where the Union possesses internal-market or administrative coordination competences and where common technical infrastructures can create cross-border interdependence. It should apply weakly to defense, direct taxation, core welfare provision, and other domains in which digital systems do not overcome national constitutional control. This is why the concept is better understood as a middle-range heuristic than a grand theory of the Union.

The concept must also be falsifiable. It would lose explanatory value if shared systems remained peripheral to actual administration, if member states systematically fragmented common infrastructures, or if European digital regulation failed to produce sustained cross-border coordination. It would also become redundant if future research showed that historical institutionalism plus regulatory-state theory fully explains the same developments

without an infrastructural mechanism. A concept that cannot lose to a rival explanation is not a useful theory.

Rival Explanations and the Discipline of Parsimony

The strongest argument against the Algorithmic Union is that most of the evidence can already be explained. The sequence from GDPR to DSA, DMA, and the AI Act can be read as neofunctionalist spillover, historical-institutionalist layering, or the maturation of the European regulatory state. DMA enforcement is best explained by regulatory-state and competition-policy theory. The Migration and Asylum Pact is more convincingly explained by intergovernmental bargaining, postfunctionalist constraints, and differentiated integration than by any digital theory. Euromocracy weakness is a problem of democratic organization and multilevel party competition, not algorithmic governance.

The areas where existing theories are less complete are narrower but still important. Interoperability among EU information systems is a good example. Historical institutionalism explains why earlier choices generate path dependence, while multilevel governance identifies the participating authorities. Yet neither makes technical interoperability itself the principal mechanism by which administrative dependence is produced. Mann's infrastructural power supplies part of the answer, but it was developed for territorial states. An EU-specific adaptation can therefore add value if it shows how supranational authority grows through infrastructures that are operated across rather than above national administrations.

Parsimony should therefore govern conceptual innovation. 'Digital federalism,' 'layered sovereignty,' 'platform state,' 'techno-regulatory polity,' and 'Algorithmic Union' should not appear as a catalogue of fashionable labels. Each must answer a different question. Digital federalism concerns functional convergence through shared infrastructure; layered sovereignty concerns the

coexistence of distinct domains of authority; platform-state theory concerns the organizational logic of digital public infrastructure; techno-regulatory polity concerns the combination of regulation, standards, industrial policy, and technological strategy; Algorithmic Union concerns integration through interoperable data and computational systems.

This division of labor also exposes overlap. If two concepts explain the same mechanism at the same level of analysis, one is probably unnecessary. Theoretical sophistication does not consist in multiplying terms. It consists in knowing when an old concept remains sufficient and when a new mechanism requires a more precise vocabulary.

Multiple Futures of European Political Order

The evidence assembled in this book does not support a single prediction about Europe's institutional destination. Several political orders can be constructed as ideal types without assuming that one will prevail. The first is the Algorithmic Union: integration deepens through data, interoperability, regulation, and shared technical systems while constitutional sovereignty remains distributed. The second is digital federalism: functional integration becomes so dense that shared digital institutions begin to resemble federal capacities even without a federal constitution. The third is layered sovereignty: different kinds of authority coexist across constitutional, monetary, regulatory, digital, and infrastructural domains.

A fourth possibility is techno-regulatory Europe. In this model, the EU's distinctive strength lies in rule-making, standards, industrial policy, technological governance, and economic security rather than in a conventional centralized state apparatus. A fifth is differentiated European polity, in which permanent variation across euro, Schengen, migration, defense, and digital domains becomes a

constitutive feature rather than an exception. A sixth is post-national democracy, in which national peoples remain the primary democratic communities while governing jointly through common institutions. A seventh is platform-constrained Europe, where formal public authority remains strong but infrastructural dependence on private technology firms limits practical autonomy. An eighth is a polycentric European order, in which overlapping institutions govern different problems without a single apex.

These models are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the most plausible description of the present Union is already composite. Democratic legitimacy can coexist with differentiated integration; a regulatory polity can become more infrastructural; digital federalization can occur in specific administrative functions; platform dependence can coexist with strong regulation. The value of ideal types lies not in choosing a winner but in making visible which mechanisms are operating in particular domains.

Crisis further complicates the picture. The euro crisis, migration crisis, Brexit, the pandemic, war in Ukraine, energy disruption, and technological rivalry have repeatedly produced institutional adaptation. But crises do not push the Union in only one direction. They can generate common instruments, national resistance, differentiated participation, and new forms of politicization simultaneously. Historical institutionalism's concepts of layering, conversion, drift, and critical juncture are therefore especially helpful for understanding a polity whose transformation is cumulative but uneven (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

Beyond Finality: Europe as an Open-Ended Polity

European integration has long been haunted by the question of finality. Is the Union an unfinished federation, an unusually dense international organization, a confederation, a regulatory state, a compound democracy, or something historically novel? The

persistence of this debate may itself reveal the problem with the question. It assumes that institutional development must terminate in a recognizable constitutional form.

The evidence of the digital age suggests a different possibility. The Union may be structurally open-ended. New capacities can be added without resolving older ambiguities. Digital identity can coexist with national citizenship. Common border systems can coexist with national administrations. The digital euro project can expand monetary infrastructure without producing fiscal federation. Industrial policy can coexist with national budgetary power. Europarties can develop without replacing national parties. The Migration and Asylum Pact, which entered into application on 12 June 2026, can strengthen common procedures while retaining politically negotiated forms of flexibility (European Commission, 2026b). The political order changes through layering rather than constitutional completion.

Walker's constitutional pluralism is valuable precisely because it refuses the demand for a single final hierarchy (Walker, 2002). Demoicracy similarly rejects the assumption that democracy beyond the state requires the construction of one European people (Nicolaidis, 2013). Historical institutionalism shows how institutions can accumulate new purposes without being fully redesigned. Together these approaches suggest that indeterminacy need not be treated as institutional failure. It may be one of the Union's constitutive properties.

This does not mean that every form of complexity is desirable. Open-endedness can obscure accountability, privilege expert institutions, and make political responsibility difficult to locate. Digital infrastructures can intensify these problems because technical systems are less visible than parliaments, ministries, and elections. The normative challenge for the next phase of European

integration is therefore not simply to increase capacity. It is to ensure that new capacities remain contestable, reviewable, and democratically attributable.

The broad conclusion of this book can therefore be stated without predicting a European superstate or announcing the end of the nation-state. European political order is being reconstructed through multiple simultaneous processes: regulatory integration, digital interoperability, platform governance, technological strategy, migration management, demographic pressure, monetary innovation, and transnational political competition. These processes rarely abolish national institutions. They place new layers of authority alongside them.

The future of Europe may consequently be decided less by a single constitutional moment than by the cumulative architecture of everyday governance. Who defines digital identity standards, who controls payment infrastructures, who regulates platforms, who operates migration databases, who sets AI rules, who finances strategic technologies, and who is democratically answerable for these decisions will shape political authority as profoundly as formal treaty provisions. Integration has not ended. But the principal theoretical task is no longer simply to ask how far integration will go. It is to understand what kind of political order integration has already created, and what forms of authority are being built inside it.

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CONCLUSION

EUROPE BEYOND THE OLD ALTERNATIVES

The European Union's new political age does not begin with a declaration. It emerges through accumulation. A regulation changes the obligations of a platform; an interoperability standard alters the design of a national administration; a digital identity framework makes cross-border recognition routine; a migration database reorganizes the informational environment of border control; a central bank explores a new payment infrastructure; a political party adapts its campaign to platform rules and data analytics; an industrial policy seeks to reduce dependence on semiconductors and computing capacity produced elsewhere. None of these changes, considered alone, announces a constitutional transformation. Yet taken together they reveal a European order whose political capacities are being rebuilt through institutions that earlier generations of integration theory treated as secondary, technical, or external to the central question of sovereignty.

The first conclusion of this book is therefore that infrastructure has become political without becoming sovereign in

the classical sense. This distinction is essential. Digital systems do not replace constitutions. Databases do not vote, interoperability protocols do not possess democratic legitimacy, and algorithms do not abolish the responsibility of officials. But infrastructure can determine the conditions under which authority is exercised. It can make some forms of cooperation routine, others costly, and still others technically impossible. It can connect administrations across borders, establish dependencies on private providers, or make access to markets conditional on compliance with shared rules. Political science has long examined who possesses legal authority. The contemporary European problem requires an additional question: through what infrastructures does authority become operational?

This is why the transformation of sovereignty observed in Chapter 1 should not be narrated as a simple transfer from the nation-state to Brussels. The evidence points instead toward a layered configuration. National governments continue to control taxation, welfare, coercion, citizenship, and extensive domains of administration. The Union, however, possesses regulatory, monetary, legal, and increasingly infrastructural capacities that condition how those national powers are exercised. Private platforms and technology providers add a further layer because public authorities often depend on infrastructures they do not own. Sovereignty in this setting is less a divisible stock of power than a set of capacities distributed across different institutional and technical domains.

The second conclusion concerns democracy. Chapter 2 showed that European political representation remains structurally hybrid. Europarties, parliamentary groups, European elections, common political-advertising rules, and transnational campaigns have created a political space that is undeniably more European than it was at the beginning of direct parliamentary elections. Yet national parties remain the principal gatekeepers of candidate selection,

political careers, media attention, government formation, and electoral identity. Digitalization has not resolved this duality. It has made transnational coordination easier while giving national leaders new channels of direct communication. It has reduced the technical cost of multilingual politics while leaving linguistic, cultural, and organizational differences intact.

This result matters because the legitimacy of a more integrated administrative order cannot be secured by administration alone. If regulation, digital identity, migration systems, and platform governance become increasingly European while political competition remains opaque or nationally fragmented, the distance between capacity and accountability may widen. The European project has always contained a tension between what institutions can do and how citizens can contest what they do. Digitalization sharpens the tension because technical systems often operate below the threshold of ordinary political visibility. A citizen may experience the effects of a database, ranking system, identity protocol, or platform rule without being able to identify the chain of decisions that produced it.

The third conclusion concerns the political economy of the digital order. Chapter 3 demonstrated that Europe's traditional regulatory strength is being stretched into new domains. The Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act, AI Act, Data Act, platform-work regulation, semiconductor policy, high-performance computing, economic-security instruments, and the digital-euro project do not form a single coherent economic constitution. They do, however, show a polity attempting to govern the architectures of digital capitalism rather than merely correct market failures after the fact. The European regulatory state is becoming more technologically conscious and selectively more industrial.

This shift should not be mistaken for technological independence. Europe's most striking condition is the coexistence of regulatory power and infrastructural dependence. The Union can impose obligations on globally significant firms while relying on non-European providers for cloud services, advanced chips, operating systems, AI models, and other critical technologies. The resulting politics cannot be described adequately as either sovereignty or dependency. It is a continual effort to transform market size and regulatory authority into practical autonomy without abandoning economic openness.

The relation between public and private power is therefore central. Platforms do not become sovereign states simply because they exercise rule-like functions. Yet their control over gateways, interfaces, data, visibility, app ecosystems, cloud environments, and digital labor markets can create forms of dependence that resemble institutional authority. The important question is not whether companies are “new states,” a metaphor that obscures more than it explains, but whether political communities retain meaningful capacity to alter the rules embedded in private infrastructures. Europe's regulatory experiments are significant because they test whether democratic institutions can discipline infrastructures they did not build.

The fourth conclusion arises from migration and demography. Chapter 4 rejected the idea that Europe's demographic pressures mechanically produce one migration policy. Aging, low fertility, labor shortages, regional depopulation, and internal mobility create incentives, but political responses are mediated by identity, welfare institutions, electoral competition, administrative capacity, and historical experience. Migration can simultaneously support labor markets, intensify political polarization, relieve demographic pressure in destination regions, and deepen population

decline in sending regions. It can produce European rules and national divergence at the same time.

This duality is especially revealing for the nature of European integration. The Pact on Migration and Asylum increases common rules, procedures, and informational infrastructures while preserving differentiated forms of implementation and solidarity. Temporary protection for people displaced from Ukraine demonstrated that shared institutions can operate rapidly when political agreement is sufficiently broad. Internal free movement, meanwhile, shows that integration can redistribute human capital within the Union, creating benefits at the European level that are experienced unevenly across regions. Migration therefore illustrates the inadequacy of treating integration and differentiation as opposites. In contemporary Europe they are often mutually constitutive.

The same is true of citizenship. European citizenship has layered rights upon national membership without replacing nationality as the principal gateway to full political membership. Digital identity may make those layered rights easier to exercise, but it does not create a single European demos. This distinction should discipline both optimistic and pessimistic interpretations. Europe can become administratively more integrated without becoming culturally homogeneous or constitutionally unitary. The absence of one demos does not imply the absence of democratic order; it implies that democratic order must be organized among several demoi.

This brings the analysis to the theoretical question developed in Chapter 5. Existing integration theories remain powerful precisely because the European Union has not left behind the political dynamics they describe. Member states bargain. Supranational institutions generate spillover. Public identities constrain integration. Policies become path dependent. Authority is dispersed across levels. Regulation remains a central form of European power.

Differentiation persists. The empirical developments examined in this book do not invalidate these theories. They reveal specific mechanisms that some of them were not designed to foreground.

The concept of the Algorithmic Union is useful only in this restricted space. It should not become a rhetorical label for every aspect of Europe's digital transformation. Its strongest application concerns infrastructural coordination: the production of durable cross-border interdependence through shared data architectures, interoperable systems, digital identity, automated matching, machine-readable standards, and algorithmically mediated regulatory procedures. It is therefore best understood as a middle-range heuristic rather than a grand theory. It explains one channel through which integration can deepen without assuming that technology determines political outcomes.

This restraint is more than methodological caution. It protects analysis from a recurrent error in technological writing: attributing historical agency to the tool rather than to the institutions that design, purchase, regulate, implement, contest, and sometimes abandon it. Europe will not become algorithmic because AI is powerful. It may become more algorithmically mediated because governments, firms, courts, regulators, and citizens incorporate computational systems into authoritative processes. The causal story remains political.

A fifth and broader conclusion follows: the European Union should be understood as an open-ended political order rather than as an incomplete version of a predetermined final form. The old alternatives - federation or renationalization, state or international organization, sovereignty or integration - remain politically meaningful, but they are insufficient as analytical endpoints. Europe can federalize functionally in one field, differentiate institutionally in another, renationalize politically in a third, and deepen

infrastructural interdependence across all three. Its future is likely to contain simultaneous movements in different directions.

This open-endedness is not the same as institutional drift. It has structure. Common law, the single market, monetary union, the Court of Justice, the Parliament, the Commission, the Council, national governments, and dense administrative networks provide durable centers of authority. What remains unsettled is how newer layers of digital infrastructure, industrial policy, migration governance, platform regulation, and economic security will attach themselves to that existing order. Some will reinforce supranational institutions; some will strengthen member states; some may increase dependence on private actors. The political order will be shaped by the interaction among these effects.

Several possible futures therefore remain compatible with the evidence. Europe may become a more capable techno-regulatory power, combining rule-making with industrial and infrastructural capacity. It may evolve toward deeper functional federalism without constitutional federation. Differentiated integration may become a permanent organizing principle, allowing different circles of participation around shared cores. Demoicratic arrangements may preserve national democratic autonomy while extending joint rule. Private platforms may continue to constrain public autonomy even as regulation expands. None of these futures needs to exclude the others.

The decisive issue is democratic governability. A political order composed of overlapping authorities can be effective, but complexity carries costs. If responsibility is endlessly dispersed, citizens may experience government without being able to identify governors. If technological infrastructure becomes indispensable, political choices embedded in its design may be treated as technical necessities. If European regulation constrains private power but

depends on expertise available largely to the firms being regulated, asymmetries of knowledge can weaken accountability. If migration solidarity is organized through complex formulas and administrative categories, political responsibility can be displaced into disputes over implementation.

The appropriate response is not nostalgia for a simpler state that no longer exists. Modern government has always depended on specialized administration, technical systems, delegated authority, and complex law. The challenge is to ensure that complexity remains politically legible. Transparency, judicial review, parliamentary scrutiny, independent oversight, open standards, public procurement rules, data rights, and competitive politics are not secondary safeguards. They are part of the institutional infrastructure of democracy itself.

The same is true of citizenship and belonging. Europe's political order will continue to depend on national histories and identities, yet mobility, migration, digital services, economic interdependence, and common law make membership increasingly layered in practice. The task is not to manufacture a single European identity by administrative means. It is to build institutions in which multiple identities can coexist with common obligations and rights. Democracy is valuable here not because it solves every legitimacy problem, but because it refuses the false choice between one European people and twenty-seven isolated democracies.

Whether that layer strengthens democratic autonomy or deepens technocratic distance is not predetermined. Whether it reduces private dependency or merely regulates it is not predetermined. Whether migration and demographic pressures produce solidarity, fragmentation, or differentiated cooperation is not predetermined. Whether European parties become capable of organizing genuinely transnational political choice is not

predetermined. These are political questions, and their openness is precisely why the future should not be described as a technological destiny.

The European Union's new political age is therefore defined less by the arrival of one institution than by a change in the terrain on which institutions operate. Power increasingly passes through data, platforms, networks, standards, infrastructures, and mobile populations. Yet the old questions remain: who decides, who benefits, who bears the costs, who can contest the decision, and which political community can legitimately answer for it? Technology changes the means through which those questions are posed; it does not make them obsolete.

Europe's next transformation may consequently be quieter than its previous constitutional milestones. It may be visible not first in a treaty but in routines: a credential recognized across borders, a platform forced to open an interface, an administration querying a shared system, a worker challenging an automated decision, a central bank testing a public digital payment, a city integrating newcomers, a party campaigning across linguistic boundaries. Political order is built from such routines when they become durable, interconnected, and expected.

The final conclusion is therefore deliberately open. The European Union is neither on a single road toward federation nor simply returning to the nation-state. It is becoming a more layered political order in which legal, democratic, economic, demographic, and technological forms of authority overlap. The analytical task is to understand those overlaps without mistaking them for a completed constitutional design. The political task belongs to Europeans themselves: to decide which capacities should be shared, which differences should remain, which dependencies are acceptable, and

how every new layer of authority can be made answerable to those who live under it.

If the concept of a new political age has meaning, it lies here. Europe is not entering a world after politics. It is entering a world in which politics increasingly determines, and is determined by, the infrastructures through which collective life is organized. The Union's future will depend on whether it can govern those infrastructures without allowing them to govern democracy in return.

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