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BETWEEN BUDGETARY AMBITION AND GEOPOLITICAL AWAKENING: THE EUROPEAN UNION'S FINANCIAL ARCHITECTURE AND ITS INTERNATIONAL ROLE IN 2025

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Abstract

This article brings together two previous analyses. The first traces the way in which the Multiannual Financial Framework has been used to support European citizenship. The second analyses how the budgetary powers of the European Parliament have evolved in the context of the negotiations for the 2021–2027 MFF and for NextGenerationEU. Starting from these two directions, the study proposes a critical assessment of how the Union's international position has changed in 2025. The central idea is that the EU's financial architecture, initially designed to strengthen internal cohesion and democratic participation, has been very quickly reoriented towards geopolitical and defence objectives. This change is most clearly seen in the ReArm Europe Plan and in the proposal for the 2028–2034 MFF. Of course, this reorientation responds to real security needs, generated both by Russia's war against Ukraine and by the weakening of American strategic guarantees. However, it also raises a series of important questions: how sustainable is the Union's normative identity, to what extent do citizenship programs risk being pushed into the European background, and how much longer can the European Parliament exercise real budgetary control in a decision-making system increasingly dominated by intergovernmental logic.

Keywords

European Union budget; Multiannual Financial Framework; European citizenship; defence spending; European Parliament; NextGenerationEU; ReArm Europe; democratic oversight; geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

The European Union has never been a fixed construct. It has changed constantly, sometimes slowly, sometimes in sudden leaps. However, the pace of transformation in the second half of the 2020s seems to exceed what Europeans had come to consider normal after the Maastricht Treaty, which, three decades ago, gave the Community a more clearly political form. Today, two lines of analysis meet that, until recently, could be treated separately. The reason is simple: under the pressure of changes in the international environment, the Union is readjusting its financial instruments to respond to issues that, until recently, were rather on the margins of the European project. This is, first of all, about defence and the management of a transatlantic relationship that no longer offers the same security as in the past (European Commission, 2025a).

The first of these lines was discussed in a previous study (Todorescu, 2023), devoted to the way in which the various Multiannual Financial Frameworks have put the idea of European citizenship into practice through dedicated programs. The analysis followed the path from the 2004–2006 pilot programme "Active Citizenship", worth 72 million euros, through the two phases of the "Europe for Citizens" programme, to the CERV instrument — "Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values" — included in the 2021–2027 MFF and financed with 1.44 billion euros (Todorescu, 2023). This evolution paints a mixed picture: the Union has shown a real interest in financing the cultural dimension of citizenship and in encouraging civic participation, but this commitment has been uneven and often vulnerable. Financial crises, Brexit negotiations and the Covid-19 pandemic have repeatedly pushed these programmes to the background, under the pressure of budgetary emergencies (Todorescu, 2023).

The second line of analysis (Todorescu, 2024) focused on the European Parliament's budgetary powers. The study followed, in a historical logic, how these powers evolved from the Treaty of Rome to the changes brought about by the Treaty of Lisbon (Todorescu, 2024; Benedetto, 2013, 2019). It also examined how Parliament used its power of approval in the negotiations on the MFF 2021–2027 and the NGEU. The conclusion was twofold. On the one hand, Parliament achieved concrete results: rule-of-law conditionality, funding increases for certain programmes, and mid-term review mechanisms. On the other hand, structural constraints meant that, in times of crisis, the real centre of decision-making shifted back to the European Council (Todorescu, 2024; European Council, 2020).

However, neither of these two analyses could fully anticipate the speed with which the post-2022 security environment would change the Union's budgetary logic. It is precisely this gap that is discussed in this article. More specifically, it re-positions the financial and institutional conclusions of previous studies in the geopolitical context of 2025. This is the year in which the European Commission proposed a 2028–2034 MFF with a commitment ceiling of €1,763.1 billion in constant 2025 prices, i.e. 1.26% of GNI and almost €2 trillion in current prices; the year in which the ReArm Europe plan opened up the prospect of additional defence spending of up to €800 billion; the year in which the SAFE instrument was adopted with a value of €150 billion; and the year in which the Turnberry agreement between the EU and the United States, followed by the 21 August 2025 Joint Statement, announced an expected energy offtake of $750 billion through 2028 (European Commission, 2025a, 2025c, 2025d; Council of the European Union, 2025). The scale and feasibility of that energy commitment, however, have been treated by later analyses as more political than commercially realistic (Drumm, 2025; Chakraborty, 2025).

In this logic, the article is structured in four sections. The first follows the budgetary evolution of European citizenship. The second analyses the European Parliament's negotiating capacity and its structural limits. The third focuses on the reorientation towards defence from 2025. Finally, the fourth proposes a critical assessment of what the Union has to gain, but also what it risks losing, in its attempt to consolidate strategic autonomy.

THE BUDGETARY GENEALOGY OF EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP

An almost sevenfold increase in the budget — from €72 million for a three-year pilot programme to around €1.44 billion for a seven-year framework — might give the impression, at first glance, that the European Union has been investing steadily and increasingly in European citizenship. In reality, things are less linear, because each stage was influenced by a different political context, and the amounts allocated, although larger in absolute values, still remained very small in relation to the size of the overall budget of the multiannual financial framework: we are talking about a tiny fraction of a budget whose major milestones are calculated in trillions (Todorescu, 2023; D'Alfonso et al., 2024).

The Active Citizenship programme from 2004–2006 had, from an institutional point of view, a rather improvised character. There was no clearly dedicated budget line for this objective. Funding was provided through administrative appropriations from the Commission's budget, and Council Decision 2004/100/EC set it five very broad objectives: spreading European values, supporting town twinning, stimulating the participation of non-governmental organisations and, in general, encouraging civic involvement. The problem was obvious: the ambitions of the programme far exceeded the €72 million available for three years. However, the results achieved — thirty organisations supported, over 250 projects by non-governmental organisations and more than 2,800 twinning agreements — were considered sufficient for the initiative to continue, from 2007, under the name "Europe for Citizens". Even so, the Commission's evaluation clearly showed that the programme had always operated under the pressure of a contradiction: high objectives, few resources. And this was not an exception, but a pattern (Todorescu, 2023).

The Europe for Citizens programme received €215 million for the period 2007–2013. But even this amount was not commensurate with the aim pursued. The Commission later showed that the budget was too small for such an ambitious mission: to cultivate a common European identity in 27 Member States, each with its own civic traditions, its own historical experiences and different levels of attachment to the European

project. Then a paradox occurred. Instead of increasing, the programme's budget was reduced in the next cycle, 2014–2020, to €188 million. The reduction came at a time when we would have expected the opposite: the Union was going through eurozone tensions, the migration crisis and, finally, the shock of the Brexit referendum, all of which tested citizens' trust in European institutions and even in the integration project. The explanation lies, at least in part, in the logic of budgetary negotiations: net contributing states almost always push for spending restraint, and small programmes without strong institutional backers are the first to be sacrificed, regardless of their symbolic or political value (Todorescu, 2023; Becker, 2019; De Feo, 2020).

The situation has only partially improved with the integration of the Europe for Citizens programme and the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme into the new CERV instrument, in the 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework. The budget of €1.44 billion, the four thematic pillars — equality, rights and gender equality; citizen engagement and participation; Daphne; Union values — and the inclusion of the programme under the heading of 'Cohesion, Resilience and Values' have given citizenship policies a stronger institutional basis. However, this reorganisation also sent a deeper signal, which only became clear later. In the old financial framework there was a heading called 'Security and Citizenship'. In the new framework, this became "Security and Defence." Citizenship was moved elsewhere, and security was directly associated with the military dimension. At first glance, it may seem like just a change in wording. In fact, however, it announced a broader shift in priorities, the effects of which are only now becoming visible (Todorescu, 2023; European Commission, 2025c).

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S BUDGETARY AUTHORITY: BETWEEN FORMAL GAINS AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

The evolution of the European Parliament, from an institution with a mainly consultative role to an actor with equal status in the annual budgetary procedure, is one of the important changes of European integration. That much is clear. More difficult to understand, but essential, is something else: the difference between the powers that Parliament has on paper and the influence that it manages to exercise in practice. And this difference has not diminished over time. On the contrary, in times of crisis, it has become even more visible (Benedetto, 2013, 2019; Todorescu, 2024).

Historically, the change occurred gradually. The budgetary treaties of 1970 and 1975 offered Parliament the first real possibilities of influence, by distinguishing between compulsory and non-compulsory expenditure. However, its role remained limited at that time. Subsequently, the Single European Act, the Maastricht Treaty and the Amsterdam Treaty gradually widened this space for intervention, through the cooperation and codecision procedures. The decisive step was taken by the Treaty of Lisbon, which completely abolished the distinction between compulsory and non-compulsory expenditure, put Parliament on an equal footing in the adoption of the annual budget and gave it the right to approve the Multiannual Financial Framework. This power is important because without Parliament's consent, the multiannual framework cannot be adopted. Even if its influence often manifests itself more in the form of blocking power than direct control over the entire process, it remains a serious lever (Benedetto, 2013, 2019; Todorescu, 2024).

The negotiations for the 2021–2027 MFF have clearly shown both the strength of Parliament and its limits. On the one hand, the institution has achieved some concrete gains: additional funds for Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, the introduction of the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism, which was later applied to Hungary, the commitment to a mandatory mid-term review, and the promise to introduce new own resources. These include the plastic waste tax, the digital services tax and the carbon border adjustment mechanism, all designed to broaden the Union's revenue base and help cover the debt generated by the NGEU. These results were not symbolic. They were achieved through difficult interinstitutional negotiations and the fact that Parliament was able to credibly use the threat of withholding its consent (Todorescu, 2024; European Council, 2020; Benedetto, 2019).

However, when we look at the NGEU itself, the picture changes. The Recovery and Resilience Facility, the core of the €750 billion package, was negotiated mainly in the European Council, where the heads of state and government bore the brunt of the political compromise. The outcome was shaped by three groups: the "Frugal Four" — Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden —, the "solidarity coalition", around France, Germany and the southern European states, and the "sovereignty coalition", represented in particular by Hungary and Poland. In this equation, Parliament remained in a rather reactive position. It intervened, negotiated, corrected, but was not the main place where the basic architecture of the agreement was decided. Piattoni (2016) had already described this phenomenon as a "verticalization" of power during the eurozone crisis. The pandemic only pushed the same logic further (Fabbrini, F., 2022; Fabbrini, S., 2023; Piattoni, 2016). And SAFE, adopted in May 2025, confirmed that the pattern had not disappeared: a €150 billion instrument for defence loans, built on the basis of Article 122 TFEU, that is, through a non-ordinary,

emergency-based route which narrowed the role of Parliament (Council of the European Union, 2025; European Commission, 2025a; European Union, 2025).

Hence the key question for the next financial framework, the one for 2028–2034: how much will Parliament be able to influence what comes next? The Commission's proposal of July 2025 introduced the idea of a 'single national plan', inspired by the logic of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, whereby several funding streams would be brought together in plans negotiated bilaterally between the Commission and each Member State. Parliament has been critical of this formula. Its Committee on Budgets rejected it in the political line set out ahead of the Commission proposal, and Parliament's May 2025 resolution insisted that the "one national plan per Member State" approach could not become the basis for post-2027 shared management spending (European Parliament, 2025). In turn, the co-rapporteurs' draft interim report discussed in December 2025 supported 1.27% of EU GNI for EU policies, excluding NGEU repayment, and rejected the merging of different policies into one overly broad plan or heading (Pari & Pradier, 2025). Whether these positions will withstand the Council's structural advantage in the MFF negotiations remains an open question at the beginning of 2026. And the fact that defence has meanwhile become a major political priority does not make Parliament's task any easier (European Parliament, 2025; Pari & Pradier, 2025).

THE 2025 DEFENCE TURN AND ITS BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS

The year 2025 marked a turning point in the way the European Union thinks about its budget. It is perhaps not as big a change as the one brought about by the NGEU during the pandemic, at least not yet in terms of financial scale, but it is comparable in ambition and direction. The immediate trigger was the change in the transatlantic relationship after the return of the Trump administration in January 2025. In this context, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk called, at the very beginning of the Polish presidency of the Council, for a serious increase in European defence capabilities. However, the root of this change is older. It must be sought in February 2022, when the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine forced the Union to rethink its strategic priorities. The Versailles Declaration of March 2022 clearly expressed this new orientation: Europe must invest more and better in defence (European Commission, 2025a; European Council, 2025).

The European Commission's response came in March 2025 with the ReArm Europe plan, later renamed "Readiness 2030", after Italy and Spain considered the initial formula to be too militarised. The plan was based on three main financial instruments. The first was the activation of the national escape clause in the Stability and Growth Pact, which allowed member states to exceed fiscal rules by up to 1.5% of GDP per year, between 2025 and 2028, for defence spending. In practical terms, this could open up a fiscal space of up to €650 billion across the Union. The second instrument was SAFE, adopted by the Council in May 2025, which made €150 billion, guaranteed by the EU budget, available for investment in areas such as missile defence, drones and cybersecurity. The third element was the expansion of the role of the European Investment Bank in financing defence and security projects, complemented by measures by which the Commission sought to attract private capital, in the logic of a savings and investments union (European Commission, 2025a; Council of the European Union, 2025).

The scale of this change is best seen when we look at the evolution of European defence spending. In 2024, the EU member states spent around €343 billion, 19% more than in 2023, and for 2025 estimates rose to €381 billion (European Defence Agency, 2025; Council of the European Union, 2025). At the same time, the NATO 2% of GDP benchmark, which for almost two decades had often functioned more as a political guideline than as a uniformly met target, was being reached or exceeded by an increasing number of Allies according to NATO's 2025 expenditure tables (NATO, 2025b). Moreover, in June 2025 NATO Allies formally committed, at the Hague Summit, to move towards 5% of GDP by 2035, split between at least 3.5% for core defence requirements and up to 1.5% for broader defence- and security-related spending (NATO, 2025a, 2025b). A particularly strong signal came from Germany. In March 2025, the Bundestag approved amendments to Articles 109, 115 and 143h of the Basic Law so that defence and certain security-related expenditures above 1% of nominal GDP would be excluded from the debt rule, which represented a major fiscal shift for the Union's largest economy (Deutscher Bundestag, 2025). The Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030, presented in October 2025, also followed this direction, seeking to translate this change of direction into concrete objectives for the development and acquisition of capabilities (European Commission, 2025f).

All these developments were taken up by the Commission in its proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework of 16 July 2025. The new framework reduces the existing seven headings to just three and sets a commitment ceiling of EUR 1,763.1 billion in constant prices from 2025, i.e. 1.26% of GNI. In current prices, the amount is close to EUR 2 trillion. However, this budget must also cover the repayments of the NGEU debt, estimated at EUR 149.3 billion. Beyond the total amount, the political message is clear: defence and space funds increase fivefold, the home affairs budget triples to €81 billion, and the instruments dedicated to external action are brought together in a single mechanism, "Global Europe", more flexible and around 75% larger than the current NDICI – Global Europe (European Commission, 2025b, 2025c). The problem is that

this new construction raises a question that the Commission does not discuss directly: how much room is left, within the budget, for programmes that support the democratic and civic dimension of European citizenship? (European Commission, 2025c; Kengyel, 2025).

But there is another issue, discussed less than it should. The agreement between the European Union and the United States, concluded in Turnberry in July 2025 and framed more precisely in the Joint Statement of 21 August 2025, announced what the Commission called an "expected offtake" of $750 billion in American liquefied natural gas, oil and nuclear energy products through 2028 (European Commission, 2025d). On paper, the amount is impressive. In practice, several independent analyses — including those by the German Marshall Fund and the LSE US Centre — have shown that this is more of a political target than a commercially realistic one. The explanation is simple: in 2024, the Union imported energy products worth around $75–80 billion from the United States. To come close to the announced target, it would have to multiply its annual purchases dramatically, while energy buying in the EU remains largely market-driven rather than centrally directed (Drumm, 2025; Chakraborty, 2025; European Commission, 2025g). The agreement was presented in parallel with commitments to purchase a larger volume of American military equipment, and its wider effect is significant: Europe's rearmament becomes linked to the US energy economy, including the fossil fuel sector, precisely at a time when the European Green Deal remains, at least formally, in force (European Commission, 2025d; Drumm, 2025; Chakraborty, 2025).

At the same time, the European defence market itself remains highly fragmented. There are separate fighter programmes – Eurofighter, Rafale, Gripen –, distinct national procurement systems and unit costs much higher than those achieved in US-scale production. Wolff, Steinbach and Zettelmeyer (2025) show that a real pooling of procurement could reduce unit costs by 50 to 90%. But such a solution requires exactly what member states have traditionally avoided in the defence sector: more coordination and more surrender of control. This is, in fact, one of the great difficulties. Without real industrial consolidation, there is a risk that the additional sums spent will push up prices without producing a proportional increase in capacity. And in a context of strategic urgency, the political temptation to quickly get over this problem is obviously very high (Genini, 2025; Wolff et al., 2025).

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT: NORMATIVE IDENTITY, DEMOCRATIC OVERSIGHT, AND THE CROWDING-OUT HYPOTHESIS

If we put together three elements — the budgetary evolution of European citizenship, the institutional changes that the European Parliament has undergone, and the reorientation towards defence since 2025 — some important conclusions emerge about the direction in which the European Union is heading as an international actor. These conclusions do not lead to a simple or definitive answer. The situation is still in flux, and much depends on negotiations that have not yet been concluded. However, they highlight some real tensions, which the upcoming negotiations on the multiannual financial framework will have to manage.

The first tension is that between the Union's normative identity and its new strategic orientation. For about three decades, the European Union has built its international role mainly around the values that it promotes — democracy, human rights, the rule of law, multilateralism — and less around military force. Hence the idea, often used in the literature, of the "normative power of Europe". In this construction, programmes dedicated to citizenship have played an important role. Town twinning, civic participation and the promotion of Union values through the fourth pillar of the CERV programme were not simply symbolic initiatives. They contributed to the consolidation of an internal legitimacy without which the Union would have had less credibility when talking externally about democracy and good governance. A Union whose citizens do not feel part of a common political community is clearly in a weaker position when it asks others to respect the same principles (Todorescu, 2023).

This does not mean, of course, that the focus on defence is wrong or unjustified. The Russian invasion has made it very clear that Europe has accumulated real shortcomings in terms of military capacity over time, against the backdrop of a long period of strategic relaxation since the Cold War. Moreover, the weakening of the predictability of American security guarantees has made this problem even more urgent. The data show quite clearly that the level of European defence spending no longer corresponded to the current risk environment (European Commission, 2025a; European Defence Agency, 2025; NATO, 2025b). The important question is therefore not whether the Union should invest more in defence. The question is another: how are these investments financed, who controls them and how are they integrated into the institutional and budgetary architecture of the Union. This is where the real stakes lie. If the new mechanisms repeat the intergovernmental model of previous crises — that is, they shift the decision-making to governments and reduce the role of parliamentary control — then the risk increases that defence will be strengthened precisely by weakening democratic oversight. And this would create a serious tension between what the Union says it stands for and how it ends up acting in practice (Piattoni, 2016; Fabbrini, F., 2022; Fabbrini, S., 2023).

SAFE is a very good example to understand the problem. The instrument was adopted on the basis of Article 122 TFEU, that is, on a legal basis designed for emergency situations. That is why the European Parliament had a limited role in this process, and the sum of €150 billion did not go through the ordinary legislative procedure. In other words, we are talking about a mechanism important in terms of value and effects, but built in a way that reduced parliamentary control. If this model is repeated — and the previous NGEU, also adopted by exceptional formulas, shows that such a scenario is plausible — then one of the great institutional gains of the Parliament, namely its role as budgetary co-authority, risks being gradually weakened. Not through a spectacular decision, but through the emergence of more and more instruments on the fringes of the classical budget or outside it, over which Parliament has less influence (Council of the European Union, 2025; European Union, 2025; Fabbrini, F., 2022).

The position of Parliament's co-rapporteurs for the 2028–2034 MFF, Siegfried Mureșan and Carla Tavares, must also be read in this context. They explicitly opposed the idea of grouping European programmes into a "single national plan" and called for stronger accountability and control mechanisms. The problem is that these demands are coming up against two important political resistances in the Council: on the one hand, the states' reluctance to increase contributions; on the other hand, their reluctance to have stronger parliamentary control. Therefore, even if Parliament formulates a coherent position, its real room for manoeuvre remains limited (European Parliament, 2025; Pari & Pradier, 2025).

Another problem arises here, perhaps even more important in the long term. We could call it, more simply, the risk of defence pushing other policies to the margins. The idea is the following: if defence spending enters the MFF at the proposed level, it may end up consuming more and more of the available budgetary space, to the detriment of programmes dedicated to citizenship, social cohesion and democratic legitimacy. The precedent is not reassuring at all. The Europe for Citizens programme suffered cuts precisely in the period 2014–2020, that is, at a time when democratic discontent and the distance between citizens and the European project were becoming increasingly visible. Now the pressure is even greater, because on top of all these priorities are added the obligations to repay the NGEU debt (Todorescu, 2023; Fabbrini, F., 2022; Kengyel, 2025).

If the future MFF — estimated at around €1.763 trillion in constant prices and almost €2 trillion in current terms — has to simultaneously cover increased defence spending, NGEU repayments, financing for agriculture and cohesion, expanding the budgets for migration and border management, as well as new priorities related to the digital and green transitions, then programmes like CERV will inevitably come under pressure. And they do not come under pressure from a position of strength. They have relatively small budgets, they do not have very strong institutional blocs behind them, and their political visibility is lower than that of the big spending chapters. For this reason, they are more exposed when the competition for resources starts to get tough (European Commission, 2025b, 2025c; D'Alfonso et al., 2024; Kengyel, 2025).

Furthermore, the Commission's emphasis on "fewer and more agile instruments" and the tendency to bring together more policies in broader budgetary mechanisms — as seen in the new logic of the "Global Europe" instrument — can have an ambivalent effect. On the one hand, this approach can offer more administrative flexibility. On the other hand, it can make the very programmes dedicated to citizenship less visible, which risk being absorbed into very large funds, negotiated mainly at executive and bilateral level. And when a programme loses its visibility, it often also loses its political weight (European Commission, 2025b, 2025c).

A final problem concerns the international credibility of the European Union. This is an important resource, but difficult to restore once it starts to erode. The Union has long presented itself as an actor defending rules-based multilateralism, and this image depends to a large extent on the coherence between what it does internally and what it asks of others externally. This is where the most sensitive tensions arise. If the Union relaxes its own fiscal rules to finance rearmament, but continues to demand strict discipline and severe conditionality from candidate and neighbouring states, the accusation of double standards becomes difficult to avoid. If it promises massive purchases of fossil fuels from the United States, but at the same time maintains the discourse of the Green Deal, then a credibility problem arises on climate policy. And if major budgetary decisions are increasingly concentrated in the European Council, while the Union continues to promote democratic governance abroad, a contradiction emerges that may gradually affect its power of non-coercive influence (European Commission, 2025d; Drumm, 2025; Chakraborty, 2025; Piattoni, 2016).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The journey from a pilot citizenship programme worth €72 million in 2004 to a multiannual financial framework approaching €2 trillion in 2025 shows how much the European Union has changed in its understanding of integration. Two decades ago, the main problem was one of democratic formation: how to accustom citizens to a European political identity built through treaties, not through a shared history lived in the same way. Today, the challenge is much greater. The Union must see whether it can, at the same time,

defend its territory, maintain its economic model and remain faithful to the values it claims to defend, all within a budgetary framework designed, in fact, for a less tense world than the one we have today (Todorescu, 2023; European Commission, 2025c).

The central idea of this article is that the answer depends on the balance that the Union will manage to find between its new geopolitical awakening and its democratic vocation. The ReArm Europe plan and the proposed MFF for 2028–2034 respond to real security needs, and it would be unrealistic to ignore this. But just as important is the way in which this expenditure is organised: how it is financed, how it is controlled and how it is integrated into the overall European budget. This will determine whether the Union emerges from this period as a more solid and credible international actor or whether, on the contrary, it will become a more conventional power bloc, gradually losing its distinct normative profile in the name of strategic autonomy. In this equation, the European Parliament's insistence on transparency, clear delimitation of programmes and serious accountability mechanisms remains one of the few real institutional guarantees. But this guarantee will only count if Parliament manages not to be marginalised again in precisely the most important negotiations (European Parliament, 2025; Pari & Pradier, 2025).

In this logic, programmes dedicated to citizenship should not be seen as secondary or symbolic additions to the European construction. They are part of the social and cultural infrastructure without which the Union can no longer convincingly claim to be a community of values, not just an association of interests. That is precisely why the stakes are not to choose between defence and citizenship, as if the two were mutually exclusive. The stakes are different: whether the Union can prove that it is capable of financing its security without sacrificing the democratic practices and civic ties that give meaning to that security. This is, in fact, the decisive question of the current political cycle: will the MFF 2028–2034 manage to maintain this balance or will the pressure of defence end up weakening the very civic and democratic basis that gives the Union its distinct identity? (Todorescu, 2023; European Commission, 2025c; European Parliament, 2025).

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