

Europe at 76: The Dream, The Achievement, The Drift

A Commemorative Essay for May 9, 2026

"World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it." , Robert Schuman, May 9, 1950

Prologue: A Voice from the Ruins

Seventy-six years ago today, on a spring afternoon in Paris, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman stood before a small gathering of journalists at the Quai d'Orsay and read aloud a declaration that would change the course of history. The room was modest. The words were not.

Schuman proposed placing French and German coal and steel production under a common supranational authority, open to all European nations willing to join. It was, on its surface, an industrial arrangement. In reality, it was the most audacious peace proposal of the twentieth century. Just five years after the end of a war that had killed sixty million people, a French minister was proposing to merge the trade of coal and steel, with the nation that had invaded France three times in seventy years.

The Schuman Declaration was not merely a treaty proposal. It was a *philosophy of governance*, a vision for how Europe could transcend centuries of bloodshed through shared sovereignty, economic interdependence, and institutional creativity. On this 76th anniversary, it is worth asking three questions: What did Schuman and the founding generation truly intend? What did Europe actually achieve? And where precisely did it go wrong?

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PART I: THE LONG-TERM INTENTION

1.1 — More Than Coal and Steel

The genius of the Schuman Declaration, drafted primarily by Jean Monnet, lay in its dual nature. It was simultaneously practical and visionary. The practical element was the pooling of coal and steel, the raw materials of war. The visionary element was stated explicitly in the declaration itself:

"The pooling of coal and steel production should immediately provide for the setting up of common foundations for economic development as a first step in the federation of Europe."

That phrase "**a first step in the federation of Europe**" is often quoted but rarely absorbed. Schuman and Monnet were not proposing a trade agreement. They were proposing the *beginning of a federal Europe*. The coal and steel community was the seed; the tree was to be a European federation. The declaration continued:

"By pooling basic production and by instituting a new High Authority, whose decisions will bind France, Germany and other member countries, this proposal will lead to the realisation of the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace."

Three words deserve emphasis: **indispensable to peace**. The founders did not see federation as a nice-to-have. They saw it as the *only* guarantee against a fourth European catastrophe. Having lived through two world wars, they understood that alliances, treaties, and good intentions were insufficient. Only *shared institutions with real authority* could prevent the cycle from repeating.

1.2 — The Monnet Method: Functional Spillover

Jean Monnet, the intellectual architect behind Schuman's declaration, believed in what scholars later called "**functional spillover**", the idea that integration in one sector would create pressures and incentives for integration in adjacent sectors. Pool coal and steel, and you would eventually need to harmonize transport. Harmonize transport, and you would need common trade rules. Common trade rules would require a common currency. A common currency would demand fiscal coordination. And fiscal coordination would ultimately require political union.

This was not naive optimism. It was a deliberate *strategy*, building federation incrementally, sector by sector, because attempting it all at once would fail politically. Monnet understood that European publics, still nursing national wounds, would never vote for federation in one leap. But they might accept it step by step, as each step created the practical necessity for the next.

The method had an elegant logic. But it also contained a fatal assumption: that the process would *continue moving forward*. That each generation of leaders would maintain the founding

generation's commitment to the ultimate destination: federation. As we shall see, this assumption proved wrong.

1.3 — The Broader Vision: Peace, Prosperity, and Global Influence

Beyond the institutional mechanics, the founding generation had three overarching goals:

First, permanent peace. Not merely the absence of war, but a structural impossibility of war between European nations. By making their economies interdependent and their institutions shared, war would become not just undesirable but *unthinkable*. This was Schuman's deepest conviction, rooted in his personal experience as a man born in Luxembourg, educated in Germany, and serving France.

Second, shared prosperity. The declaration explicitly stated: "*It will be a Europe where the standard of living will rise by grouping together production and expanding markets, thus encouraging the lowering of prices.*" Economic integration was not an end in itself but a means to improve the lives of ordinary Europeans, workers, farmers, families.

Third, global relevance. Schuman understood that individually, European nations were declining powers. France and Germany alone could not match the United States or the Soviet Union. But together, Europe could be a force for stability and progress in the world. The declaration spoke of Europe's contribution to "*the development of the African continent*", a reminder that in 1950, European nations still held colonial empires, and the founders imagined a constructive (if paternalistic) global role for a united Europe.

1.4 — What Schuman Did NOT Envision

It is equally important to note what the founding vision did *not* include:

- **A regulatory superstate.** Schuman proposed a *High Authority* with real power in a specific domain (coal and steel), not a bureaucracy regulating everything from cucumber curvature to vacuum cleaner wattage. The model was ***bounded authority*** — strong where it mattered, absent where it didn't.
- **A permanent intergovernmental negotiation.** The founders explicitly chose ***supranational authority*** over intergovernmental cooperation. They had seen the League of Nations fail because it relied on unanimous agreement among sovereign states. The High Authority was designed to *override* national vetoes in its domain.
- **An ever-expanding bureaucracy.** Monnet himself was famously lean in his administrative style. The original High Authority had a small staff and clear mandate. The idea was ***focused competence***, not institutional sprawl.

These distinctions matter enormously when we assess what Europe became versus what it was meant to be.

PART II: WHAT WAS REALLY ACHIEVED

2.1 — The Miracle of Peace

Let us begin with what is so easily taken for granted that it has become invisible: **Europe has been at peace for 76 years.**

This is not normal. For the preceding five centuries, major European wars occurred roughly every generation. The Thirty Years' War, the Napoleonic Wars, the Franco-Prussian War, World War I, World War II, each devastated the continent. The idea that France and Germany would not only stop fighting but become so intertwined that war between them is literally inconceivable would have seemed delusional in 1945.

Yet here we are. No French soldier has fired at a German soldier in 81 years. No German tank has crossed into Belgium. No Italian army has marched on Austria. The European project did not merely *reduce* the probability of war among its members — it *eliminated* it. This is arguably the greatest political achievement of the modern era, and it is directly attributable to the institutional framework Schuman proposed.

We must never become so accustomed to peace that we forget how extraordinary it is, or how fragile it could become without the institutions that sustain it.

2.2 — The Single Market: Europe's Economic Engine

The **European Single Market**, established in 1993 and now encompassing 450 million consumers, is the world's largest integrated economic area. It represents approximately €17 trillion in GDP — comparable to the United States and larger than China.

The single market delivered on Schuman's promise of shared prosperity through:

- **Free movement of goods:** Elimination of customs duties and border checks for trade between member states, reducing costs and expanding consumer choice.
- **Free movement of services:** (Partially achieved) allowing companies to operate across borders.
- **Free movement of capital:** Enabling cross-border investment and financial integration.
- **Free movement of people:** Perhaps the most revolutionary: 450 million Europeans can live, work, study, and retire in any member state. A Portuguese engineer can work in Munich. A Polish student can study in Paris. A Dutch retiree can live in Spain.

The economic impact has been substantial. The European Commission estimates that the single market has increased EU GDP by approximately 8-9% compared to a scenario without integration. Trade between member states has increased dramatically, and prices for consumers have fallen in many sectors due to increased competition.

2.3 — The Euro: Bold but Incomplete

The introduction of the **euro** in 1999 (physical notes and coins in 2002) was the most ambitious step since the founding treaties. A common currency for (now) 20 member states, used daily by 350 million people, and the world's second reserve currency after the US dollar.

The euro delivered:

- **Price transparency:** Consumers can compare prices across borders instantly.
- **Elimination of exchange rate risk:** Businesses trade across the eurozone without currency hedging costs.
- **Lower interest rates:** Particularly for southern European countries that previously paid high premiums.
- **Global monetary weight:** The euro gives Europe a seat at the table in global monetary affairs.

But the euro also exposed the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the European project — a tension we will return to in Part III.

2.4 — Enlargement: From Six to Twenty-Seven

The EU grew from six founding members (France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg) to twenty-seven, absorbing:

- **1973:** United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark
- **1981:** Greece
- **1986:** Spain, Portugal
- **1995:** Austria, Finland, Sweden
- **2004:** The "Big Bang": ten countries, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Cyprus)
- **2007:** Romania, Bulgaria
- **2013:** Croatia

The 2004 enlargement was historically momentous. It reunified a continent divided by the Iron Curtain. For nations that had spent forty years under Soviet domination, EU membership represented a return to Europe, a guarantee of democratic governance, and access to economic opportunity. The transformation of countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states from post-communist economies to prosperous democracies is one of the EU's greatest success stories. However, the extension to 27 members (28 before Brexit) was not sufficiently taken into account in successive treaties.

2.5 — Erasmus, Schengen, and the European Identity

Beyond the grand institutional achievements, Europe built something more subtle but equally important: a **shared European experience**.

- **Erasmus programme** (1987): Over 12 million students have studied in another European country. This created a generation of Europeans who have friends, memories, and emotional connections across borders. It is hard to demonize a nation when you spent your happiest university years there.
- **Schengen Area** (1985/1995): The abolition of internal border controls across 27 countries. A Parisian can drive to Berlin without showing a passport. This seemingly mundane convenience is, historically, revolutionary.
- **European Court of Human Rights and Charter of Fundamental Rights**: A shared legal framework protecting individual liberties across the continent.

These achievements created what might be called *lived integration* — not the abstract integration of treaties and institutions, but the daily experience of a Europe without barriers. For younger Europeans who have grown up with Erasmus, Schengen, and the euro, a fragmented Europe is as unimaginable as war between France and Germany.

2.6 — Regulatory Influence: The Brussels Effect

One achievement rarely celebrated but enormously consequential is Europe's **regulatory influence** on the world. Columbia Law professor Anu Bradford coined the term "Brussels Effect" to describe how EU regulations become *de facto* global standards.

- **GDPR** (General Data Protection Regulation): Became the global template for data privacy law, adopted or imitated by dozens of countries.
- **Product safety standards**: CE marking is recognized worldwide.
- **Environmental regulations**: EU emissions standards influence global automotive manufacturing.
- **Competition policy**: EU antitrust enforcement has reshaped the behaviour of global tech companies.

Europe lacks military power and tech giants, but it wields enormous *regulatory power*. When the EU sets a standard, global companies comply because the European market is too large to ignore. This is a form of influence that Schuman could not have anticipated but would likely have appreciated. Nevertheless, one must also admit that the EU went in overdrive in terms of regulations and this is now stifling its economic competence.

PART III: WHERE IT WENT WRONG

3.1 — The Destination Was Forgotten

The most fundamental failure of the European project is not any specific policy mistake. It is the **abandonment of the destination**.

Schuman's declaration was explicit: the coal and steel community was "*a first step in the federation of Europe*." The Monnet method assumed continuous forward movement toward that goal. But somewhere between the Treaty of Rome (1957) and the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), the destination was quietly dropped from the conversation.

Today, the word "federation" is almost taboo in European politics. Leaders speak of "ever closer union" — a phrase so vague it means everything and nothing. The European Commission pursues "more Europe" in regulatory terms while carefully avoiding any discussion of genuine federal architecture. National leaders invoke European solidarity when it suits them and national sovereignty when it doesn't.

The result is an institution trapped in permanent adolescence, no longer the child of the coal and steel community, but never allowed to become the adult federation the founders envisioned. Europe has the *responsibilities* of a superpower (defending 450 million people, managing the world's largest single market) but the *institutional architecture* of a diplomatic conference.

3.2 — The Democratic Deficit: Europe's Original Sin

The Monnet method — building integration through technocratic institutions rather than democratic participation — was a brilliant strategy for the 1950s. But it created a structural problem that has compounded over seven decades: **the democratic deficit**.

The European Commission, which holds the monopoly on legislative initiative (the sole right to propose new laws), is not directly elected. The European Council, where the most consequential decisions are made, meets behind closed doors. The European Parliament, the only directly elected institution, was for decades a rubber stamp and even now lacks the power to initiate legislation.

The result: European citizens feel that decisions affecting their lives are made by distant bureaucrats they didn't choose and can't remove. Voter turnout for European Parliament elections has declined from 62% in 1979 to around 51% in 2024 — and in some countries falls below 30%.

This democratic deficit is not merely a theoretical concern. It has real political consequences:

- **Brexit** (2016): The UK's departure was driven partly by the perception that "unelected bureaucrats in Brussels" were making decisions for Britain. Whatever one thinks of

Brexit, the sentiment behind it “European governance lacks democratic legitimacy” resonated with millions.

- **Rise of Eurosceptic parties:** From Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National to Italy's Fratelli d'Italia to Hungary's Fidesz, Eurosceptic movements have gained strength across the continent, often by exploiting the gap between European governance and democratic accountability. Europe must not ignore or reject this, but must seek real changes that prove the sceptics wrong.
- **Constitutional Treaty rejection** (2005): When French and Dutch voters were given a direct say on the EU's constitutional future, they said *no*. The response of European elites was telling: rather than addressing the democratic concerns, they repackaged essentially the same content as the Lisbon Treaty and ratified it through parliaments, bypassing referendums. This confirmed many citizens' suspicion that European integration was an elite project imposed from above.

The founding generation's error was not in creating technocratic institutions — that was necessary in the 1950s. The error was in never *transitioning to democratic institutions* as integration deepened. As Europe accumulated more power, it should have accumulated more democratic legitimacy. Instead, it accumulated more bureaucracy.

3.3 — Regulatory Overreach: From Focused Authority to Sprawling Bureaucracy

Schuman proposed a High Authority with *focused competence* in a specific domain. What Europe built instead is a regulatory apparatus of staggering breadth and complexity.

The EU's *acquis Communautaire*, the total body of EU law, now comprises approximately **100,000 pages** of legislation. It regulates everything from financial markets and environmental standards (where cross-border coordination is genuinely necessary) to the classification of bananas and the maximum power of vacuum cleaners (where it is not).

The **2024 Draghi Report** on European Competitiveness, commissioned by the European Commission itself, delivered a devastating diagnosis. Mario Draghi, former President of the European Central Bank, found that:

- **Europe's productivity gap** with the United States has been widening for two decades. EU GDP per capita in purchasing power terms is now roughly 34% below the US level.
- **Energy costs** for European industry are 2-3 times higher than in the US and significantly higher than in China.
- **Regulatory burden** is a major competitive disadvantage. European companies spend disproportionate time and resources on compliance rather than innovation.
- **Investment gap:** Europe needs approximately €800 billion in additional annual investment to remain competitive, roughly 5% of EU GDP.

- **Innovation deficit:** Europe produces excellent research but fails to commercialize it. Of the world's top 50 tech companies, none are European.

The Draghi Report is, in essence, a 400-page admission that the European regulatory model has become a competitive liability. Not because regulation is inherently bad, but because **Europe regulates *too much, too broadly, and too slowly***. Even the Draghi report fails to analyse the root causes of Europe's decline in depth. €800 billion in additional annual investment in itself will not address the issues if Europe's citizens are still hampered in their initiatives by bureaucratic regulations and high costs of running a business and high taxes.

The irony is painful: Schuman proposed ***focused authority*** in domains where it mattered. Europe built ***diffuse authority*** across domains where it often doesn't. The High Authority was designed to be powerful in a narrow field. The European Commission became weak across an impossibly broad one.

3.4 — The Unanimity Trap: Institutional Paralysis

The EU's decision-making architecture contains a structural defect that would have horrified the founders: **unanimity requirements** for the most important decisions.

In areas including foreign policy, defence, taxation, and treaty changes, every single member state has a veto. This means that Hungary can block sanctions on Russia. Cyprus can block measures against Turkey. Any single country can hold the other twenty-six hostage to its particular interests. An issue that became increasingly a deadlock mechanism as the EU evolved from 6 to 27 member states.

The consequences are severe:

- **Foreign policy incoherence:** Europe cannot respond quickly or decisively to geopolitical crises because 27 foreign ministers must agree. While the US president can make decisions in hours, Europe deliberates for weeks or months.
- **Defence fragmentation:** Despite spending collectively over €200 billion annually on defence, European nations operate 27 separate armies with 27 separate procurement systems, 27 separate command structures, and 17 different types of main battle tank (compared to one in the US). The waste is astronomical.
- **Tax competition:** Unanimity on taxation allows countries like Ireland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands to maintain tax regimes that attract corporate profits away from countries where economic activity actually occurs, a questionable form of internal competition that undermines collective prosperity, although general tax competition is healthy.

The founders understood this problem. The original ECSC High Authority could make binding decisions by majority vote. But as integration expanded, national governments insisted on retaining vetoes in sensitive areas, precisely the areas where collective action matters most.

The result is an institution that can regulate the wattage of your toaster but cannot agree on a common defence policy while Russia wages war on its borders.

3.5 — The Missing Pillar: Defence and Foreign Policy

Perhaps the most consequential failure of European integration is the absence of a common defence.

This was not for lack of trying. In 1950, the same year as the Schuman Declaration, France proposed the **European Defence Community (EDC)**, which would have created a unified European army. The treaty was signed in 1952 by all six founding members. It was then rejected by the French National Assembly in 1954, killed by a combination of Gaullist nationalism and Communist opposition.

This was arguably the single most damaging moment in European integration history. Had the EDC been ratified, Europe would have had a common defence structure from the mid-1950s — seven decades of institutional development, shared military culture, and strategic coherence. Instead, Europe outsourced its defence to NATO and, by extension, to the United States.

For forty years, this arrangement worked. The US had strategic reasons to defend Europe (containing the Soviet Union), and Europe benefited from American security guarantees while investing in social welfare rather than military hardware and capacity. But this created a dependency that is now proving catastrophic, not only in the domain of defence, but it also created economic and cultural dependencies.

In 2026, Europe faces a perfect storm:

- **Russia's war in Ukraine** (since February 2022) demonstrated that large-scale conventional war has returned to Europe. European nations scrambled to increase defence spending, but years of underinvestment cannot be reversed overnight.
- **US retrenchment:** American political sentiment has shifted toward burden-sharing and, in some quarters, outright disengagement from European security. The era of unconditional US security guarantees is over.
- **The 2026 Iran war** (February 2026) has created a second energy crisis for Europe, with fuel costs rising 25-30% and global commodity markets in turmoil and far reaching economic consequences, demonstrating that Europe's security vulnerabilities extend far beyond its borders.

Europe in 2026 is a continent with the GDP of a superpower, the military coordination of a debating society, and the strategic autonomy of a dependent. This is the direct consequence of the EDC's failure in 1954 and seven decades of avoiding the question.

3.6 — Enlargement Without Deepening

The 2004 "Big Bang" enlargement, adding ten countries simultaneously, was a historic and morally necessary act. But it was undertaken without the institutional reform needed to make a union of 25 (now 27) function effectively.

The problem is mathematical and political:

- **Mathematical:** Unanimity among 6 countries is difficult. Unanimity among 27 is nearly impossible and very time-consuming. Every enlargement without reform of voting rules makes decision-making harder, especially when time is of the essence.
- **Political:** The new member states, having just escaped Soviet domination, were understandably protective of their newly regained sovereignty. They were enthusiastic about the single market and structural funds but resistant to deeper political integration. This shifted the EU's centre of gravity away from federation and toward intergovernmentalism.

The EU chose *breadth over depth*, expanding its membership while diluting its institutional capacity. It is as if a company kept hiring employees while refusing to update its management structure. The result is an organization too large for its governance framework and too loosely integrated for its ambitions.

3.7 — The Euro's Birth Defect

The euro was introduced with a fundamental architectural flaw that economists warned about at the time: **monetary union without fiscal union**.

A common currency requires, at minimum:

- A common monetary policy (achieved — the European Central Bank)
- A common fiscal framework (partially achieved, the Stability and Growth Pact, widely violated)
- A fiscal transfer mechanism (not achieved, no permanent mechanism to transfer resources from prosperous to struggling regions)
- A banking union (partially achieved, still incomplete)

The United States has all four. When Alabama struggles economically, federal taxes from California flow to Alabama through social security, Medicare, and federal programs. When a bank fails in Texas, the FDIC (a federal institution) handles it. The dollar works because it is backed by a federal government with taxing and spending authority.

The euro has none of this. When Greece collapsed in 2010, there was no mechanism to help. The resulting crisis, years of austerity, youth unemployment above 50%, social devastation, nearly destroyed the eurozone and inflicted lasting damage on European solidarity. Southern Europeans felt punished by northern austerity; northern Europeans felt exploited by southern profligacy.

Both had legitimate grievances, and both were victims of an architectural flaw that should have been fixed before the euro was launched. Of course, Greece's collapse would have been prevented if it had adopted a sound budgetary discipline. The same risk is today still there for multiple member states running too large budgetary deficits.

The euro crisis revealed a deeper truth: Europe had the *ambition* of a federation (common currency) but the *institutions* of a confederation (no fiscal union). This mismatch between ambition and architecture is the defining pathology of the European project.

3.8 — The Brussels Bubble: Disconnection from Citizens

Over seven decades, European institutions developed a culture that is increasingly disconnected from the citizens they serve.

- **Language:** EU documents are written in impenetrable bureaucratic jargon. Regulations reference other regulations that reference directives that reference framework decisions. Even lawyers struggle to understand EU law; ordinary citizens have no chance.
- **Geography:** European institutions are concentrated in Brussels (and to a lesser extent, Strasbourg and Luxembourg), creating a literal and metaphorical bubble. EU officials live in a cosmopolitan enclave where everyone speaks multiple languages, earns above-average salaries, and shares pro-European convictions. This is not representative of the continent they govern.
- **Accountability:** When things go well, national politicians take credit. When things go badly, they blame Brussels. This dynamic, encouraged by the EU's institutional opacity, means that European institutions get responsibility without credit and blame without accountability.
- **Consultation theatre:** The EU conducts elaborate "public consultations" that create the appearance of citizen participation without the substance. The 2021-2022 Conference on the Future of Europe generated hundreds of citizen recommendations, most of which were politely filed and forgotten.

The founders built institutions that were deliberately technocratic, because in the 1950s, that was the only way to begin. But seventy-six years later, Europe still governs through technocracy rather than democracy. The citizens of Europe are *subjects* of European governance, not *participants* in it.

3.9 — Subsidiarity in Reverse

The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) introduced the **principle of subsidiarity** — the idea that decisions should be taken at the lowest level of government capable of handling them effectively. The EU should act only where member states cannot act sufficiently on their own.

In practice, subsidiarity has been honoured in the breach. The EU has progressively expanded its regulatory reach into domains that are manifestly local or national in character:

- Urban planning regulations
- Consumer product specifications
- Agricultural practices at the farm level
- Professional qualification standards
- Cultural content quotas

Meanwhile, in domains where European-level action is genuinely necessary, such as defence, foreign policy, energy security, industrial strategy, the EU remains weak because member states refuse to cede sovereignty.

Europe has achieved **subsidiarity in reverse**: supranational authority where it isn't needed, national fragmentation where it is. The EU regulates what should be local and fragments what should be federal. This is the precise opposite of what effective multi-level governance requires and the precise opposite of what Schuman envisioned with his model of ***focused authority in strategic domains***.

PART IV: THE WORLD IN 2026 — WHY REFORM IS EXISTENTIAL

4.1 — The Geopolitical Squeeze

As Europe celebrates its 76th birthday, the geopolitical landscape is more threatening than at any point since the Cold War.

Russia wages war on Europe's eastern border, seeking to reintegrate Ukraine into its sphere of influence and likely other ex-Sovjet states as well. The conflict has exposed Europe's military weakness, energy vulnerability, and strategic incoherence. Four years into the war, Europe still cannot agree on a unified strategy.

The United States, historically Europe's security guarantor, is turning inward. Running massive budget deficits and facing domestic polarization, America's commitment to European defence is no longer unconditional. The transatlantic relationship that sustained Europe for seven decades is fraying.

China has become the world's manufacturing superpower and is rapidly advancing in technology, AI, and green energy. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has expanded its influence across Africa, Southeast Asia, and even into Europe itself, acquiring stakes in European ports, energy infrastructure, and technology companies.

The Middle East remains volatile. The February-March 2026 US-Israeli strikes on Iran triggered a global energy crisis, with oil prices spiking and European fuel costs rising 25-30%. This turned into an unseen energy crisis with the closing of the Strait of Hormuz. Europe, still recovering from the 2022 Russian energy shock, found itself in a second energy crisis in four years, a brutal reminder that energy dependence is a strategic vulnerability.

4.2 — The Competitiveness Crisis

The Draghi Report's findings are not merely academic concerns. They describe an existential threat to European prosperity:

- Europe's share of global GDP is declining.
- European companies are falling behind in AI, quantum computing, biotechnology, and space.
- The continent faces demographic decline, an aging population and shrinking workforce.
- Energy costs make European industry uncompetitive.
- Regulatory burden stifles innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Capital markets remain fragmented along national lines, preventing the scale-up financing that creates global champions.

If these trends continue, Europe faces not dramatic collapse but gradual irrelevance — a slow fade from global significance, accompanied by declining living standards and increasing dependence on others for technology, energy, and security.

4.3 — The Institutional Mismatch

The core problem is not any single policy failure but a **structural mismatch** between Europe's challenges and its institutional capacity.

Europe faces *federal-scale problems*: defence against Russia, competition with China, energy security, technological sovereignty, with *confederal-scale institutions*. It is as if a modern corporation tried to compete in global markets using the management structure of a 1950s gentlemen's club.

The unanimity requirement means that the most important decisions require agreement among 27 governments with divergent interests. The rotating Council presidency means that strategic priorities change every six months. The Commission's five-year mandate is too short for long-term strategy but too long for crisis response. And the Parliament, despite its democratic legitimacy, lacks the powers that any serious legislature requires.

PART V: WHAT SCHUMAN WOULD SAY TODAY

5.1 — The Unfinished Cathedral

If Robert Schuman could see Europe in 2026, he would likely feel a mixture of pride and frustration.

Pride at the peace, prosperity, and freedom that his initiative made possible. The Europe of 2026, for all its problems, is incomparably better than the Europe of 1950. No war between member states. Democratic governance across the continent. A standard of living that would have seemed miraculous to the generation that survived World War II.

Frustration that the *destination* he articulated, federation, remains unreached after seventy-six years. Schuman did not propose an eternal process of integration. He proposed a *first step* toward a specific goal. Seventy-six years of first steps without arriving anywhere would strike him as a failure of political will, not of institutional design.

Schuman might compare Europe to an unfinished cathedral, magnificent in its ambition, impressive in its partial construction, but ultimately unable to fulfill its purpose because each generation of builders argued about the design rather than completing the structure.

5.2 — The Paradox of Success

There is a cruel paradox at the heart of Europe's situation. The European project succeeded *so well* at its primary mission, preventing war, that subsequent generations lost the *urgency* that drove the founders.

Schuman and Monnet built European institutions in the shadow of Auschwitz and Stalingrad. They had seen what happened when European nations pursued their interests without constraint. That existential fear gave them the courage to propose radical solutions.

Today's European leaders have no such fear. Their generation grew up in peace and prosperity. War between France and Germany is unimaginable, which means the *reason* it is unimaginable (European institutions) is taken for granted. The very success of the European project has undermined the political will to complete it.

This is the paradox: Europe needs crisis to generate the political will for reform, but the purpose of European institutions is to *prevent* crisis. Success breeds complacency, and complacency breeds vulnerability.

5.3 — The Road Not Taken

At several moments in European history, the path toward federation was open:

- **1954:** The European Defence Community could have created a common European army. France rejected it.
- **1965-66:** The "Empty Chair Crisis". De Gaulle blocked majority voting, establishing the precedent that national vetoes would persist. The Luxembourg Compromise enshrined intergovernmentalism.
- **2005 - 2008:** The Constitutional Treaty could have given Europe a genuine constitution with democratic legitimacy. French and Dutch voters rejected it, partly because it was too technocratic, partly because it was too ambitious. Its replacement, the treaty of Lisbon was even deliberately kept opaque. Today, the treaty resulted in overregulation and did not meet its democratic ambitions.
- **2010-2015:** The euro crisis could have been the catalyst for fiscal union and genuine economic governance. Instead, Europe chose austerity and muddled through.
- **2022-present:** Russia's invasion of Ukraine could have catalyzed a common European defence. Four years later, progress remains incremental.

Each of these moments represented an opportunity to take the *next step* toward the federation Schuman envisioned. Each time, Europe chose the path of least resistance — preserving national sovereignty at the cost of collective capacity.

PART VI: THE NEXT CHAPTER

6.1 — The Question for the Next Generation

As Europe marks its 76th birthday, the fundamental question is not whether the European project was worthwhile, it manifestly was, but whether it can survive in its current form.

The world of 2026 is not the world of 1950, or 1992, or even 2019. It is a world of great power competition, technological disruption, energy insecurity, and democratic fragility. In this world, a loosely coordinated confederation of 27 chattering nation-states, however prosperous individually, cannot compete with continental-scale powers that act with strategic coherence.

The choice is stark:

Option A: Complete the cathedral. Reform European institutions to create genuine federal capacity in strategic domains (defence, energy, technology, foreign policy) while returning over-regulated competences to member states. This is what Schuman intended. It requires political courage that has been absent for decades.

Option B: Managed decline. Continue with the current institutional framework, making incremental adjustments while Europe gradually loses global relevance. This is the path of least resistance. It requires no political courage and delivers no strategic results.

Option C: Fragmentation. Allow centrifugal forces (nationalism, populism, divergent interests) to pull the union apart. This is not a deliberate choice but the default outcome if Option A is not pursued. Brexit was the first symptom; it may not be the last.

6.2 — What Reform Requires

Genuine reform of the European project would need to address the structural failures identified in this essay:

1. **Restore the destination.** Openly acknowledge that the goal is federation, bounded, bottom-up subsidiarity-based federation, not a centralized superstate, and build public support for it through democratic participation, not technocratic imposition.
2. **Fix the democratic deficit.** European citizens must feel that they own European governance. This requires institutions that are directly accountable, transparently governed, and genuinely responsive to citizen input.
3. **Apply subsidiarity correctly.** Federal authority in domains that require continental scale (defence, energy, technology, foreign policy). National and local authority in everything else. Less regulation overall, but stronger governance where it matters.
4. **Abolish unanimity.** Replace national vetoes with qualified or supermajority voting (e.g. 80%) in all domains. No single country should be able to hold 26 others hostage.

5. **Build fiscal capacity.** A common currency without fiscal union is an architectural flaw. Europe needs genuine fiscal instruments, not merely emergency funds but permanent mechanisms for investment, stabilization, and solidarity. A fiscal union however also requires a permanent freedom of information so that citizens know they can trust the institutions.
6. **Create strategic capacity.** Long-term strategy cannot be hostage to five-year electoral cycles or six-month Council presidencies. Europe needs institutional mechanisms for strategic planning that transcend political turnover.

6.3 — Schuman's Enduring Wisdom

On this 76th anniversary, it is worth returning to Schuman's own words — not the famous phrases that adorn EU buildings, but the deeper insight that animated his proposal:

"Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity."

This sentence is usually quoted to justify incrementalism, the idea that Europe should proceed slowly, step by step. But read it again carefully. Schuman did not say Europe should proceed *slowly*. He said it should proceed through *concrete achievements*. The emphasis is on *achievement*, not on *pace*.

For too long, Europe has used Schuman's words to justify inaction — to argue that patience is a virtue and that the next step can always wait. But Schuman was not counselling patience. He was counselling *action*, concrete, tangible, meaningful action that creates real solidarity.

Seventy-six years after the declaration that began it all, Europe has achieved much. But it has not achieved what Schuman set out to build. The cathedral remains unfinished. The question for the next generation is whether they will complete it — or watch it crumble.

VI. WHAT SCHUMAN2030.EU PROPOSES

6.1 A subsidiarity audit

In order to create a genuine “federal” European level, it is important create focus. This means that the federal European level should only and only focus on those domains that are truly supra-national. Simultaneously, any competence that is not truly supra-national should be returned to the participating member states, restoring their sovereignty and restabing citizens confidence. Of course, there are domains where competences are shared, or at least whereby some aspects are shared. The federal level, in casu the EU level today, should then preferably formulate it as guidelines or norms. Member states can then adopt them in a manner that takes into account their regional differences.

A bottom-up subsidiarity audit will liberate resources at the European level allowing to more effectively establish the federal competence domains. At the same time, any competence that will be handled locally, read often based on territorial boundaries, increases the democratic feedback loop between the citizens and their democratically assigned representatives at government level.

6.2 A Bounded Multi-Federalism

Rather than a single all-encompassing federal level, Schuman2030 proposed the establishment of Federal Councils for each specific supra-national competence domain.

| Federal Council | Domain |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Defence | Military, security, NATO integration |
| Space | Launch, satellites, Earth observation |
| International Affairs | Diplomacy, trade bloc, economic relations |
| Physical Infrastructure | Roads, ports, transport corridors |
| Digital Infrastructure | Secure IT backbone, cybersecurity, AI |
| Energy & Economy | Strategic reserves, energy security, raw materials |
| Innovation | R&D, breakthrough technologies |
| Long-term Planning | Geopolitics, demographics, strategic foresight |

Together, these Federal Councils make up the European Federal level, although not all 27 members need to be participating in all Councils (which has consequences). These Councils operate relatively autonomously from the participating member states. Their mandate is to fulfil their supra-national objectives following longer term strategic roadmaps that are regularly revised. Note that the establishment of these federal Councils does not mean that member states lose all national power in the domain. A proposed rule is that 1/3 of the agreed upon budget remains national, expressing that all federal competences still have national elements.

6.3 Reinforced democratic control

The current EU power structure is rather opaque and complex and largely results in regulations and laws being imposed from above, even if legally the EU parliament is officially the legislative power. In additions, mechanisms like the Citizen's Initiative and Green/Orange cards, while meant as democratic control mechanism are not practical and barely used.

Hence, Schuman2030 proposes a new democratic structure.

1. A Citizen's Parliament composed of appointed delegates by the National Parliaments. No direct elections are envisioned. The Parliament acts upon the proposals from the Federal Councils and initiates themselves federal levels laws and regulations. The national delegates establish the link with national member states whereby member states citizens can influence or question the decisions using binding referendums.
2. A Wise Statesmen Senate composed of experienced politicians and appointed domain experts. Their role is to validate the Parliaments proposed laws and regulations.
3. Then establishment of an Impact Office. This Impact Office is a permanent institution who analyses and scrutinizes all laws and regulations proposals and serves the Senate.

The Federal Councils are managed by 4 directors (2 Parliament-appointed, 2 Senate-appointed) with a rotating Presidency. Each Federal Council has its own budget and staff. A director can only be appointed following proven experience in the Senate, which requires a transition rule for the first years after establishment.

6.4 A blueprint for national reform

Robert Schuman wrote:

'European integration must in a general way avoid the errors of national democracies, above all their excess of bureaucracy and technocracy. ...

One cannot ignore the observation that the problems we identified are only present at the European level. The issues of overregulation of democratic deficit are also present at national level. This is a complex matter. National regulations are "inherited" from the European level because EU directives must be implemented at the national level, but the bureaucratic mindset was inherited as well. The same applies to the democratic control. While citizens still vote, once the votes are casted the political class and parties take over because the election have them a mandate till the next election. In addition, special interest groups, often linked to political parties, have no interest in democratic reform. On the contrary, they use their power to keep their power. This phenome is worldwide and undermines most western democracies. Hence, if we want to create a strong and democratic Europe, the efforts must be made to reinforce democracy at national and regional level as well.

More information at <https://schuman2030.eu/wp6a-postlisbon-reform-concept/>

Epilogue: May 9, 2026

Today, as Europeans mark the 76th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration, the continent faces challenges that would be familiar to the man who stood at the Quai d'Orsay in 1950. War on Europe's borders. Energy insecurity. Great power competition. The threat of irrelevance.

Schuman's answer then was bold, creative, and institutional. He did not propose speeches, summits, or declarations of intent. He proposed a *structure*, a new institution with real authority, binding decisions, and a clear mandate. He understood that good intentions without institutional architecture are wishes, not policy.

The challenges of 2026 demand the same boldness. Not another treaty that rearranges institutional furniture. Not another summit that produces communiqués and photo opportunities. But genuine structural reform that completes the federation Schuman envisioned — adapted to the realities of the twenty-first century, grounded in democratic legitimacy, and focused on the domains where Europe must act as one or accept decline.

"World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it."

The dangers are proportionate. The question is whether the creative efforts will be.

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Summary

Europe at 76: The Dream, The Achievement, The Drift

A commemorative short essay for May 9, 2026, 76 years after Schuman's declaration.

"World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.", Robert Schuman, May 9, 1950

A Voice from the Ruins

Seventy-six years ago, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman stood at the Quai d'Orsay and proposed the unthinkable: merging French and German coal and steel — the sinews of war — under a common supranational authority. Just five years after a war that killed sixty million, a French minister was binding his nation's industrial heart to its historic enemy.

But this was no mere trade deal. Schuman's declaration stated it explicitly: pooling coal and steel was ***"a first step in the federation of Europe"***, a federation he called ***"indispensable to the preservation of peace."*** The seed was industrial. The tree was to be political.

What Was Achieved

The achievements are extraordinary, so extraordinary that they've become invisible.

Peace. For five centuries, major European wars erupted roughly every generation. Since 1950, not a single shot has been fired between member states. War between France and Germany is not merely unlikely — it is *unthinkable*. This alone may be the greatest political achievement of the modern era.

Prosperity. The Single Market — 450 million consumers, €17 trillion in GDP — is the world's largest integrated economic area. Free movement of goods, capital, services, and people transformed a fragmented continent into an economic powerhouse. A Portuguese engineer works in Munich. A Polish student studies in Paris. A Dutch retiree lives in Spain.

Identity. Erasmus sent 12 million students across borders. Schengen abolished passport controls. The euro became the world's second reserve currency. For younger Europeans, a fragmented Europe is as unimaginable as war between neighbours.

Influence. The "Brussels Effect" turned EU regulations into global standards — from GDPR to product safety to emissions rules. Europe may lack tech giants and aircraft carriers, but when Brussels sets a standard, the world follows.

Where It Went Wrong

Yet beneath these achievements lies a deepening structural crisis.

The destination was abandoned. Schuman proposed a *first step toward federation*. Seventy-six years later, the word "federation" is taboo in European politics. Leaders speak of "ever closer union", a phrase so vague it means everything and nothing. Europe is trapped in permanent adolescence: no longer the infant of the coal and steel community, but never the adult federation the founders envisioned.

Democracy was never built in. The Monnet method, integration through technocratic institutions, was brilliant for the 1950s. But as Europe accumulated power, it never accumulated *democratic legitimacy*. The Commission proposes laws but isn't elected. The Council decides behind closed doors. When French and Dutch voters rejected the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, elites repackaged it as the Lisbon Treaty and bypassed referendums. Brexit was partly the bill for decades of democratic deficit.

Regulation replaced strategy. Schuman proposed *focused authority* in a specific domain. Europe built *diffuse authority* across 100,000 pages of legislation, regulating vacuum cleaner wattage while failing to coordinate defence. The 2024 Draghi Report delivered a devastating verdict: Europe's productivity gap with the US has widened for two decades, energy costs are 2-3 times higher, and not one of the world's top 50 tech companies is European. Europe needs €800 billion in additional annual investment just to stay competitive.

Unanimity became paralysis. In foreign policy, defence, and taxation, every member state holds a veto. Hungary blocks sanctions on Russia. Any single country can hold twenty-six others hostage. Europe spends €200 billion annually on defence but operates 27 separate armies with 17 types of main battle tank. It can regulate your toaster but cannot agree on a common defence while Russia wages war on its borders.

Subsidiarity was inverted. Europe regulates what should be local (product specifications, professional qualifications) and fragments what should be federal (defence, energy, foreign policy). The precise opposite of effective governance — and *the precise opposite of what Schuman envisioned*.

The World of 2026

The geopolitical landscape makes *reform existential*, not optional.

Russia wages war on Europe's eastern border. The United States, running massive deficits and turning inward, no longer offers unconditional security guarantees. China dominates global manufacturing and expands influence across Africa and Asia. And the February 2026 US-Israeli strikes on Iran triggered Europe's *second* energy crisis in four years, fuel costs up 25-30%, a brutal reminder that energy dependence is a strategic vulnerability.

Europe faces federal-scale problems with confederal-scale institutions. It has the GDP of a superpower, the military coordination of a debating society, and the strategic autonomy of a dependent.

Complete the Cathedral

Schuman's declaration contains a phrase usually quoted to justify inaction: "*Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements.*" But read it again. The emphasis is on *achievement, not on patience*. Schuman was counselling action — bold, structural, institutional action.

Seventy-six years of first steps without arriving would strike him not as prudence, but as a failure of political will.

The cathedral Schuman began is magnificent in its partial construction. But an unfinished cathedral cannot shelter anyone from the storm. The dangers today are proportionate to those of 1950. The question is whether the creative efforts will be.