

**RECOMMENDATIONS**  
FROM MEMBERS OF THE TEPESA NETWORK  
TO THE INCOMING  
**IRISH**  
**PRESIDENCY**  
OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION



**JULY-DECEMBER 2026**

**TEPSA**

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# Abbreviations

<b>AI</b>	Artificial intelligence
<b>CAP</b>	Common Agricultural Policy
<b>DFA</b>	Digital Fairness Act
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EP</b>	European Parliament
<b>GNI</b>	Gross national income
<b>MFF</b>	Multiannual Financial Framework
<b>NegoBox</b>	Negotiating Box
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>U.S.</b>	United States of America

# Introduction



## ERIK JONES

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Ireland will hold the Council Presidency at a moment when the European Union (EU) faces a difficult combination of external pressure, internal fragmentation and growing demands for strategic action. Russia's war against Ukraine, uncertainty in the transatlantic relationship, economic and technological dependencies, democratic vulnerabilities and the prospect of enlargement all require the EU to strengthen its capacity to act. Yet this cannot be achieved through self-sufficiency or technocratic crisis management alone. Europe needs an agenda that combines openness with resilience, competitiveness with democratic legitimacy, and strategic ambition with credible financing.

In this context, strategic autonomy should not be understood as European self-sufficiency or disengagement from allies and partners. Rather, it is about strengthening Europe's capacity to act together with like-minded partners from a position of greater resilience, credibility and reduced vulnerability. Europe's future capacity to act will therefore depend not only on internal EU integration, but also on its ability to organise closer cooperation with a wider circle of democratic European partners, including the United Kingdom (UK), candidate countries and closely associated states.

### **European strategic autonomy as an opportunity**

Strategic autonomy will be at the centre of the agenda for the upcoming Irish Presidency. This is not to diminish the

importance of other dossiers. Rather it is to reflect the reality that the world is changing, and the EU will have to change along with it. As [Niklas Helwig](#) argues, this window for the development of Europe's strategic autonomy is more of an opportunity than a threat.

By creating the conditions for the EU to act decisively and with purpose, the Irish Presidency will help ensure that the EU remains open to trade and international cooperation. The Irish Presidency can also set priorities, by focusing on those vulnerabilities that most need attention, and by fostering diversification and strengthening economic resilience, while at the same time giving due priority to European security and support for Ukraine.

The central theme in Helwig's analysis is that the pursuit of strategic autonomy is about far more than just adapting to changes in the transatlantic relationship. It is about asserting European values in a way that strengthens the EU's ability to pursue European interests.

At the same time, this pursuit of strategic autonomy should remain open and outward-looking. In an increasingly fragmented geopolitical environment, Europe's resilience will depend not on isolation, but on diversification, strategic partnerships, and flexible forms of cooperation with countries that share Europe's broader political and security objectives.

## **Digital sovereignty: fostering strategic interdependencies**

Nowhere is this clearer than in the digital space, where debates about the need for some kind of ‘digital sovereignty’ have a long provenance. Here too, as [Seamus Allen](#) argues, the Irish Presidency should prioritise openness. However, rather than focusing on vulnerabilities, Allen argues that the Irish Presidency should identify ‘strategic interdependencies’, meaning those that offer to enhance European autonomy rather than diminish it. The Irish Presidency should also focus on ensuring the effective exchange of lessons learned at the national level about how best to mitigate the risks posed by the fast pace of innovation in digital technology and its impact on European democracy and society.

The theme that runs through Allen’s recommendations reflects the importance of balance, coherence, and simplification. Clearly there is a need for European involvement in the digital space, particularly where core European values are at stake. But there is also a need to ensure that such involvement does not create unnecessary distortions or contradictions. More important, the European approach to digital sovereignty should not be defensive; the Irish Presidency can find opportunities in this space for promoting European interests as much as across the domain of strategic autonomy more generally.

## **A constructive approach to negotiation of the EU budget**

Any such prioritisation will necessarily require resources, however. And one of the major – if not ‘the’ major – responsibilities of the Irish Presidency will be to push the budgetary negotiations underway in the EU for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)

over the line. [Brigid Laffan](#) focuses her contribution on this challenge. In doing so, Laffan notes that this is not Ireland’s first experience managing a crucial part of the MFF negotiation process.

The lesson Laffan draws is that the Irish Presidency should be cautiously ambitious. The Presidency should try to protect the European Commission’s initial proposal for the overall framework, because an increased budget is essential for Europe to address new and emerging priorities. Laffan also stresses that the Irish Presidency should resist efforts within the European Council to fall back on a logic of zero-sum bargaining and ‘juste retour’. Instead, it should show how the EU’s priorities can be addressed within the Commission’s proposed envelope as well as how this can take place alongside a simplification of the financial framework.

Of course, even a cautiously ambitious approach is no guarantee of success. If necessary, it would be enough for the Irish government to set the stage for the Lithuanian Presidency to complete the negotiations in Spring 2027. In doing so, it will be important for the Irish Presidency to foster the constructive engagement of the European Parliament (EP). The precise calendar is less important than the successful delivery of a new MFF – because without financial resources, Europe’s efforts at strategic autonomy or digital sovereignty will be significantly diminished.

## **Building momentum for EU enlargement**

Moreover, the EU has other major priorities. Enlargement is at the top of the list. The challenge is two-fold. European policy-makers need to persuade a highly diverse and potentially sceptical public within existing Member States that enlargement to new Member States will

be in their self-interest. They also need to reassure an equally diverse and sceptical public in candidate countries that the process for accession is credible.

At the same time, enlargement should increasingly be understood not only as a normative or redistributive project, but also as part of a broader effort to strengthen Europe's geopolitical resilience, economic weight and long-term security. In this sense, candidate countries should not primarily be framed as future recipients of European solidarity, but also as potential contributors to a stronger and more resilient Europe.

These two challenges are linked. To be convincing within the EU, European leaders will have to be credible as they talk through the many economic and security issues at stake. To be credible they will also have to be convincing insofar as they can reassure the people in candidate countries that support from the EU for their eventual accession exists.

[Giselle Bosse and her co-authors](#) present the solution to this two-fold challenge as a matter of honesty, transparency, and framing. European leaders need to get ahead of the conversation, they need to address the most troubling issues up front, and they need to explain how these issues can be tackled in a way that leaves people better and not worse off than if enlargement never took place. These are difficult political arguments for European leaders to make, but the alternative of enlargement without that kind of explanation is unconvincing, incredible, and therefore also unsuccessful.

### **Rebuilding EU-UK ties**

The EU also needs to consider its partnerships with other key countries, the most important of which is the UK. The

2016 Brexit referendum has left a deep legacy of mistrust and dislocation. It also left the UK itself deeply divided. And it created a highly charged conversation about the fate of Northern Ireland. All of this must be addressed for the relationship between the EU and the UK to flourish.

Unfortunately, [Barry Colfer](#) explains, the timing is not propitious. The Labour government in the UK is weak and its Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, is embattled. Meanwhile, the Reform Party is led by the politician most closely identified with Brexit, Nigel Farage. Of course, these situations may change in the UK's rapidly evolving political environment, but they remain distracting for UK politicians. Nevertheless, the Irish Presidency does have an opening to make progress on significant issues of common interest.

More broadly, the UK question illustrates a wider challenge facing Europe: how to organise meaningful and flexible cooperation with strategically important European partners outside the formal structures of EU membership. In an increasingly uncertain geopolitical environment, such partnerships may become an essential complement to deeper EU integration itself.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that the Irish Presidency should frame Europe's resilience as a positive and outward-looking project. Strategic autonomy should not mean closing Europe off but building the capacity to cooperate from a position of strength. Europe's future resilience will depend not only on deeper integration within the EU itself, but also on the Union's ability to organise cooperation across a broader European political space characterised by shared democratic values, interdependence and common strategic interests.

Such openness will require clear political commitment both at home and abroad. It will also require more coherent digital and economic policies, credible enlargement narratives, a renewed partnership with the UK, and an MFF that matches the EU's strategic ambitions with adequate resources. The Irish Presidency is well placed to broker this balance between openness, security, competitiveness and democratic legitimacy.

# A positive agenda on strategic autonomy



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Developments in the first half of 2026 delivered a one-two punch to the foundations of the transatlantic relationship. First the escalating rhetoric over Greenland, combined with a revised United States (U.S.) national defence strategy that explicitly prioritises burden shifting, has forced European governments to confront the growing conditionality of American security commitments – bringing NATO closer to a breaking point.

Second, the decision by the U.S. – together with Israel – to launch a war against Iran without prior consultation of European allies has further eroded transatlantic trust. European governments were not only sidelined in a major geopolitical escalation with direct consequences for their security and economic interests but were subsequently expected to align politically with decisions over which they had little influence.

Taken together, this one-two punch does not simply reflect episodic tensions. It points to a long-term shift in transatlantic relations in which cooperation is less anchored in shared political commitments and norms and instead turned increasingly transactional and hostile. Even for staunch Atlanticists in Europe, it is becoming difficult to assume that future U.S. engagement will return to earlier patterns, where disagreements were mitigated through reflexive consultations and an underlying belief in the value of the transatlantic partnership.

The Irish EU Council Presidency will be confronted with a challenging international environment in the second half of 2026 that is further shaped by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and an intensifying competition with China. To help the EU navigate this complex environment, the Irish EU Council Presidency should frame strategic autonomy as a positive project for Europe along two lines:

- 1.Strategic autonomy is a holistic endeavour that requires efforts across defence, economic and political domains.
- 2.Strategic autonomy is not about cutting ties, but about assessing risks and diversifying where necessary.

## **Strategic autonomy beyond defence**

Efforts by the EU and its Member States to strengthen defence industrial and military capacity remain a central component of the strategic autonomy agenda. The ability to deter aggression – including in a scenario where U.S. engagement in European security weakens – is essential. It will also increasingly depend on flexible cooperation formats involving both EU Member States and closely aligned European partners. Security is the domain where the consequences of an unstable international environment and an uncertain transatlantic partnership are felt most acutely.

Closing the capability gap with the U.S. in

conventional defence is therefore a precondition for greater autonomy in other policy fields. The rushed EU-US trade arrangement in 2025, aimed at avoiding a tariff escalation under pressure linked to U.S. support for Ukraine, illustrates how security dependencies can spill over into economic decision-making.

However, strategic autonomy is no longer confined to defence. Europe's ability to act independently also depends on its economic, technological, and political capacity. In practice, this means that strategic autonomy ultimately rests on EU competitiveness. Without a robust industrial base, technological capability, and access to capital, Europe's room for manoeuvre will remain limited regardless of defence efforts.

The Draghi Report on European competitiveness makes clear that Europe's economic underperformance is increasingly becoming a strategic vulnerability, particularly as innovation and commercialisation in key digital sectors are concentrated in the U.S. and China. While such dependencies were manageable in the more optimistic period of global market integration, they now expose Europe to external risks.

Strengthening investment, innovation capacity, and the single market is therefore not only an economic necessity, but a strategic imperative. This also points to the importance of advancing the Savings and Investments Union, as fragmented financial markets continue to constrain investment. As in its 2013 Presidency, when the Irish government placed jobs and growth at the centre of the EU agenda, Ireland is well positioned to emphasise competitiveness and investment as key pillars of strategic autonomy.

Ultimately, the objective of 'strategic autonomy' is to empower the EU to act decisively and with purpose. Defence capabilities and economic competitiveness serve the broader goal of enabling the EU and its Member States to define and implement policy choices in line with their own values and preferences – whether in regulating digital platforms, advancing the green transition, or upholding democratic standards. These choices increasingly come with external pressure. U.S. resistance to Big Tech regulation illustrates the potential for conflict. More broadly, recent actions by the U.S. administration, including pressure on European governments, targeted measures against civil society organisations, and open political alignment with parts of the European far right, point to a willingness to shape European political debates in ways that challenge democratic processes and the cohesion within the EU.

Political autonomy is equally relevant for the EU's external action. The war against Iran illustrates how a European approach to conflict resolution — grounded in international law, diplomacy, and the restrained use of force — can be undermined by unilateral action. The 2015 nuclear agreement demonstrated the EU's capacity to broker diplomatic solutions, while withdrawal of the U.S. from the agreement and the latest military escalation have shown how fragile such achievements remain. The EU's commitment to international law can only be credibly upheld from a position of strength.

### **An open approach to strategic autonomy**

As a global trading power, the pursuit of strategic autonomy cannot mean cutting ties or striving for self-sufficiency. The Irish EU Council Presidency should emphasise

an approach that combines economic security and competitiveness with openness to trade and international cooperation, in line with the European Commission's concept of open strategic autonomy.

Only on the surface are autonomy and openness in tension. Strategic autonomy is about managing dependencies and associated vulnerabilities in a way that safeguards the well-being of European citizens and enables self-determined policy choices. Two elements are particularly important: risk assessment and diversification.

First, not all interdependence constitutes a vulnerability. Since the launch of the Economic Security Strategy in 2023, the Commission has developed a more systematic approach to identifying and assessing risks across sectors. This includes differentiating between supply chain disruptions, infrastructure vulnerabilities, technological dependencies, and risks of economic coercion. Sectors are considered particularly vulnerable when dependencies are highly concentrated, difficult to substitute, and strategically relevant for critical infrastructures or key industries.

The Irish Presidency can complement this work by fostering political prioritisation within the Council. The challenge is no longer to identify risks, but to decide which ones matter most. While there is broad agreement among Member States on addressing vulnerabilities related to critical raw materials and infrastructure protection, divisions persist regarding how assertively to tackle dependencies in areas such as digital technologies or Chinese supply chains. Ireland, with its open-market orientation, is well placed to act as a broker in these debates.

Second, diversification of trade and economic partnerships is a central instrument for managing external dependencies. Agreements with Mercosur and India mark an important shift in this direction, as they expand the EU's economic links. At the same time, diversification extends beyond trade agreements. Through initiatives such as Global Gateway, the EU is strengthening infrastructure and investment partnerships, particularly in Africa and the Indo-Pacific. The Irish Presidency should position diversification as a key instrument to reduce dependencies while maintaining open trade.

The negotiations on the next MFF will be a central arena for translating strategic autonomy into practice. The Irish EU Presidency faces a dilemma: strategic priorities require greater investment, but agreement among Member States remains limited. It should ensure that MFF negotiations reflect a clear prioritisation of vulnerabilities. Funding decisions should be aligned with the EU's economic security assessments — directing resources towards critical technologies, defence-industrial capacity, energy systems, and raw materials, where investment can most effectively strengthen Europe's capacity to act.

### **Recommendations for the Irish EU Council Presidency**

Strategic autonomy needs to be at the core of the EU efforts in the second half of 2026, as it is essential not just for its security, but also for its ability to sustain economic prosperity and implement political choices in line with its own values and interests. The Irish EU Council Presidency can play an important role in shaping how the EU prioritises vulnerabilities, links economic security to competitiveness, and maintains openness in an increasingly fragmented

international environment. Five priorities stand out:

1. **Prioritise vulnerabilities:** The Irish Presidency should push for a prioritisation of economic security risks within the Council. The challenge is to decide which dependencies are most critical for Europe's ability to act. Particular attention should be given to critical technologies (such as artificial intelligence [AI]), digital infrastructures, energy systems, and raw materials.
2. **Link competitiveness to strategic autonomy:** Building on the Draghi report and Ireland's own experience from the 2013 Presidency, Ireland should frame competitiveness, innovation, and investment as central pillars of strategic autonomy. This includes supporting progress on the Savings and Investments Union and ensuring that MFF negotiations direct resources towards strategically relevant sectors.
3. **Promote diversification without protectionism:** The Irish Presidency should position diversification as a core instrument of economic security and preserve the EU's commitment to open and rules-based trade. The agreements with India and Mercosur, alongside initiatives such as Global Gateway, should be framed as part of a broader strategy to reduce excessive dependencies and strengthen Europe's resilience.
4. **Defend democratic resilience as part of strategic autonomy:** Strategic autonomy is also about protecting Europe's capacity to uphold democratic standards and regulate its digital space according to its own rules and values. The Irish Presidency should therefore underline the

importance of implementing instruments such as the Digital Markets Act and the AI Act in the face of increasing external pressure.

5. **Prioritise defence enablers and Ukraine integration:** The Irish Presidency should help keep EU defence efforts focused on the practical enablers of strategic autonomy: air defence, ammunition production, space-based assets, drone capabilities, military mobility, and the scaling of defence industries. A particular priority should be the closer integration of the Ukraine defence sector into the European industrial base, in order to learn from Ukraine's battlefield innovation and address European capability gaps.

# Digital policy priorities for a competitive, resilient, and democratic Europe



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The success of the EU's digital policy programme may significantly influence the extent to which Europe's future will be prosperous, safe, democratic, and resilient. Digital policy leadership will thus be critical for the overall success of Ireland's EU Presidency and the Irish Presidency's themes of values, competitiveness and security. Digital technology is also a key component of the debate about Europe's autonomy and effective digital policy is indispensable for Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy. The EU's current digital policy programme has many positive features – but in some cases it lacks nuance, balance, and risks focusing more on ambitious actions than on meaningful results. The Irish Presidency has an opportunity to steer the direction of EU policy to focus more on effectiveness and results and to refine policy to address nuance and complexity. From this perspective reflections are offered here on some of the key digital policy issues the Irish Presidency is likely to grapple with.

## Digital sovereignty

Ireland's Presidency provides it with an opportunity to steer the critical debate on digital sovereignty. This debate has dramatically transformed in recent years. Several Member States that champion openness and were once wary of the concept now support digital sovereignty as an existential issue for Europe's values, democracy and security. These Member

States seem willing to make a deal with protectionist leaning Member States if this is what it takes to establish a robust digital sovereignty policy.

As this author has argued [elsewhere](#), a protectionist version of digital sovereignty would be counterproductive. The Irish Presidency should offer an alternative – and steer the EU toward a policy of open sovereignty through the development of a coherent digital sovereignty strategy for Europe.

However, the case for open sovereignty will only be persuasive if Ireland proposes robust actions to address Europe's dependencies, vulnerabilities and the digital threats to Europe's values and society. Instead of European champions, self-sufficiency, and 'Buy European' policies, the Irish Presidency could advance open sovereignty frameworks that seek to address dependency risks, promote diversification, and entail contingency planning and resilience by design. Ireland could also promote a European focus on strategic openness through the pursuit of strategic interdependencies – what might be called 'interdependification' – to reduce the risk of one-way dependencies that make Europe vulnerable. Above all, a well-designed open sovereignty framework, by harnessing the potential of global technology to build a digitally sovereign Europe may be the most effective way to address Europe's real digital sovereignty risks.

## **A strategy for AI**

AI will be of critical importance for Europe's future prosperity. However, the EU's overall strategy for AI needs to be refocused to one that is more discriminative, targeted, results-focused and productivity-centred. The EU's AI Continent Action Plan and Apply AI strategy risk wasting resources on the indiscriminate promotion of AI for the sake of AI. The European Commission is promoting an 'AI first' policy, in which 'AI is considered as a potential solution whenever organisations make strategic or policy decisions.' A growing body of evidence shows that enormous proportions of AI uptake across the private sector is failing to deliver productivity gains, is inefficient, and often used for purposes for which it is poorly suited. Public investment in AI [risks repeating this pattern](#) and previous patterns of European public investment in technology that have failed to deliver successful results in the past – from search engines to cloud. The Irish Presidency should draw on the growing body of research evidence to steer the EU's AI policy to a policy of 'effective AI'. The Presidency could promote frameworks that ensure EU funding to promote AI should either (a) demonstrably enhance productivity and quality or (b) meaningfully contribute to the development of Europe's technological capabilities. The investment of public money to promote AI without applying such tests risks the possibility that the EU will invest enormously in AI and still fall behind in AI technology.

## **Age bans for social media?**

The protection of young people from social media harms is a priority of Ireland's EU Presidency, including the consideration of age restrictions on the

use of social media. The harms that social media present are very real – for instance, the negative effects of social media addiction are well-documented.

However, the current state of the debate in Europe lacks nuance. Social media has positive implications as well as negative ones – it can also be empowering, inclusive and sometimes conducive to safety, especially for young people who are at risk of social isolation, who are in vulnerable situations or who are from minority communities.

Furthermore, age bans may have other negative consequences. If bans are circumvented, it may result in the use of social media that no longer attempts to provide a child-friendly experience. Social media addiction is certainly a problem that deserves specific attention – but notably older generations are now also increasingly at risk of addiction. Potentially, mandating better online environments for children and mandating anti-addiction tools for social media users may be a better approach.

The problem is a complex one. Evidence about the effectiveness of age bans in countries such as Australia is ambiguous at best. It thus makes little sense for the Irish Presidency to seek a single harmonised policy for Europe. Notably, EU Member States already diverge when it comes to setting the age restrictions for alcohol, driving and voting. Instead, the Irish Presidency should encourage EU Member States to cooperate, exchange evidence and to try different policies – but they should take action.

## **The European Democracy Shield**

Ireland should prioritise the advancement of the Democracy Shield framework, which was presented in November 2025 to help protect democracy in Europe, and

which includes aspects relevant to digital policy. The Democracy Shield should also be adapted to new evidence and changing contexts. It largely envisages social media as a venue in which threats to democracy spread, a view that should be nuanced in two ways.

First, in many European countries where democracy has been under threat, social media has been the last lifeline for political dissent amidst full-scale state capture of both public and private sector media. It is often the last space where state-backed disinformation can be effectively challenged. Recently, social media was vital in facilitating an opposition party victory in Hungary's election, in a country where most other forms of media were effectively captured by the state. The Irish Presidency could seek to ensure that the Democracy Shield is implemented without undermining the role that digital media can play in helping to safeguard democracy.

However, the threat of social media should not be ignored. The second nuance is that social media can be a proactive agent in its own right, and not just a venue. Certain social media companies are becoming increasingly active political agents. Furthermore, the US has recently officially set out a strategy of interfering in European politics to promote the emergence of friendly governments and set out plans for harnessing US government-friendly social media for the purpose of 'countering anti-American propaganda' and elevating local voices who support American interests. The Irish Presidency should ensure the Democracy Shield framework is consolidated to address such threats and take into account such developments to bolster Europe's democratic resilience.

## **Simplification**

Ireland has committed to digital simplification as a priority of the Irish presidency. There are welcome opportunities presented by the EU's digital simplification omnibuses – such as areas where the regulatory framework can be streamlined to produce cost savings without weakening regulatory protections. This may include addressing areas where regulations problematically overlap or where reporting requirements are unnecessarily duplicated.

It is vital to ensure that simplification is conducted prudently – and as Ireland has previously urged, it should involve impact assessments and risk assessments. Sometimes there may be good reasons that regulations have been crafted in a particular way, even if the reasons later seem unclear or obscure. In other cases, supposed simplifications may have unanticipated consequences.

As an example, the proposed change to the definition of personal data in the General Data Protection Regulation, while seemingly a technical exercise, presents significant risks. European privacy regulators have already warned that the proposal risks weakening privacy protection more than anticipated. The proposal also risks increasing Europe's cyber vulnerabilities and presenting cybersecurity risks.

The Irish Presidency should focus on the objective win-win scenarios where the regulatory framework can be enhanced to reduce unnecessary burdens while maintaining regulatory protections. It should also seek to ensure that simplification is conducted prudently with careful impact assessments and risk assessments. There may be many areas of legitimate policy debate that go beyond technocratic simplification – but including

these within the simplification packages risks derailing the simplification agenda which has already become more politically contentious than necessary.

### **New legislative files**

The Irish Presidency also has the opportunity to advance files designed to promote European innovation. These include the Cloud and AI Development Act; the Quantum Act; the Digital Networks Acts; and the second European Chips Act. [Past EU experiences](#) with promoting tech innovation in Europe have sometimes underperformed due to a focus on arbitrary quantitative targets, size, scale and ‘flashier’ prestigious technology. For example, a European Court of Auditors report described Europe’s semiconductor policy as ‘deeply disconnected from reality.’ It is unclear why Europe needs to produce 20% of the world’s semiconductors as it intends. The design of the Cloud and AI Development Act should draw lessons from past European projects that did not achieve intended goals, such as Gaia-X.

Building on such lessons, the Irish Presidency should propose a policy of effective innovation fostering. This policy would seek to ensure public innovation packages are targeted, focused and goal orientated. They should be designed to have demonstratable benefits for Europe’s productivity and technological capabilities. These files are also an opportunity for Ireland to advance the open sovereignty framework. The Irish Presidency could guide these files to bolster resilience for crisis scenarios, without wasting resources on a futile pursuit of self-sufficiency. They should promote European control of systemically sensitive technology – without necessarily meaning that such systems must be built by Europeans, provided that robust sovereignty criteria

are met. They may also present opportunities for Europe to interdependify itself by building on its technological strengths.

The Irish Presidency should also prioritise the forthcoming Digital Fairness Act (DFA) to both protect consumers and promote competition. In the digital economy, consumer detriment from practices such as lock-in effects and manipulative design remain significant problems. Although intended as a consumer protection policy, the DFA may offer valuable opportunities to promote competition and innovation by facilitating greater consumer switching and choice. However, the DFA also risks losing coherence if it becomes a catch-all package for gaps in the digital policy framework – there are proposals the DFA should include a wider-range of issues ranging from addiction to data processing. These are important issues but may be more appropriately addressed in purpose-specific legislation.

### **Recommendations for the Irish EU Council Presidency**

The Irish Presidency of the EU is a key opportunity to steer the direction of European digital policy. The EU’s digital policy programme has many positive features – but in many cases it needs to be refocused upon meaningful results; refined for nuance and complexity; and rebalanced between competing objectives. In particular, this article recommends that the Irish Presidency could:

- Steer the EU towards a coherent digital sovereignty strategy that safeguards openness while setting out robust actions to address Europe’s digital dependences and digital threats to Europe’s democracy, society and values. The strategy should reduce dependencies, promote diversification,

embed resilience and foster strategic interdependencies.

- Promote the policies of effective innovation fostering and effective AI. These policies should ensure that public innovation packages and public investments in key technologies, such as AI, are targeted, focused and goal-orientated and designed to have demonstratable benefits for Europe's productivity and technological capabilities.
- Promote a prudent approach to simplification underpinned by impact assessments and risk assessments.
- Advance the DFA to protect consumers while also harnessing the potential of consumer protection measures that can boost competition and innovation.
- Promote EU cooperation and actions on the protection of young people on social media without mandating a single harmonised policy.
- Prioritise the implementation of the Democracy Shield while taking into account the vital role social media can play in safeguarding democracy as well as the threat that comes directly from politicised social media ownership.

The issues considered above should be of central importance for Ireland's Presidency, as the success of the EU's digital policy agenda in these areas will significantly influence the future prosperity, resilience and social well-being of both Ireland and Europe.

# The Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034



## BRIGID LAFFAN

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Ireland takes over the Presidency of the Council on July 1, 2026, its eighth Presidency since accession in 1973. During the seventh Presidency in the first half of 2013, the Irish government secured the agreement of the 2014-2020 MFF by preparing a special meeting of the European Council in February 2013. The Presidency then had to deliver the consent of the EP, the most difficult inter-institutional negotiation of Ireland's term. Consent was finally achieved on the morning of the June 27 European Council. Failure to secure the MFF would have been a major Presidency failure.

The MFF negotiations are jumbo horizontal negotiations involving multiple Council formations that must deliver broad agreement on the distribution of EU finance for a seven-year period. Increasingly, however, the MFF is not only a distributive exercise, but also a strategic instrument for strengthening Europe's resilience, competitiveness and security. The 2028-2034 MFF is being negotiated in intensely challenging times given the growing demands for EU spending, the repayment of Recovery and Resilience Facility monies, and the trade-offs across multiple areas both internal and external. Because the Member States are acutely aware of how much they contribute to the EU budget and how much they receive, budgetary negotiations are subject to intense scrutiny in national capitals. MFF negotiations consist of three major decisions; the MFF Regulation, the Own Resources Decision and a plethora of sectoral regulations.

## Current state of play

The MFF negotiations began with a Commission proposal, 'An ambitious budget for a stronger Europe 2028-2034', issued on July 16, 2025. The Commission is seeking a budget of approximately EUR 1.96 trillion or 1.26% of EU gross national income (GNI) to meet the immense challenges Europe faces. The Commission proposed far-reaching changes to the structure of the budget, the composition of spending, the degree of flexibility and the mode of delivery.

The Danish Presidency (second half of 2025) launched exploratory talks to gauge the initial response of the Member States. That Presidency also established the institutional structure of the negotiations. An ad hoc MFF working party with three sub-groups was established and additionally there is the Working Party on Own Resources that remains responsible for revenue. By the end of the Danish Presidency, the dossier was ready for a first review by the European Council. The European Council held on 18 December 2025 devoted two short paragraphs to the MFF. First, it took note of the Negotiating Box (NegoBox) prepared by the Danish Presidency. Second, it signalled that the end of 2026 would represent "timely agreement" of the negotiations. The European Council tasks the Irish Presidency with agreement by the December 2026 European Council, making the budgetary negotiations the most salient of the Presidency.

The NegoBox establishes a structured negotiating format and has been central to multiple iterations of the MFF. The NegoBox is a non-binding Presidency tool that establishes guardrails around the negotiations and aims to populate the box with content as agreement is reached in different sectors if the Member States inch towards consensus. Essentially the box is populated with draft European Council Conclusions with lots of text in square brackets that must be progressively removed if agreement is to be reached. The core principle of the MFF negotiations is that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

On 1 January 2026, the Cypriot Presidency took over the NegoBox and identified the MFF as its “top priority” with the aim of “significantly advancing negotiations on all sectoral legislative files for the new MFF 2028-2034” in its Presidency priorities. In addition, the Cypriot Presidency seeks to establish indicative figures for different budgetary headings by the end of June before it hands over to the Irish Presidency. There was no discussion of the MFF at the March European Council because of the pressure of the Iran war. The MFF was taken up at the informal leaders meeting in Cyprus on 23-24 April. Because there are no formal conclusions issued after informal European Councils, the issue will be revisited at the June European Council. That will be an important moment to assess how the talks are progressing. The negotiating task facing the Irish Presidency will only become clear once the Cypriot Presidency ends.

### **Recommendations for the Irish Presidency**

There is much that could be said on the MFF and related negotiations given their centrality and the political and policy salience of the proposals on the table.

These recommendations focus on four key issues which are the source of the key tensions and trade-offs in the talks.

### **Overall size of the budget and own resources**

The Commission was relatively modest in its pitch for resources although the headline figures suggest a significant increase. The increase is lower than it appears as a proportion of it is intended for repayments of NextGenerationEU funds that are scheduled to begin in 2028. This repayment reduces the overall GNI figure from 1.26% to 1.15% because 0.11% is earmarked for repayments. Despite this the governments of the net contributor countries (or ‘frugals’) immediately reacted with horror to what was framed as the Commission’s ‘EUR 2 trillion budget’. The tension between net contributors and the governments of net beneficiaries is a major cleavage in all budgetary negotiations since the second Delors MFF in 1992. The net contributors are determined to keep the overall budget as low as possible whereas the beneficiaries have every incentive to support an increased budget. The EP always supports increased spending as it uses this for leverage over policy. The Irish Presidency should aim for the headline figure requested in the Commission proposal as the EU needs to expand its public finance leverage and without an increased budget it will not be able to address new and emerging policy priorities.

The outcome on the overall size of the EU budget is related to the decision on own resources, an issue that the EU has failed to make major progress over 20 years. In the last MFF, an additional own resource was agreed, namely, contributions based on non-recycled plastic packaging waste. In its July 2025 proposals, the Commission proposed a menu of additional own resources for the next MFF. The menu

includes own resources based on the emissions trading system, one on the carbon border adjustment mechanism, a temporary own resource on company profits for companies with over EUR 100 million net turnover, e-waste, and Tobacco Excise duties.

The Commission with the backing of the EP has been pushing for additional resources for the last decade with limited success. The Irish Presidency must deliver additional own resources to dilute GNI contributions which trigger 'juste retour' national responses among the net contributors and lead to a framing of budgetary politics as 'our money'. Moreover, as NextGenerationEU repayments bite, additional resources are vital to ensure that the resources are there for current priorities.

### **Overall size of the budget and own resources**

One of the most challenging issues during MFF negotiations is the degree of prioritisation between what might be defined as traditional spending areas, Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion and areas that have emerged over the last 20 years, namely, research and innovation, competitiveness, security and the international role of the EU. The traditional spending areas are driven by a distributive logic with a focus on farmers and regions. These two budgetary areas have always represented the largest part of the budget. The newer areas are focused on what might be described as European public goods, but they face a continuous fight for resources. The Commission proposes the following division; 37% for CAP and Cohesion, 30% for competitiveness, infrastructure, culture, and security and 11% for external action.

There has already been fierce resistance

from the farming lobby forcing President Von der Leyen to make changes to the proposal in November 2025 as she faced a revolt in EP. This is a difficult area for Ireland as CAP receipts now form a significant proportion of budgetary inflows and the political power of the farming lobby was evident in Ireland's position on Mercosur and the fuel protests in April 2026.

Given the EU's need to focus on its future prosperity, the Irish government should maintain the balance in the Commission proposal and if changes need to be made, keep such changes within the overall envelope already indicated. This will be extremely difficult as there is a tendency for MFF negotiations to drift back to support for agriculture and Cohesion as the talks enter the end game. The power of domestic lobbies both sectoral and territorial tends to out power the more diffuse interests represented by the other areas no matter how salient.

### **Structure of the budget and specific policy areas**

The Commission has proposed the most far-ranging changes to the structure and flexibility of the EU budget since Delors in the mid-1980s. The proposal identifies four pillars or spending headings, down from seven in the existing MFF. Within the spending headings there is a pronounced effort to concentrate funding in fewer financial instruments and direct the funding as one envelope to the Member States in National and Regional Partnership Plans under Heading One. This represents a major change in shared management; so far it has met with resistance from regions, fearful that national governments will call the shots, social actors wanting ringfenced funding and agricultural interests. The impact of the Recovery and Resilience Facility is evident in the proposal to establish

performance and output criteria for funding rather than reimbursement of eligible expenditure. The aim is to enhance the leverage of the budget in national reform efforts and to promote a holistic approach to EU monies rather than relying on a system akin to a watering can that sprinkles EU funding on multiple objectives with limited effectiveness.

The second major shift is to combine an array of different financial instruments into two major funds, the European Competitiveness Fund and the Global Europe Instrument. By consolidating the budget into major funds, the Commission will be in a position to prioritise and act at scale. For example, the European Competitiveness Fund will allocate five times more for defence, security and space than the current MFF.

Undoubtedly, the devil will be in the detail concerning those funds characterised by direct Commission management. That said, simplification and consolidation of the vast array of budgetary instruments is a necessary step in enhancing the effectiveness and transparency of EU public finances. The Irish Presidency should broadly support these efforts and ensure that there is not a drift back to previous practice as the negotiations evolve.

### **Management of the negotiations: Is a deal on?**

The European Council timetable of December 2026, the end of the Irish Presidency, is ambitious but would crown the Irish term if it were achieved. There is intense pressure on Ireland from key capitals to achieve an outcome. The October European Council will be an important staging post in the negotiations. By then there would have to be substantial agreement and the

contours of a deal emerging. Every MFF negotiation is characterised by one failed European Council, then followed by another that delivers agreement. Unless there is substantial agreement by October or provision for another European Council in November, December 2026 is unlikely to complete the negotiations. That said, the Irish government must aim for December 2026. If that is not possible, the Irish Presidency has got to prioritise progress in the MFF negotiations so that the European Council could agree in Spring 2027 under the Lithuanian Presidency well before the French Presidential elections in May 2027. Without substantial progress under the Irish Presidency, the MFF negotiations would be in danger of collapse.

In addition to managing the Council negotiations, the Irish government should prioritise maintaining good relations with the EP given the need for their consent. This involves a focus on EP leadership and on the powerful Budget Committee. The EP is already flexing its muscles in the negotiations and will want to influence both the scale and composition of the MFF package as well as own resources. Majorities within the EP are less stable than in previous parliaments; the Presidency must be attentive to where majorities will come from.

Just as the 2013 negotiations, the Irish Presidency has major responsibility for securing the 2028-2034 MFF. As it does so, the Irish Presidency should prioritise four objectives: preserving the overall ambition of the Commission proposal; securing progress on own resources; resisting a return to purely distributive 'juste retour' bargaining; and ensuring that the MFF increasingly supports Europe's broader strategic priorities, including competitiveness, resilience and security.

# Mind the gap: When EU enlargement narratives fail to match public concerns



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The EU stands at a critical geopolitical crossroads. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has transformed enlargement from a long-term integration project into a strategic necessity linked to security, stability, and the future of the European order.

At the same time, public support for enlargement, while still broadly positive, has become increasingly fragile and uneven across Member States. Diverging national trends, limited public awareness, and growing sensitivity to economic and social concerns point to a more volatile political environment in which enlargement is supported in principle but contested in practice.

This moment coincides with the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU. Enlargement should increasingly be understood and communicated not only as a normative or elite-driven project, but as a collective effort to build a stronger and more resilient Europe for, by and with citizens. And above all, a process that is fair and predictable. As a longstanding advocate of rule-based integration and a pioneer in democratic innovation, as for example through its Citizens' Assembly model, Ireland is uniquely positioned to redefine how enlargement is framed.

The key challenge is not only to sustain momentum, but to bridge the gap between EU-level justifications – centred on geopolitics and values – and the material and credibility concerns that shape public attitudes. Addressing this mismatch will be essential to maintaining durable support for enlargement across the Union and candidate countries.

## **The problem: Fragile and uneven public support for enlargement**

Public support for EU enlargement has proven more resilient than expected in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Across the EU, overall backing for further enlargement increased in the immediate aftermath of the war, driven by heightened perceptions of security threats, solidarity with Ukraine, and a renewed sense of geopolitical purpose. However, this support remains fragile, uneven, and increasingly contingent, raising important questions about its sustainability.

Eurobarometer data between 2022 and 2025 show that, while aggregate support for enlargement remains above pre-war levels, national trajectories diverge significantly. Some Member States have experienced notable increases in support, such as Portugal (+15 percentage points),

Slovakia (+12), and Sweden (+11), while others show stagnation or decline. In particular, several Central and Eastern European countries that were initially among the strongest supporters of Ukraine's accession have registered substantial drops in support, including Czechia (-12), Poland (-9), and Hungary (-8).

These shifts point to a broader pattern: support for enlargement is neither uniform nor stable but varies across national contexts and over time. By 2024, Member States could be broadly grouped into 'cautious supporters,' 'fence-sitters,' and a smaller number of outright sceptics, reflecting increasing differentiation in public opinion across the Union.

At the same time, a significant information deficit persists. Only around one-third of EU citizens report feeling well informed about enlargement, suggesting that public attitudes are often formed under conditions of limited knowledge and are therefore particularly susceptible to politicisation and framing effects.

In candidate countries, by contrast, support for EU membership remains consistently high, particularly in Ukraine and across most of the Western Balkans. However, this support coexists with growing scepticism regarding the credibility and timing of accession. In the Western Balkans, while positive views of the EU remain strong, optimism about accession timelines has declined sharply in several countries, for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina (-33 percentage points) and North Macedonia (-18).

These trends reveal a dual challenge. Within the EU, public support is increasingly differentiated and sensitive to changing political and economic

conditions. In candidate countries, high levels of support risk being undermined by declining trust in the credibility of the accession process. This combination creates a politically volatile environment in which enlargement remains broadly supported in principle but increasingly contested in practice.

### **What drives public attitudes towards enlargement?**

Public attitudes towards EU enlargement are shaped by a complex and shifting combination of factors, rather than a single, stable set of preferences. Five factors stand out.

First, security perceptions have become a central driver, particularly since 2022. Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered a surge in public support for enlargement, especially for Ukraine's accession, by framing enlargement as part of a broader effort to defend European security and stability. This 'geopolitical turn' reinforced perceptions of Ukraine as belonging to the European political community and increased solidarity across Member States. However, this effect has proven conditional and potentially temporary, as support declines when citizens associate enlargement with concrete risks, such as military escalation or long-term security commitments.

Second, economic concerns remain highly salient. Public support is sensitive to perceived costs associated with enlargement, including financial transfers, labour migration, and pressure on domestic welfare systems. As economic pressures increase – whether through inflation, energy costs, or broader fiscal constraints – support for enlargement tends to weaken, particularly in countries where these concerns are politically mobilised.

Third, identity and cultural factors continue to play an important role. Perceptions of whether candidate countries 'belong' to Europe – based on shared history, culture, or values – influence public acceptance of enlargement. These perceptions are not uniform across Member States and often intersect with national narratives and historical experiences, contributing to the uneven distribution of support observed across the EU.

Fourth, domestic political dynamics and information environments shape how enlargement is perceived. Public opinion is influenced by political elites, media framing, and exposure to disinformation, particularly in contexts where pro-Russian narratives or Eurosceptic positions are prominent. In such contexts, enlargement can become entangled with broader debates about sovereignty, migration, and the role of the EU, amplifying scepticism.

Finally, in candidate countries, support for EU membership is driven largely by expected socio-economic benefits and security guarantees but is increasingly moderated by credibility perceptions. Where citizens perceive the accession process as slow, inconsistent, or politically blocked, optimism declines despite continued overall support for membership.

These dynamics suggest that public attitudes towards enlargement are multi-causal, context-dependent, and highly responsive to political framing.

### **How the EU justifies enlargement**

EU institutions justify enlargement through overlapping narratives reflecting different understandings of its purpose and legitimacy. These logics are reweighted over time, particularly in response to geopolitical developments.

A first and increasingly prominent logic is geopolitical necessity. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, enlargement has been framed as a strategic instrument to ensure security, stability, and resilience, and less as a long-term policy choice than a response to an evolving security environment.

A second logic is normative and value-based, presenting enlargement as extending core EU values - democracy, rule of law, and human rights - and as both a reward for reforms and a commitment to democratic transformation.

Third, a procedural logic emphasises fairness, merit, and rule-based decision-making, with accession conditional on clearly defined criteria and transparent assessment.

In practice, these logics are combined, but their flexible use can lead to ambiguity and inconsistent messaging across audiences and contexts.

### **The mismatch: Why EU justifications do not resonate with public attitudes**

The preceding sections highlight a fundamental tension at the heart of EU enlargement policy: the way enlargement is justified by EU institutions does not fully align with the factors that shape public attitudes towards it. This mismatch can be understood along three interrelated dimensions:

First, there is a justification gap between normative and strategic narratives on the one hand, and material and social concerns on the other. EU institutions predominantly justify enlargement in terms of geopolitical necessity and shared values - emphasising security, stability, and the extension of democracy and the rule of law. By contrast, citizens tend to

evaluate enlargement through its perceived economic and social consequences, including costs, migration, and labour market effects. While geopolitical and normative arguments may generate initial support - particularly in moments of crisis - they often fail to address the concrete concerns that shape longer-term public attitudes.

Second, a temporal gap separates long-term EU narratives from short-term public evaluations. EU discourse frames enlargement as an investment in future stability, prosperity, and security, the benefits of which will materialise over time. Public opinion, however, is more sensitive to immediate and visible impacts, such as fiscal pressures, economic uncertainty, or perceived risks. This divergence makes support for enlargement inherently volatile: it can increase rapidly in response to external shocks, as observed in 2022, but decline just as quickly when short-term costs become more salient.

Third, there is an audience and communication gap. EU enlargement is communicated through a plurality of narratives that vary across institutional contexts and target audiences. Value-based arguments are often emphasised in communication with candidate countries, while more strategic or security-oriented frames are used within the EU. At the same time, procedural narratives stressing merit and fairness are deployed to reassure Member States. While this flexibility allows the EU to address different constituencies, it can also result in fragmented and inconsistent messaging, which makes it more difficult for citizens to form coherent views on enlargement.

The absence of a clear link between EU justifications and citizens' concerns contributes to an information deficit, in

which large segments of the population feel insufficiently informed about enlargement. This, in turn, increases the susceptibility of public opinion to politicisation, domestic contestation, and disinformation. At the same time, inconsistent narratives risk weakening the perceived credibility of the enlargement process, both within the EU and in candidate countries.

## **Recommendations for the Irish EU Council Presidency**

Addressing the misalignment between EU justifications and public attitudes requires more than improved communication; it calls for a recalibration of how enlargement is framed and explained. The Irish Presidency is well placed to lead this shift. Drawing on its longstanding support for rule-based enlargement and its experience in fostering inclusive public engagement, Ireland can use its convening power – particularly in the context of ongoing MFF discussions – to align Member States around a more societally grounded approach to enlargement.

1. Champion a 'material and social impacts' dialogue: The Irish Presidency should use Council meetings to pivot away from purely geopolitical narratives, while tasking Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos and DG ENEST with providing clear, evidence-based economic assessments. These metrics must openly address costs, labour mobility, and distributional trade-offs to pre-emptively defuse domestic anxieties and populist disinformation.
2. Align short-term gains with long-term objectives: Ireland and the Commission must explicitly link long-term strategic stability to immediate, tangible benefits for EU citizens. Joint

communication strategies should frame enlargement not just as a future security investment, but as an active driver of near-term economic opportunity and localised European resilience.

investment in Europe's long-term resilience, security and democratic stability. This will require more coherent communication, greater procedural credibility and a clearer connection between enlargement and citizens' concrete concerns.

3. Forge a coherent and consistent institutional narrative: The Presidency must work with Commissioner Kos to eliminate the fragmented, audience-specific rhetoric that currently erodes public trust. They should co-develop an integrated communication framework across EU institutions that synthesises values, security, and fairness into a single, cohesive policy project.

4. Enforce rigorous procedural predictability and merit-based clarity: Ireland must champion strict adherence to objective benchmarks and transparent timelines within the Council. By coordinating closely with Commissioner Kos to ensure visible, predictable consequences for both reform progress and stagnation, they can counter public perceptions of a politically driven process.

5. Invest in Presidency-led national engagement and public debate: The Irish Presidency and the Commissioner should sponsor joint forums connecting national parliaments, civil society, and local media. Because public attitudes are shaped within national political contexts, these initiatives are essential to ensure that enlargement is debated in ways that reflect specific domestic concerns while remaining grounded in shared European objectives.

Taken together, these recommendations suggest that the Irish Presidency should frame enlargement as a shared societal

# EU-UK relations: Much done, more to do



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Ireland and the UK share a storied past dating to long before the current complexities in EU-UK relations. Ireland gained independence from the UK in 1921, and both countries entered the European Economic Community, the forerunner to the EU, in 1973. The histories and peoples of both countries are intimately linked with bonds of kinship, economics, and culture that are enduring. Thus, relations with the UK remains one of Ireland's most important strategic partnerships and it is fitting to consider the current state of EU-UK relations within the context of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The UK's departure from the EU following the 2016 Brexit referendum ushered in years of uncertainty and instability in UK politics as well as enmity and distrust in EU-UK relations. The exact and varied motivations that seek to explain the UK's 51.9 - 48.1% vote in favour of leaving the EU will be debated forever, but it is clear that issues of sovereignty, cost, and migration, loomed large during the campaign, as has been well documented.

The UK's protracted withdrawal was always going to involve some degree of trauma for the EU. The UK was an important and strategically significant Member State, accounting for around 15% of the EU's population and gross domestic product at the time of its departure. But Brexit never developed into an existential shock on the level of the crises which battered the EU such as the eurozone crisis, the COVID-19

pandemic, or Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Throughout the sabre rattling, talks-about-talks, and negotiations leading to Brexit, the EU remained united and pragmatic, while the UK fell into disarray with much of its politics characterised by impulsivity and disorganisation.

The economic impact of Brexit for the UK has also been considerable, with experts suggesting it has reduced its gross domestic product by 6-8%. For both sides, the UK withdrawal has resulted in a reduction in person-to-person contact among officials, experts, and citizens. Taken together, all this contributed to negotiations between the EU and the UK in the lead up to Brexit being often fraught, contentious, and dramatic.

Throughout the UK's withdrawal, the status of Northern Ireland and of the border on the island of Ireland persisted as the most intractable issue to resolve. The Irish Government remains strongly opposed to any attempt to impose a border on the island, and Ireland received unwavering support from the EU and its Member States in this regard. However, it is commonly misunderstood that Ireland received such steadfast support during Brexit because of particular affection for the country from its peers. In truth, Ireland received unwavering support because it is an EU Member State, not because of anything peculiar to the country, and the imposition of a border would have been against the interests of the EU as a whole.

Much is being done to try to restore or

emulate the relations that have been lost by Brexit, through the establishment of an annual Irish-UK summit as well as with increased attention in some quarters to the institutions and exchanges facilitated under the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. There are those in Europe who feel that Ireland should use its Presidency to drive the EU-UK relations forward and many in Dublin who believe that they can.

### **Current relations**

Current relations between the EU and the UK are shaped by agreements and policies which emerged in the aftermath of the UK's official departure in January 2020. This includes most prominently the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the treaty which governs EU-UK trade relations post-Brexit which was signed in December 2020 and entered into force in May 2021. Specific arrangements for Northern Ireland are contained in the 2021 Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland which forms part of the withdrawal agreement, and the 2023 Windsor Framework which adjusts the operation of the Protocol. This legal framework, to intents and purposes, keeps Northern Ireland, a constituent part of the UK, within the EU's Single Market for goods, thus alleviating the need for a border on the island of Ireland, much to the chagrin of many Northern Irish unionists who see it as undermining Northern Ireland's status within the UK.

The election of the Labour Party's Keir Starmer as Prime Minister in July 2024 brought with it a period of relative calm in UK politics following years of turbulence, which had seen four Prime Ministers, and six Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland in a less than eight-year period. The election of the Labour Government also precipitated a welcome 'reset' in EU-UK relations and allowed the

two sides to reestablish some goodwill and to identify shared objectives.

However, the calm that Starmer initially provided is being disrupted as his government struggles in the polls and as UK politics experience a period of sustained fragmentation. At the local and regional elections in May 2026, Labour sustained major losses as the right-wing nationalist Reform Party of Nigel Farage topped the poll and as the Greens and smaller left parties also made gains, heaping further pressure on the embattled Prime Minister. At the time of writing, Starmer's leadership is being challenged from elements within his party, and it is increasingly unclear how long he will remain in office.

### **Current cooperation and areas for improvement**

As part of the wider 'reset' agenda, the EU and UK also agreed to convene annual summits. The 'Common Understanding' agreement reached at the first such summit in May 2025, sets out shared priorities for EU-UK relations, including the need to strengthen security relations, bolster economic ties, and expand cooperation across specific policy areas. The next EU-UK summit is expected to be in spring or summer 2026 to coincide with the scheduled review of the implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and will occur towards the end of the Cypriot Presidency or at the start of the Irish Presidency.

As has been the case since 2016, the priorities of the EU are likely to focus on predictable and pragmatic measures relating to trade and regulation. For the UK, where the approach to Brexit has always been driven more by emotion and political posturing, Prime Minister Starmer has stated that while he wants to adopt a "more ambitious" relationship with the EU,

he emphasised that this would be “hemmed in by ‘red lines’” including no membership of the EU’s customs union or single market. However, now that the white heat of Brexit has dissipated, geopolitical realities lay bare clear areas of strategic shared interest for EU-UK relations including when it comes to security, democracy, and economic resilience.

Areas of shared interest now include:

- Security and defence cooperation, designed to strengthen cooperation on support for Ukraine, cyber defences, the defence industry, and protection of critical infrastructure.
- Closer economic relations, including the notion of a ‘Common Sanitary and Phytosanitary’ area to minimise animal and food safety checks.
- Greater emphasis on youth mobility, where the EU is prioritising a ‘youth experience scheme’ to allow young people to work and study across the EU and UK, en route to the UK’s re-association with the Erasmus+ programme.
- Energy and Climate cooperation, where the UK might participate in the EU’s internal electricity market and where the UK’s Emission Trading Scheme and the EU Emission Trading System might be linked.
- Deeper cooperation on tackling irregular migration and combating people smuggling and improving border management.

### **More common ground?**

Amid these potential areas for greater cooperation, the EU will always insist on the strict implementation of the existing

agreements to promote the integrity of the single market. The EU is increasingly asserting itself as the global standard in reliable, predictable, rules-based trading, with the densest network of trade deals in the world, with new arrangements reached with the likes of Australia, India, and Mercosur. The UK as a trading nation has always been attracted by the opportunities for economic activity and trade afforded by closer ties with the EU. What’s more, the UK maintains one of the best militaries in the world and will continue to play an outsized role in detecting, deterring, and combatting risks in Europe, for example as the lead partner in the Joint Expeditionary Force along with the Baltic and Nordic States and the Netherlands.

At the onset of the Irish Presidency, EU-UK relations are probably at a turning point. It is possible that they will enter a renewed phase of disruption amid the ever-increasing turbulence in domestic UK politics. However, amid the wars in the Middle East, the growing risk of Russian aggression, the withdrawal of the US, and the decline of the multilateral rules-based order, it is also clear that both sides share interest in safeguarding and promoting democracy and values both at home and abroad. Thus, with a bit of leadership and vision, the wider geopolitical context could provide the impetus for closer EU-UK cooperation. More broadly, the UK relationship illustrates the growing importance of flexible forms of European cooperation that extend beyond the formal boundaries of EU membership.

The Irish Presidency should therefore prioritise pragmatic and forward-looking cooperation with the UK in areas such as security, energy, youth mobility and economic resilience, while also helping to develop more flexible forms of European cooperation that can strengthen the wider European political order.

## **Recommendations for the Irish Presidency**

To strengthen EU-UK relations in an increasingly unstable geopolitical environment, the Irish Presidency should prioritise four areas in particular:

- Deepen EU-UK security and defence cooperation, particularly in relation to support for Ukraine, critical infrastructure protection, cyber security and defence industrial cooperation.
- Promote pragmatic economic cooperation through progress on areas such as sanitary and phytosanitary alignment, energy cooperation and regulatory coordination where mutual interests are strong.
- Support greater people-to-people engagement, including progress on youth mobility and UK re-association with Erasmus+, in order to rebuild trust and long-term societal links between the EU and the UK.
- Frame EU-UK cooperation as part of a broader effort to strengthen European resilience, recognising that Europe's capacity to act increasingly depends on flexible cooperation with closely aligned European partners beyond the formal structures of EU membership.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the contributors, and do not represent the position of their Institutes nor of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).

TEPSA would like to thank all researchers who contributed to this publication.

Editing: Pernille Rieker (ARENA), Erik Jones (EUI), Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA)

Formatting: Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA)

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



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