

Europe Divided and Falling into the Abyss

(Translated)

By Hassan Hamdan

The European Union is currently experiencing its worst days since its inception. It is torn between nostalgia for its past global leadership, with the illusions of a future leadership role. Europe is weighed down by both foreign and domestic pressures, leading it into a deep abyss. This is evidenced by the admission of France, one of the leading advocates for European unity. On 20 January 2025, its Prime Minister, François Bayrou, declared that France and Europe are threatened with being “crushed,” following Donald Trump’s return to the White House, saying, “And if we don’t do anything, our fate is very simple - we will be dominated. We will be crushed. We will be marginalised.” European-American relations had already been strained during Trump's previous term due to two main issues:

1. NATO members being pressured to allocate 2% of their GDP to defense budgets.
2. The balance of benefits/interests, and the trade deficit in the balance of payments, along with tariff policies.

Now, Trump’s second term comes at a time when Europe faces significant challenges, including:

1. The Russian-Ukrainian war and its repercussions upon Europe.
2. NATO and European security, particularly the defense of Europe and the level of participation required to maintain security, amidst foreign threats, especially from Russia, and Trump's threats to withdraw from NATO.
3. Renewed discussions on trade relations with America, trade wars, tariffs, and the weakening of the EU following Brexit.
4. Trump’s proposal to purchase Greenland, which could alter Europe's maps, national security, and the Arctic region.
5. Economic weakness, deficits, and debt in some European countries, the relocation of European companies to America, rising fuel prices after the loss of Russian gas, and fears of U.S. sanctions and market restrictions.
6. The rise of the far-right in Europe, with some parties even coming to power, aligning with Trump's mindset on certain issues and internal crises.
7. As noted by Politico on 24 April 2024, “The former reality TV star’s return to power would not only be the biggest test in transatlantic relations in postwar history; it could pose an existential risk to European unity as the tensions over how to work with the world’s most powerful country pull the continent apart on issues ranging from trade policy to the fight against climate change to the defense of European territory.”

These points are important, and of great significance, in trying to understand the future of the European Union, and the most prominent and dangerous files. This is in addition to the existence of other difficult files, major problems and dangerous divisions between the countries of the European bloc, including over the relationship with China and Russia, bilateral defense agreements, American influence in some European countries, some parties and institutions, and the lack of unity of political and military opinion.

It is true that each of these files requires an independent and lengthy study due to their importance, danger, and effects, but we will have a general reflection over some of them, the most important of which currently is related to Trump’s presence in power and the internal challenge.

The idea of European unity was once a beautiful dream, but it was built on shaky foundations, with more factors contributing to its potential collapse than to its construction. Nationalism and the rejection of unity have undermined the project.

Europe has not progressed; in fact, it has fallen behind compared to other regions, with some countries surpassing it in various fields. As crises intensify, declarations about European unity and strength become mere cries in the wilderness, offering no real sustenance.

The two most critical threats to Europe today are summarized in two points:

First point: The mindset and policies of the current U.S. administration under Trump.

Second point: Domestic risks that threaten European unity.

Regarding the first point, it is the presence of Trump and his administration and how to deal with Europe as a single unit. “We always assumed America would be there for us, no matter what. Not with Donald Trump it isn’t” Guy Verhofstadt, the then European Parliament’s chief Brexit negotiator, said in an e-mail interview with the New Atlanticist published on 26 January 2017, during Trump’s first term. Verhofstadt added, “For the first time in history there is a US president who is rooting for the breakup of the European Union.”

Also during Trump’s first term, Donald Tusk, the then President of the European Council, and current prime minister of Poland, echoed this sentiment. On 31 January 2017, he stated in a press release, “United we stand, divided we fall” stating that Trump’s America is now on par with Russia, China, and radical Islam in terms of its adversarial stance toward the European Union, saying, “An increasingly, let us call it, assertive China, especially on the seas, Russia’s aggressive policy towards Ukraine and its neighbours, wars, terror and anarchy in the Middle East and in Africa, with radical Islam playing a major role, as well as worrying declarations by the new American administration all make our future highly unpredictable.”

Trump does not consider the European Union a partner for his country, but rather wants to deal with each country alone. This is because the European Union is an economic power that should not be underestimated, even if it has weakened from what it was. It is a powerful economic power, and dialogue with a huge economic bloc will make them stronger in their trade and economic negotiations, unlike what would be the case if negotiations were conducted with each country alone.

This philosophy upon which Trump’s stance is based is a correct philosophy, especially since he is exploiting the weaknesses of the unity, and the internal dangers that are ravaging the countries of the European Union, most notably the first blows that harmed European unity, which is Brexit, including Trump’s encouraging Britain to leave and the promises he made to them after the exit.

Britain’s exit from the European Union is a disaster by all standards, for the Union’s status at the international level, as it weakened the power of European economic decision-making and the power of international competition with other powers.

Trump has pledged to impose taxes and tariffs to reduce the US trade deficit and protect American industries from competition from imported goods. These tariffs are expected to reach 10% on European exports.

On the issue of European security, Trump’s threats to the Europeans showed a very serious negative slant, due to the lack of a joint defense unit, which is the trend towards individual and bilateral defense projects, at the expense of the continent’s overall security.

Regarding Greenland, on 8 January 2025, French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said he did not believe the U.S. would invade the vast Arctic island that has been part of Denmark for over 600 years. “There is obviously no question that the European Union would

let other nations of the world attack its sovereign borders, whoever they are,” he told France Inter radio. “We are a strong continent.”

As for the second point: It is the growth of right-wing populist movements, whose popularity has increased in Germany, France, Italy, Poland and the Netherlands. Indeed, the leaders of this right have come to power while supporting Trump’s idea of leaving the European Union, in addition to the fact that their political outlook on some internal and foreign issues is completely different from the traditional orientations of the EU countries.

Germany’s decision to reimpose border controls risks undermining the EU’s unity and cooperation, according to a senior migration expert. “The current strategy does not lead to solidarity. It does not lead to more control,” Gerald Knaus, co-founder of the Berlin-based think tank European Stability Initiative (ESI), told Anadolu news agency, in comments published on 16 September 2024. “It is putting at risk what has been achieved, which is the biggest border-free area in the world,” he added, referring to the EU’s visa-free Schengen zone.

In this regard, Dr. Franz Hermann, a political analyst from Berlin, told Sky News Arabia, “These measures reflect fears of increased migrant flows and declining security control, in a move that could pave the way for the end of the European dream. Re-imposing border controls could be the beginning of a broader disintegration within the European Union, threatening the achievements made over decades. The crises have contributed to increasing popular resentment and strengthening nationalism, which weakens the European Union’s ability to confront challenges in a unified manner.”

These policies reflect the extent to which the rise of the far right is dangerous for the union project. In his essay, “Welcome to Barbieland: European sentiment in the year of wars and elections” of 25 September 2024, the European Council on Foreign Relations’ lead analyst on public opinion, Pawel Zerka, described how the shift to the right is likely to affect policies related to European Union integrity, saying, “xenophobic language and policy is no longer a staple of the region’s Eurosceptic politicians only – it is also shared by much of its mainstream... Many might feel disappointed about the benefits of the EU membership... In ten of the EU’s 27 member states only a minority believes the interests of their country are well taken into account in the bloc... Central and eastern European far-right parties and illiberal populists are not operating in a vacuum. Their growing assertiveness towards the EU channels a certain demand among citizens; and the political mainstream is now also trying to tap the same sentiments... One might also wonder whether the EU’s normalised xenophobia may not put some young people off the European project altogether while habituating other young people to an ‘ethnic’ conception of Europeaness, and thus allowing them to feel able to vote for the far-right.”

In conclusion: These matters reveal a strong struggle between two forces. One of which, America, is very arrogant and believes only in its own interests, even at the expense of its closest allies. The other, its opponent, Europe, is burdened by wounds, diseases and lack of political thinking due to the presence of corrupt and weak rulers and political class. In confirmation of this opinion, in his article for Deutsche Welle, “The EU’s drive to bolster defense,” Bernd Riegert wrote on 23 March 2022, “It has once again become clear to politicians and policymakers in the EU that Europe can only be defended with the help of NATO, that is, with its American allies. That is the reason the EU’s “Strategic Compass” is in no way competing with the NATO alliance, says Michael Gahler, MEP and foreign policy expert of the Christian Democratic Union group in the European Parliament. “Collective defense will have to continue to be carried out with NATO for the foreseeable future.””

Perhaps this is one of the innovations of the founding leaders of the United States, who bound Europe, after World War II with two steel shackles: the NATO umbrella and the Marshall Plan, so that Europe would remain subject to American will to live the bitterness of humiliation, oppression and slavery, as it had made the peoples of the rest of the world taste.