



By: Alberto Alemanno

Why authoritarian regimes view the EU as a threat?



Make no mistake: despite the claims of US President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance, and their MAGA acolytes, the European Union is not in decline.

In many ways, the EU project has succeeded beyond its founders' most optimistic expectations.

For the first time in modern history, Europe is recognized by other powers as a political actor in its own right rather than merely a market or a loose collection of sovereign states.

That was not the case after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or even following the EU's eastward enlargement in the early 2000s.

Over the past three decades, Europe has built a political and regulatory order that external powers can no longer bypass by dealing with 27 national governments individually. Instead, they must deal with Europe as one.

This is increasingly evident in how foreign powers frame their policies and actions.

Even Trump's new *National Security Strategy* (NSS), for example, speaks of a declining "Europe" rather than focusing on individual EU member states.

Russian President *Vladimir Putin*, for his part, has justified his war against Ukraine by invoking EU (and especially NATO) expansion, while China views Europe as a unified regulatory counterweight.

Europe is a political community

At the heart of this shift lies a deeper transformation. Europe is no longer seen only as a geopolitical actor, but as a competing model for organizing economic and political life.

Consequently, European policymakers are forced to confront a fundamental question they have largely avoided for decades: Is the EU merely a coordination mechanism, or is it a political community with a shared destiny?

In reality, the world has already answered this question. Whether Europeans acknowledge it or not, Europe is a political community.

That recognition, however, is neither automatic nor guaranteed. It depends on the EU maintaining its distinct economic model.

Unlike American capitalism, with its emphasis on speed, scale, and accumulation, and Chinese authoritarianism, which subjects markets and political authority to centralized state control, Europe's social-market economy places democratic choice, social protection, and the rule of law at the center of economic life.

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When viewed through this lens, it is clear that the Trump administration's hostility toward the EU is not about individual regulations.

It is about opposition to a system in which workers have a voice through collective decision-making, universal health care and education are rights, and antitrust law protects competition instead of supporting state-backed or politically connected firms.

That model is made possible by scale. With 450 million consumers governed by a unified regulatory framework, the EU is the world's largest single market.

Multinational firms seeking access to it have no choice but to adapt to European rules, enabling the EU to set the terms of global competition.

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Today's external pressures to abandon that model are nothing new. For decades, critics have claimed that Europe's social model was

unsustainable, its regulatory regime economically suicidal, and its democratic constraints on markets naive.

Yet that model has delivered stability, prosperity, and global clout. The intense opposition it receives is evidence of its success: it has become a force others must confront rather than dismiss.

The numbers speak for themselves. The EU's major economies **match or exceed US productivity** per hour worked, enjoy **higher life expectancy**, and have far lower **income inequality**.

Quality-of-life rankings consistently place **European cities** such as Vienna and Copenhagen ahead of their American counterparts.

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Moreover, despite the NSS's warning of "civilizational erasure," Europe has absorbed **millions of migrants** without undermining social cohesion.

Germany alone has naturalized more than a half-million citizens over the past five years, while Italy's far-right government approved record numbers of migrant entries in 2025, showing that the EU's immigration model can function even under leaders ideologically opposed to it.

Taken together, these features help explain why authoritarian regimes view the EU as a threat and why profit-maximizing companies regard it as constraining.

Europe's greatest strength

What the bloc lacks is not institutional capacity, but the political will to defend its

model and complete the process of European integration.

To be sure, Europe faces serious challenges. Economic growth is uneven, capital markets remain fragmented, and defense capacity has not kept pace with security threats.

But these weaknesses are not the product of the EU's social and regulatory model, and dismantling it would only make them worse.



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In response to fears of deindustrialization and relative decline, EU policymakers have converged on a single diagnosis: over-regulation. The prescribed cure, inevitably, is deregulation.

Both former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi's report on EU competitiveness and the European Commission's "Omnibus" package, for example, treat Europe's regulatory approach as a liability rather than an asset.

The logic behind this regulatory rollback is straightforward: in a world dominated by the United States and China, Europe must abandon its social-market model to stay competitive.

But that reasoning mistakes success for failure. Europe cannot simply imitate America or China, given that it lacks the former's

financial and military dominance and the latter's centralized control over labor and capital.

And why would the world need a smaller, slower version of US capitalism or Chinese state control?

Ultimately, when Washington pressures Europe to dilute its environmental or industrial rules in order to shield American interests, it is intervening directly in European self-government.

By pushing back against the EU's economic and political model, Putin, Trump, and Chinese President Xi Jinping have done what 70 years of gradual integration could not: they have made Europeans see themselves as Europeans.

In a world of rival empires and raw power politics, Europe's greatest strength remains precisely the model that makes it inconvenient to others.

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