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Shoring up an International System Adrift: A Policy Guide for the EU in Five Areas of Global Governance

Lead author: Steven Blockmans (CEPS)

Contributing authors: Matteo Bursi (IAI Rome), Ceren Ergenc (CEPS), Ettore Greco (IAI Rome), Noa Lameire (KU Leuven), Federica Marconi (IAI Rome)

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Abstract

Global governance is increasingly fragmented, with a widening gap between transnational challenges and institutional capacity. This report identifies five strategic priorities for the European Union to strengthen multilateral cooperation across climate, trade and taxation, health, migration, and digitalisation: reframing the narrative around concrete outcomes; building flexible coalitions, particularly with the Plural South; strengthening monitoring and compliance; securing predictable financing; and aligning internal practices with external commitments. Together, these priorities offer a roadmap for restoring confidence in multilateral governance and consolidating the EU's leadership in fair, inclusive, and sustainable international cooperation.

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Executive Summary

The current landscape of global governance is marked by increasing fragmentation, institutional strain, and a growing gap between challenges and the capacity of existing systems to address them. The European Union, a major actor with both regulatory influence and diplomatic reach, faces the urgent task of adapting its approach to sustain and strengthen multilateral cooperation across key policy domains: climate governance, trade and taxation, health, migration, and digitalisation.

This report identifies five strategic priorities for the EU to enhance the effectiveness, legitimacy, and resilience of multilateral governance:

Reframe and own the narrative: The EU should shift its communication strategy to focus on the concrete outcomes and practical benefits of multilateral action, rather than abstract principles. By highlighting real-world successes — such as increased refugee rights, progress on climate targets, and advances in digital standards — the EU can build public trust and counteract scepticism about international cooperation.

Build coalitions: Effective multilateralism increasingly depends on flexible alliances and pre-negotiated positions with influential partners, especially in the Plural South. The EU should invest in deeper coordination with countries such as Brazil, South Africa, and India and expand its outreach to emerging actors, ensuring that its initiatives reflect broad support and are not perceived as exclusive or Eurocentric.

Improve monitoring and defend compliance: Strengthening accountability is essential. The EU should support the development of robust monitoring frameworks, such as voluntary peer-review mechanisms in migration and enhanced compliance systems in health and climate agreements. Linking transparency and reporting to funding and participation can incentivise better implementation and foster trust among stakeholders.

Secure predictable financing: Because many multilateral institutions face chronic funding shortfalls, the EU should advocate for more flexible, long-term funding arrangements, coordinate contributions among member states, and promote direct support for local actors and civil society. This approach would help stabilise key agencies and ensure continuity of essential services, particularly in crisis-prone areas like migration and health.

Align external with internal commitments: The EU's credibility depends on consistency between its domestic policies and its international advocacy. This requires reducing barriers to civil-society participation, ensuring that internal practices meet the standards promoted abroad, and systematically integrating international commitments into EU law and practice.

By pursuing these priorities, the EU can help restore confidence in multilateral governance, address critical global challenges more effectively, and reinforce its position as a leader in shaping fair, inclusive, and sustainable international cooperation.

Introduction

The international order is undergoing a period of profound disruption driven by a combination of factors, namely climate change, geopolitical competition, technological transformation, and economic coercion. While political figures like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and Xi Jinping have become symbolic agents of this era of upheaval, they are better understood as symptoms of structural changes rather than the primary cause.

The multilateral system established after World War II was largely designed by the United States and European powers to stabilise a world shaped by global conflict and ideological rivalry. For decades, this order supported economic growth, international cooperation, and relative geopolitical stability. Many of the institutions and mechanisms created during that period, however, are increasingly ill-equipped to address the complexities of the contemporary era.

A major source of disruption is the reemergence of geopolitical rivalry among states that seek to reshape the global balance of power. President Putin has long promoted a vision of a multipolar international order in which Russia can compete strategically with the United States (US) and China. In situations where such influence cannot be secured directly, say through the BRICS group, Russia has opted for instability and geopolitical fragmentation to serve its interests, thus weakening existing institutions and alliances. Similarly, President Xi is working to expand China's global influence and reshape elements of the international order in ways more compatible with Chinese political and strategic priorities. Other rising powers, including India and Brazil, also seek greater autonomy and influence within an increasingly multipolar system. In one way or another, all have been aided and abetted by the erratic implementation of President Trump's policy of America First, which has accelerated the US's waning power on the world stage. But a world defined by competing power centres is proving less conducive to multilateral cooperation and collective governance (Stubb 2026).

Exclusively focusing on state actors risks overlooking the growing influence of non-state actors. Highly capable transnational organisations, including criminal networks and extremist groups, illustrate how non-state actors can exploit globalisation and weak governance structures. Large technology companies, meanwhile, continue to pursue rapid innovation and market expansion in artificial intelligence and AI-powered humanoid robots — i.e., the creation of a new species altogether — with limited regard for political or social consequences (Harari 2024).

Human-driven mega-trends further intensify instability. Climate change functions as a threat multiplier by exacerbating resource scarcity, migration pressures, and environmental disasters. Modern societies have become highly dependent on interconnected systems vulnerable to disruption, including digital networks, energy infrastructure, global supply chains, and public health systems. The increasing frequency and severity of epidemics further demonstrate the fragility of contemporary global interdependence.

These overlapping pressures have widened economic inequalities, contributed to social unrest, and displaced populations across regions. They have also weakened confidence in the ability of governments and international institutions to manage crises effectively. In such an environment, political leaders who work on rapid or authoritarian solutions often gain support by presenting themselves as alternatives to ineffective institutions. AI increasingly enables them to deliver results while lowering the cost of suppression, further undermining democracy (Mounk 2026).

For the EU and like-minded actors, the central challenge of the coming years involves not only adapting multilateral institutions to new geopolitical, technological, economic, and climate realities. They must also determine whether the foundational principles associated with the post-1945 international order can survive in an increasingly fragmented and disruptive global environment.

This report examines how the EU and its member states can defend and transform multilateral institutions to make them more robust, effective, and democratic (Choi et al. 2024). It presents targeted recommendations for the EU in five policy areas: climate governance and sustainability, trade and taxation, health and pandemics, migration and refugees, and digitalisation. Each thematic section of the report is structured along the same lines. After a brief introduction to establish whether there have been any game-changers or updates to the trends noted in previous ENSURED research reports, each section then engages in great detail with the five recommendations presented in ENSURED's strategic choices report (Blockmans 2026).

Recommendation 1: Reframe and own the narrative to defend core values and demonstrate the practical utility of multilateral governance. The EU's strategic communications regarding global governance should counter scepticism by showing what works in practice.

Recommendation 2: Enhance EU diplomatic engagement, leveraging institutions and member states in negotiation settings to build coalitions with like-minded partners willing to uphold global governance systems on specific issues that serve their core principles. The focus should be on key BRICS countries (Brazil, India, and South Africa) as well as on other swing states of the Plural South (especially Indonesia, Mexico, and Nigeria), whose influence and populations are considerable.

Recommendation 3: Target global governance reform to improve monitoring and defend compliance. The EU, to demonstrate feasibility, should commission or support pilot projects in thematic areas (e.g., climate finance for loss and damage, or the implementation of digital standards in low-income countries).

Recommendation 4: Secure predictable financing for selected organisations (e.g., for staff capacity and secretarial support) in areas such as trade, climate, and migration governance, where the robustness of multilateralism and the EU's strategic interests are at stake.

Recommendation 5: Align domestic and global regulations more effectively. In doing so, the EU should involve civil society at every stage, reduce procedural barriers to participation, ensure the representation of marginalised and small states, and model best practices in its own conduct.

Climate Governance and Sustainability

Global environmental governance has entered a phase of increased strain. Core institutions such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) remain intact but show signs of procedural delays and difficulty reaching consensus. This reflects trade-offs between, on the one hand, effective and inclusive global governance and, on the other, ambition and trust among parties. While these institutions remain relatively robust, patterns of slow, uneven progress towards agreed-upon targets have become evident. Against this backdrop, the EU faces a dual challenge: sustaining the credibility of multilateral environmental governance while addressing its operational weaknesses. The following recommendations outline how the EU can address this challenge by strengthening the effectiveness, democracy, and robustness of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) like the UNFCCC and the CBD.

Recommendation 1: Reframe and Own the Narrative

Effective, democratic, and robust EU environmental diplomacy within global governance depends not only on negotiation outcomes but also on the EU's capacity to shape and sustain credible narratives about multilateralism itself. In its communications (e.g., the Commission Work Programme, the 2040 climate target, ongoing press releases, and communications concerning forthcoming political developments), the EU can demonstrate its commitment to its core values, namely respect for democracy and support for a rules-based international order. To underscore this message, strategic communications should consistently emphasise two key aspects.

First, strengthening and promoting the results of environmental multilateralism is critical. After the climate COP30 in Belém in 2025, the EU emphasised that "multilateralism can still deliver," reflecting an awareness that confidence in global cooperation can no longer be taken for granted (DG CLIMA 2025). However, defending multilateralism in abstract terms is insufficient and should go hand in hand with implementation and progress. Ten years after the Paris Agreement, while the process remains intact, considerable cracks in its implementation have become visible, e.g., slow submissions of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) ahead of COP30 (Kustova et al. 2025). To maintain a "delivery narrative," the EU must recognise these issues and propose reforms to bridge the gap (see section on governance reform).

Second, inclusivity and democracy should be central to EU communications. The UNFCCC and CBD COPs have seen exponential growth in attendance, which highlights whole-of-government and whole-of-society developments (Petri et al. 2025; Petri and Karlas 2025). For the EU, non-state-actor involvement is essential to pursue these approaches, as reflected in communications from the COP30 report: "the EU's belief that pluralistic, democratic engagement is key to building trust and delivering a transition that leaves no one behind" (DG CLIMA 2025). However, this remains abstract, with few concrete examples. While the EU has in the past been a strong advocate for non-state actor involvement in negotiation rooms, this advocacy has not always been successful (Petri and Karlas 2025). Similarly, while the EU has long operated a pavilion in the Blue Zone at the UNFCCC COPs, it has not done so since COP29, marking the loss of an institutionalised space for structured state/non-state interaction. To sustain the credibility of this inclusivity claim, it is necessary to show whom it includes and how, and to back up narratives with transparency and tangible action.

Recommendation 2: Build Coalitions

To build on a diplomatic strategy aligned with the EU's core values, the EU must engage with third countries to ensure widespread cooperation. Given the global nature of environmental governance, issue-specific partnerships can develop into sustainable bilateral and multilateral relations. The EU should therefore use MEAs simultaneously as negotiation arenas and as platforms to build partnerships that extend beyond environmental policy. This would strengthen political alignment and support for multilateralism more broadly.

Inequalities among negotiating parties are known to strain environmental negotiations (Petri and Karlas 2025; Petri et al. 2025). Developing countries are affected by distorted bargaining power due to funding constraints, visa issues, language barriers, limited scientific and legal expertise, and personnel instability. Mitigating and addressing these inequalities is essential to build partnerships and coalitions with a broad set of countries. While this challenge is global in nature, the EU can add significant weight to mitigating proposals. These proposals include both COP organisation reforms (e.g., increasing virtual participation and disentangling different COP spaces) and measures that target inequalities (e.g., increasing the UNFCCC Trust Fund, which supports delegation participation, or addressing COP meeting inclusiveness, particularly in informal settings) (Petri and Karlas 2025). Such proposals would strengthen the legitimacy of negotiations and, more fundamentally, deepen trust with partner countries.

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Environmental partnerships can characterise bilateral partnerships at large. The inclusion of Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters in trade agreements has institutionalised commitments to multilateral agreements, including the UNFCCC and CBD (Muller 2023). The depth and specificity of these commitments, however, vary significantly across partners, indicating room for greater strategic coherence. For instance, while certain new TSDs (e.g., with India or Australia) have explicit text on UNFCCC procedures, such as NDC submissions, others do not (e.g., with Mercosur). Additionally, the EU must translate these TSDs into diplomatic partnerships at the COPs.

Diplomatic partnerships within MEAs often take the form of coalition-building. Issue-specific coalitions, in particular, have proven effective in aligning actors across the global north and south (Klöck et al. 2024). The High Ambition Coalition during the Paris Agreement negotiations illustrates how coordinated cooperation among parties can build trust and deliver results (Yamineva

2016). While there are calls for renewed momentum behind the High Ambition Coalition (Earsom 2023), other initiatives and coalitions, such as the First Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels, show considerable opportunities. Building sustainable diplomatic relations thus hinges not only on support for overcoming party inequalities but also on sustained cooperation grounded in bilateral and multilateral trust-building.

Recommendation 3: Improve Monitoring and Defend Compliance

The reform potential in the climate and biodiversity regimes is limited and shaped by enduring trade-offs between effectiveness and democracy (e.g., reforming the agenda-setting of negotiations versus maintaining the party-led process) (Petri et al. 2025; Petri and Karlas 2025; Martins and Petri 2025). While this inherent tension is unlikely to be resolved, there are several practical, targeted pathways for governance reform that do not reopen foundational compromises.

A recurring challenge in environmental governance is improving implementation monitoring. The CBD's Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) outlines goals and targets, with the two key instruments for reporting progress towards implementation being the National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and national reports. The UNFCCC's Paris Agreement mandates NDCs and the Global Stocktake. Under both the UNFCCC and CBD regimes, there are ongoing debates about how to make implementation reporting more robust.

A second area for reform lies in strengthening coherence across the different regimes. Together with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the UNFCCC and CBD form the Rio conventions. Over the last few years, momentum has built in the CBD and UNCCD with coherence decisions (CBD 2025), but the UNFCCC parties have not met this momentum. The EU has long advocated an integrated approach, with proposals to enhance cooperation between scientific bodies, better integrate national-level submissions, and renew the mandate for the Joint Liaison Group. After the failure of COP30 on this front, the Turkish COP31 presidency recognises this workstream as a priority area (Kurum 2026). The EU should develop an effective proposal based on its own ideas and on existing agreements under the CBD and the UNCCD.

Finally, biodiversity governance continues to face uneven political representation, reflected in limited high-level participation at CBD COPs. Advancing the KMGBF requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. So, compared to UNFCCC COPs, which are regularly attended by EU commissioners and heads of government of member states, the CBD lacks such representation. At the resumed COP16 in Rome in 2025, the highest-level EU representative was a director general at DG ENV (CBD 2025). Limited high-level representation at COPs signals weaker political salience and constrains followthrough. Addressing this is a clear pathway for the EU to demonstrate leadership.

Recommendation 4: Secure Predictable Financing

Finance remains one of the most contested dimensions of multilateral environmental governance. Given that the costs and benefits of addressing climate change and biodiversity loss are unevenly distributed across countries, international financial flows are central to ensuring participation, implementation, and political buyin. But disputes persist across MEAs over the *amount*, *sources*, and *governance* of finance.

In the absence of a permanent financial mechanism, most CBD finance flows through the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), an independent international mechanism that operates under several MEAs. At the last COPs, parties agreed to establish two new mechanisms, one within and one outside the GEF superstructure: the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF) dedicated to the KMGBF, and the Cali Fund. The EU, advocating for greater private-sector contributions, was influential in negotiating these funds to be open to contributions from "all sources" (CBD 2022; Petri et al. 2025). In practice, however, private finance remains limited: the GBFF has no private funding, and the Cali Fund holds only $1,000. To ensure these funds are effective, the EU should create enabling frameworks domestically and push for internationally applicable ones (e.g., a clear biodiversity taxonomy and domestic encouragement schemes).

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In the UNFCCC, debates over financial instruments mirror those of the CBD. The core debate in this workstream concerns control over the use of those funds. Donors want to retain control, while recipients seek freedom in how they disburse the funds. While this debate will most likely not go away soon, the EU should focus its efforts on high-yield funding that generates systemic benefits, notably capacity-building initiatives that strengthen parties' ability to meet procedural and substantive obligations (Steinebach and Limberg 2021; Kustova et al. 2025).

Capacity-building initiatives such as the UNFCCC Trust Fund, the NDC Partnership, and the CBD's NBSAP Accelerator Partnership have one key benefit: they assist other states in their own work, whether procedural or substantive (Kustova et al. 2025; Petri et al. 2025; Petri and Karlas 2025). This is crucial for mitigating inequalities among parties. These mechanisms are relatively low-cost and politically feasible, and they yield systemic returns by improving transparency, compliance, and access to further finance. By strengthening these programmes, the EU should defend their necessity in MEA governance and thereby strengthen effectiveness and diplomatic engagement.

A final recommendation concerns the internal coordination of the EU's member states. Although about 75 percent of EU climate finance comes from direct bilateral or multilateral contributions by member states, disparities in performance significantly affect overall effectiveness (Kustova et al. 2025). A visible example arose in the context of the Tropical Forests Forever Facility (TFFF), launched at COP30 (Lameire 2026). While the EU lauded this launch, it did not contribute itself, and the facility received pledges from four EU member states. While international finance is squarely a member states' competency, coordination among member states and the EU would improve strategic coherence and enable a more balanced allocation of resources across an increasingly complex funding landscape.

Recommendation 5: Align External With Internal Commitments

At both the CBD and the UNFCCC, the EU has strong leadership ambitions, positioning itself as a global diplomatic and exemplary leader (Groen 2018; Oberthür and Groen 2016), while being recognised by others as one of the top three most influential actors in the UNFCCC and CBD (Parker et al. 2017). However, in the run-up to COP30 in Belém in 2025, domestic politics risked undermining this entire international reputation. The Paris Agreement hinges on procedural compliance, whereby countries adhere to the rules. Ahead of the COP, only 13 countries had met the submission deadline for their NDCs, with the EU among the last to submit. This late submission was due to contentious negotiations between the EU institutions and member states over the setting of a 2040 climate target, which is required to submit the 2035 NDC. This shows how the EU's diplomatic effectiveness hinges upon functioning domestic politics.

While the late NDC submission did not undermine the EU's external unity at COP30, it signalled internal coordination challenges. Known for speaking with one voice (Delreux and Earsom 2024; Delreux and Keukeleire 2017), member states show a united negotiating front. However, this capacity remains structurally restricted by divergent member-state priorities, shared competence constraints, and complex coordination dynamics (Petri et al. 2025; Kustova et al. 2025). To maintain this external climate strategy, the EU should prioritise domestic political alignment and timely coordination among member states ahead of diplomatic summits. Reinforcing this domestic-external link will be essential for sustaining the EU's leadership role in an increasingly contested multilateral environmental system.

Trade and Taxation

As argued in the context of the ENSURED project, the global trade regime, centred on the World Trade Organization (WTO), increasingly operates in ”two parallel worlds” (Weinhardt and Parízek 2026). On the one hand, WTO members continue to modernise the organisation through institutional reform, updating procedures and rules to make the system fit for purpose after nearly two decades of deadlock in the negotiation pillar and years of paralysis in dispute settlement. On the other hand, major powers, notably the United States, are eroding the foundations of the multilateral trading system. The return of aggressive US tariff policies under President Trump's second administration has intensified this contradiction. The July 2025 Turnberry agreement between the EU and the US illustrates this trend. Although justified through claims of future WTO compatibility, the agreement clearly violated the WTO's Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) principle. The failure of the WTO's fourteenth Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Cameroon in March 2026 symbolised the fragmentation of the global trade order. The WTO increasingly struggles to maintain credibility as a splintered system of plurilateral governance emerges around it. Instead of comprehensive institutional reform, smaller coalitions of willing states have advanced agreements outside the formal WTO framework.

A similar tension between effectiveness and legitimacy characterises contemporary global tax governance (Boukal et al. 2025). The OECD/G20 two-pillar solution, especially the global minimum tax, represented the most ambitious attempt to curb corporate tax avoidance through multilateral cooperation. Agreed to by 139 countries and implemented in the EU and several developed states in 2024, it combined significant innovation with broad international support.

The OECD process increasingly prioritised political feasibility over transformative ambition. It accommodated US demands through a 2025 side-by-side arrangement while facing criticism from developing countries that saw limited benefits and high administrative costs. Several states, including Kenya and Nigeria, ultimately withdrew from the process (Goni and Miyandazi 2021). These concerns strengthened support for a parallel UN-led initiative spearheaded by the African Group. In 2024, the UN General Assembly launched negotiations on a Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation, emphasising inclusiveness and equal participation. As the US increasingly moved towards unilateralism and the EU softened its opposition, many countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America rallied behind the initiative. Nevertheless, neither the OECD nor the emerging UN framework has successfully reconciled effectiveness with broad participation. Future progress in global tax governance will therefore depend on balancing ambitious reform with inclusive legitimacy.

Recommendation 1: Reframe and Own the Narrative

The central tension in EU trade policy is the growing gap between its traditional self-image as a champion of open, rules-based multilateralism and its increasingly pragmatic, interest-driven response to a deteriorating geopolitical environment. While the EU continues to promote cooperation, regulatory leadership, and institutions such as the WTO, its policies increasingly emphasise competitiveness, strategic autonomy, de-risking, and the use of unilateral or preferential instruments. Even though trade agreements with partners such as India, Indonesia, and Mercosur are presented as support for openness, they also reflect adaptation to a fragmented global economy in which multilateral progress has stalled. This contradiction is particularly evident in measures such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), debates over reforming special and differential treatment, and the Turnberry Agreement, which exposed the EU's willingness to depart from core multilateral principles when confronted with geopolitical and economic pressures.

> The EU should align its rhetoric more closely with its practice.

To address this tension, the EU should align its rhetoric more closely with its practice. Rather than presenting interest-driven policies as straightforward extensions of multilateralism, policymakers should acknowledge the trade-offs between strategic autonomy and rules-based cooperation. Greater transparency about these competing objectives would strengthen the credibility of EU trade policy and reduce perceptions of inconsistency among trading partners. At the same time, the EU should continue to support WTO reform but prioritise pragmatic, sector-specific initiatives over ambitious proposals (e.g., redefining developing-country status), which are likely to face broad resistance.

In taxation governance, the EU's system narrative varies according to institutional setting. Within the OECD/G20 two-pillar process, which the EU helped to construct, the international tax system is presented as functional and capable of producing "landmark agreements" (Council of the EU 2022, 1024/22). Within the OECD context, the EU emphasises fairness, competitiveness, and simplification through the global minimum tax. At the UN, however, the narrative has shifted towards procedural legitimacy and consensus-based governance (Boukal et al. 2026). With references to widening "rifts," deepening "rupture," and reshaped "global alliances" (Hoekstra 2026), the EU increasingly frames the international order as uncertain and contested, emphasising the need to defend European interests (Boukal et al. 2026). Tax governance is thus increasingly portrayed as closely linked to sovereign competences threatened by geopolitical fragmentation.

The EU therefore faces a widening gap between rhetoric and practice. The problem is not adaptation itself but the absence of a broader narrative that coherently explains these adjustments. Without such a framework, what might otherwise be seen as principled pragmatism appears as fragmentation and inconsistency.

Recommendation 2: Build Coalitions

Relying exclusively on incremental WTO reform carries substantial risks for the future of the multilateral trading system. As geoeconomic competition intensifies outside the organisation, a widening gap is emerging between formal WTO reform discussions and the dynamics that actually shape global trade governance. If this disconnect persists, the WTO risks losing not only effectiveness but also broader political relevance. To preserve a rules-based trading order in the medium term, the EU should therefore prioritise coalition-building with like-minded partners both within and outside the WTO framework. Outside the organisation, bilateral and regional trade agreements can serve as instruments to preserve and extend what may be called the "WTO template." Such agreements allow countries to continue developing rules in policy areas where multilateral negotiations remain blocked, including digital trade, industrial subsidies, and the trade-environment nexus.

This approach reflects broader transformations within the WTO itself. Many WTO members continue to push the organisation to expand its activities into areas such as development, environmental governance, and inclusiveness, despite growing challenges to its traditional agenda (Weinhardt, Parízek, and Srivastava 2025). Some states regard these issues as essential for maintaining the WTO's legitimacy and relevance in a changing global economy, while others prefer a narrower focus limited to conventional trade liberalisation.

Against this backdrop, a fragmented but functional patchwork of agreements may be preferable to institutional paralysis for the EU. Coalitions of willing states can still generate a degree of predictability and regulatory coordination even in the absence of universal consensus. Whether the WTO itself can remain the central institutional hub of this increasingly plurilateral system remains uncertain. Nevertheless, smaller coalitions are already gaining momentum. One example is the emerging cooperation between the EU and members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which announced plans for a separate digital trade agreement during MC14 in Yaoundé in 2026.

Since 2017, groups of WTO members have negotiated agreements on issues such as e-commerce and investment facilitation, but a small number of states, particularly India and South Africa, have opposed the incorporation of these initiatives into the WTO framework as Annex IV agreements. The implication is not that plurilateralism should replace multilateralism altogether, but rather that coalitions of willing actors may help preserve elements of the rules-based system while broader consensus remains unattainable. For the EU, remaining engaged in shaping these arrangements is strategically preferable to standing aside while competing powers redefine the terms of global trade governance.

Recommendation 3: Improve Monitoring and Defend Compliance

Due to the lack of consensus on further trade liberalisation through the WTO, efforts to expand the organisation's scope are currently feasible primarily through informal, non-binding mechanisms rather than formal treaty-making. Information sharing, voluntary guidelines, and the dissemination of best practices are laudable safeguard measures. However, criticism of the WTO Secretariat, particularly from the United States, illustrates how institutional robustness itself is increasingly under pressure.

The EU has historically positioned itself as one of the strongest defenders of WTO dispute settlement reform. Following the paralysis of the Appellate Body, the EU played a leading role in establishing the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) in 2020 as a temporary alternative mechanism. Initially supported by 16 members, including China, the arrangement has since expanded to 31 participants (counting the EU and all its member states as a single participant), which represents nearly 60 percent of global trade. As a major export power, the EU continues to benefit substantially from the WTO *acquis*, including its legal framework and accumulated jurisprudence. Given the aforementioned constraints, the EU should prioritise preserving the WTO's core functionality in the short term. Strengthening and expanding the MPIA should therefore remain a central priority, particularly by facilitating greater participation from developing countries through reforms that improve their access to dispute settlement procedures.

The EU should place greater emphasis on inclusiveness in global economic governance.

An additional approach worth pursuing would focus on practical initiatives such as strengthening plurilateral agreements among willing members. The EU could also continue building coalitions with like-minded partners outside the WTO framework while postponing more ambitious reforms until a possible post-Trump political environment emerges. Although this strategy would help contain further fragmentation, it would not resolve the structural tensions that undermine the trading system.

Recommendation 4: Secure Predictable Financing

For more than a decade, the WTO functioned under a policy of near "zero nominal growth," leaving its budget largely stagnant despite inflation and rising operational costs (WTO 2025). Although a modest increase was approved in 2024, the organisation continues to face financial pressures. Voluntary contributions to technical assistance programmes have declined, funding for trade-related assistance has fallen to historic lows, and delayed or suspended payments from major members, including the United States, have increased uncertainty. As a result, the WTO remains structurally underfunded and is considering budget cuts, hiring freezes, and staff reductions (WTO 2025).

The EU remains one of the WTO's strongest political and financial supporters. It does contribute as a single entity, but its member states collectively provide a substantial share of the organisation's budget. In addition, member states support WTO technical assistance and development programmes through voluntary funding.

To strengthen the predictability of WTO financing, the EU could take several important steps. First, it could lead efforts to establish multi-year funding commitments, thereby providing the WTO with greater budgetary stability and reducing dependence on annual political negotiations. Second, it could increase unearmarked contributions, allowing the WTO more flexibility in allocating resources where they are most needed. Third, the EU could improve coordination among its member states to ensure timely payments and potentially establish temporary mechanisms to compensate for arrears from major contributors. By taking a leadership role in stabilising WTO finances, the European Union would not only support the organisation itself but also reinforce the broader rules-based international trading system on which much of the global economy depends.

Recommendation 5: Align External With Internal Commitments

The EU's internal regulatory framework is generally well aligned with its WTO commitments, reflecting both its dependence on international trade and the supranationalisation of trade policy. This centralised approach allows for relatively consistent implementation of WTO rules across the single market and ensures unity of external representation by the European Commission.

However, tensions persist where EU regulations pursue environmental, health or consumer protection objectives that trading partners perceive as barriers to trade. The US-EU Turnberry Agreement also raised concerns because its preferential treatment departed from the MFN principle, illustrating how geopolitical and strategic considerations can conflict with the EU's longstanding commitment to multilateral trade rules.

In taxation, the EU faces a different challenge. While it successfully coordinated implementation of the Global Minimum Tax, divisions among member states have limited its ability to support more inclusive approaches to international tax cooperation, particularly in the UN process.

A priority for the EU should be to strengthen WTO compatibility assessments across both internal regulations and external trade agreements. New legislative initiatives, as well as future Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and sectoral arrangements, should be systematically assessed against WTO principles to minimise legal uncertainty and reinforce the EU's credibility as a defender of the rules-based trading system. Where departures from WTO norms are considered necessary, the EU should provide clear legal justifications and ensure that such measures remain narrowly tailored and temporary.

The EU should also place greater emphasis on inclusiveness in global economic governance. In trade, this means consulting more closely with developing-country partners when designing regulatory measures with extraterritorial effects. In taxation, it means engaging more constructively with the UN tax process and addressing Global South concerns about representation and fairness. A more coherent EU position would require member states to avoid blocking common approaches that strengthen the legitimacy of international tax cooperation while remaining compatible with existing multilateral frameworks.

Health and Pandemics

In recent years, global health multilateralism has shown both resilience and fragmentation. The adoption of the WHO Pandemic Agreement in 2025, the debate over the reform of the Global Health Architecture (GHA), the UN80 initiative, and the revised International Health Regulations demonstrate a continued capacity for collective action and a willingness among many countries to strengthen global cooperation. Such needs are further underscored by the recent outbreaks of Ebola and Hantaviruses in 2026. Nevertheless, geopolitical tensions, financial constraints, and competing national priorities are challenging the coordinated implementation and long-term sustainability of global health cooperation endeavours and thereby raising serious concerns about the robustness and effectiveness of global health institutions. In particular, a number of US moves under the Trump presidency, such as the official withdrawal from the World Health Organization and the dismantling of institutions like USAID, have undermined many health-related activities. This has created a void that no other player seems ready and willing to fill. Furthermore, the American initiatives have been coupled with major funding cuts in the health sector of development policies by the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, as well as several other major donors. This trend signals a systemic funding crisis.

Recommendation 1: Reframe and Own the Narrative

In this context, the EU should position multilateralism as a strategic necessity rather than a normative choice; at the same time, European institutions should describe the money spent for global health not only as a gesture of solidarity towards vulnerable low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs) but also as a form of investment that can help reduce important risks for the EU as well as enhance Europe's influence worldwide. The Global Health Resilience Initiative (GHRI), recently adopted by the European Commission, envisages objectives and measures to support this narrative shift.

Emphasising tangible benefits for European citizens — while reaffirming core values and principles such as equity and solidarity — would strengthen internal and external credibility and boost the European Union's role in global health. By adopting a more effective narrative, the European institutions should link global health to issues perceived as relevant by citizens, enterprises, and policymakers. In this regard, for example, during a period when national security has again become a topic of utmost importance, the nexus between epidemic control and security must be underscored. Likewise, disruptions to global supply chains caused by pandemics (as seen during COVID-19) must be presented as a key reason to reinforce international cooperation on health.

Recommendation 2: Build Coalitions

In a more fragmented global landscape, the EU should actively promote flexible, issue-based coalitions with partners committed to rules-based governance.

Likewise, it should leverage its position — both as a union and as individual member states — within multilateral *forums* like the G7 and the G20, presenting itself as a reliable partner whose actions are rooted in the principles underpinning international law and, as such, aim at countering nationalist agendas pursued by foreign leaders (Fernández and Dijkstra 2026). The EU has already taken steps in this direction through initiatives such as the One Health Summit 2026, organised under the French G7 Presidency. Coalition-building should prioritise shared commitments to implementation and financing. The most natural partners would be countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Switzerland, as well as selected countries in Africa and Latin America (e.g., South Africa, Mexico, and Brazil), which support multilateral health frameworks. Notably, with some of these very countries, the EU has already intensified its cooperation in the health sector in recent years. An example is EU-Canada cooperation on medical countermeasures for preparedness and response to serious cross-border public health threats. Attention should be given to the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034). Indeed, the Global Europe Instrument (GEI), if well designed, could be a highly valuable tool for creating new alliances or strengthening existing ones in global health cooperation.

In the void left by other players' inaction in the global health landscape, the EU could play a leading role.

Despite the current orientation of the United States, dialogue with Washington must remain active, especially in light of potential political changes that could lead the US to reconsider its disengagement from international health cooperation. Conversely, a more cautious approach, though not entirely closed to possible cooperation opportunities, should be adopted towards China, given its tangible shortcomings in transparency.

Recommendation 3: Improve Monitoring and Defend Compliance

In the void left by other players' inaction in the global health landscape, the EU could play a leading role, advancing reforms that could revive multilateral cooperation and strengthen the robustness, effectiveness, and democracy of international organisations operating in this domain. In general, the EU should propose a vision for a simpler, more focused, more legitimate international health governance that can define and implement clear objectives and procedures. In this regard, the EU institutions and member states should work to establish clearer institutional mandates, stronger leadership, and more sustainable financing.

A key priority is to develop a steady diplomatic approach to support a revitalised, more focused World Health Organization (WHO), which, given reduced resources, should perform a limited set of core functions (Fernández and Heinzel 2025). Likewise, European institutions should advocate for greater transparency and promote more effective compliance and monitoring frameworks, particularly regarding the implementation of the Pandemic Agreement and the International Health Regulations. Particular attention should be given to the possibility of linking compliance — and information disclosure — to the allocation of funds and to representation within the institutions' governing bodies.

Recommendation 4: Secure Predictable Financing

While the EU supports strengthening WHO financing, current contributions remain largely project based. A shift towards long-term core funding, combined with performance-based accountability, would enhance both institutional stability and policy impact. The EU should also work to reduce the current reliance on earmarked contributions. In addition, to ensure greater coherence and effectiveness, European institutions ought to support enhanced coordination among global health actors, including development banks and regional institutions.

In this regard, to build a solid agenda capable of strengthening multilateralism and safeguarding specific EU interests, a growing share of global health spending needs to be shifted from the national to the European level. This would make it possible to mobilise considerable resources while avoiding redundancies and inconsistencies. To that end, the next Multiannual Financial Framework, which has the potential to generate substantial EU-level resource mobilisation, can play a crucial role. What is needed is a significantly larger common budget — an objective not easy to achieve, as global health investments are often driven by national foreign policy considerations, but gradual progress is possible. Likewise, the Team Europe approach should be further developed to enhance the effectiveness of investments and avoid potential misalignments among national policies.

Recommendation 5: Align External With Internal Commitments

Especially since COVID-19, the EU's efforts to align its domestic health policies with its global health goals have made significant progress. The Global Health Strategy is particularly relevant. But further alignment is needed. In fact, this alignment remains incomplete due to fragmented national competencies, tensions between domestic and global priorities, regulatory inconsistencies, and gaps in funding and implementation. The expansion of the mandates of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) following the COVID-19 pandemic is to be welcomed. However, a further, substantial strengthening of both agencies — one capable of enhancing their internal capacities (in terms of funding and personnel) — remains possible and indeed desirable. Transferring competences and resources from the national to the European level is of paramount importance for creating a more uniform and coherent framework across member states.

Migration and Refugees

Global migration governance entered 2026 in a structurally weaker position than at any point since the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018. Both were already limited instruments, being non-binding, underfunded, and dependent on political will that was never uniformly present (Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025). The resource shock has since deepened. A sweeping pause in US foreign assistance, beginning in January 2025, removed funding that covered approximately 40 percent of the operational budget of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (Lynch 2025; PBS NewsHour 2026). In the meantime, by mid-2025, 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, including approximately 45 million refugees. This is nearly double the figure of a decade ago (UNHCR 2025c).

The EU presents itself as a counterweight to these challenges to multilateral institutions, yet its own practice contradicts this, as development assistance conditioned on migration control cooperation (documented across partnerships with Libya, Turkey, Tunisia, and Niger) undermines the multilateral framework the EU claims to champion (Mixed Migration Centre 2024; Cassarino 2025). The EU's approach to global migration governance can thus be characterised as "selective multilateralism," defined as sustaining the compacts as normative anchors while, in practice, defaulting to bilateral and minilateral arrangements (Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025). That posture is now harder to sustain because the global architecture it anchored is eroding, and because the EU's own practice is contributing to that erosion.

Recommendation 1: Reframe and Own the Narrative

The EU's public positioning on global migration governance has tended to emphasise the GCM and GCR for their multilateral significance rather than their practical outputs. This approach has limited traction in domestic political contexts where both instruments are either unknown or actively misrepresented as creating binding immigration obligations. In contrast, the GCM explicitly reaffirms the sovereign right of states to determine their national migration policy and creates no new enforceable legal obligations (Carrera et al. 2018). The GCR similarly leaves refugee protection decisions with states. The EU's communication strategy should shift towards concrete demonstration of what these frameworks have produced, while remaining honest about their limitations.

After the compacts were introduced, national law granted refugees the right to work in 62 percent of host countries, and 67 percent allowed refugees to move freely within their borders by 2024 (UNHCR 2025b). The GRF Progress Review in December 2025 documented that 10 countries had adopted new refugee labour laws and that refugee enrolment in higher education had increased by 50 percent (UNHCR 2025a). While it is difficult to establish whether the compacts led to these developments, as these gains reflect what states chose to report, the compacts have certainly produced a reporting and accountability architecture by providing structured incentives for states to document and publicly commit to action. The GCM's recognition of climate-driven displacement is a clearer example of compact-specific normative innovation (Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025). The EU's communication strategy should defend this accountability architecture. Within the 2026 IMRF, the EU should advocate for a voluntary peer-review mechanism modelled on the Universal Periodic Review. It is achievable without renegotiating the GCM's non-binding character and is viable as a transparency measure even in a politically restrictive environment. The EU's communication strategy should therefore highlight these governance innovations as improvements in legibility, comparability, and political accountability, in response to criticism that pledge-implementation under the GCR remains uneven due to persistent funding shortfalls (UNHCR 2025b).

Recommendation 2: Build Coalitions

The EU's coalition-building on migration typically consists of broad statements of multilateral commitment without specific negotiating alliances on contested provisions. Brazil, South Africa, and India are priority coalition partners for the EU in general, and this holds for migration governance. The EU can do more to pre-coordinate its positions with these states before multilateral forums, rather than announcing them unilaterally. As a case in point, no major actor currently supports renegotiating the non-binding character of either compact. The state-centric turn in global governance makes this even less likely in the short term. But a coalition pushing for a structured voluntary peer-review mechanism, introduced in recommendation one, is achievable without treaty-level renegotiation. It would require the EU to coordinate a clear position inside the Justice and Home Affairs Council before the 2026 IMRF and to pre-coordinate with its global partners. Even a non-binding reporting framework would help create a public record of implementation gaps that civil society can use and that the EU can reference in bilateral relations.

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Recommendation 3: Improve Monitoring and Defend Compliance

The EU should engage with the UN80 reform process on a case-by-case basis. For the migration regime, it should provide viable alternatives to the merger options for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and IOM. The proposed integration of these agencies would generate short-term budget savings while imposing longer-term governance costs. The legal distinction between refugee protection and migration management, which underpins non-refoulement as a binding norm, depends in part on institutional separation. An agency with a blended mandate would face sustained pressure to subordinate protection functions to migration management objectives, particularly given the direction that major donor states are setting for global governance (PassBlue 2025).

The EU should provide earmarked funding to UNHCR for expanded monitoring and reporting on GCR pledge fulfilment. The third Indicator Report (UNHCR 2025b) shows that the framework exists, but resources for politically usable tracking are lacking. This requires a commission budget line and EU backing in UNHCR's Executive Committee. The EU should also use its standing on UNHCR's Executive Committee and IOM's Council to oppose any UN80 restructuring that reduces UNHCR's operational independence, backing that position with a credible alternative of financing. Defending the compacts' review forums and indicator frameworks is the form of strategic multilateral engagement available to the EU in the current period of governance retreat (Blockmans 2026).

Recommendation 4: Secure Predictable Financing

The US aid freeze left IOM with a funding gap of approximately 40 percent of its operational budget and up to 5,000 staff at risk; the formal January 2026 withdrawal made this permanent. UNHCR faces comparable reductions. The EU cannot fully replace US contributions. For UNHCR alone, the US contributed $2.1 billion in 2024, compared with the European Commission's $271 million — all tightly earmarked — while Germany and other member states contributed separately. For IOM, the EU was the second-largest donor at €480 million, but again, member states — including Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy — contribute independently and often more flexibly. Rather than attempting to fill the gap in full, the EU and member states should coordinate their contributions, and press for less restrictive earmarking, to target UNHCR and IOM operations in the regions where funding collapse most directly affects EU borders. The clearest case is UNHCR's operations in North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Western Balkans, the regions that directly affect EU migration and displacement dynamics. If UNHCR loses the capacity to operate in Libya or Sudan, the consequences reach EU borders directly.

The clearest case is UNHCR's operations in North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Western Balkans, the regions that directly affect EU migration and displacement dynamics. If UNHCR loses the capacity to operate in Libya or Sudan, the consequences reach EU borders directly.Without registration, protection screening, or humanitarian presence in those countries, more people are pushed into irregular and dangerous onward movement towards Europe. The EU has a strategic interest in UNHCR maintaining its presence and registration functions in North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Western Balkans that goes beyond humanitarian principles: when UNHCR's capacity collapses in these regions, irregular and dangerous onward movement towards EU borders increases. Financing options within the current architecture are constrained. Global Europe budget contributions to UNHCR are tightly earmarked and tied to political agreements that member states negotiated around control objectives; reorienting them towards core operational support would require renegotiating those arrangements. The more tractable near-term option is for the EU to use its position on UNHCR's Executive Committee to advocate for more flexible earmarking of existing contributions and to coordinate member-state bilateral contributions under a common framework without requiring new legislation. In the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial

Framework negotiations, the EU should push for a dedicated external migration financing envelope distinct from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund's internal allocation, though the political space for this will depend heavily on how defence spending demands shape the overall negotiation.

To amplify impact, the EU should use its financing position to convene a donor coordination mechanism with Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia to collectively fill the structural gap left by the US withdrawal from global UNHCR and IOM financing. No single donor can address this gap unilaterally, and without coordination, each remaining contributor risks underinvesting relative to the collective need, since all rely on UNHCR registration and case management for their own resettlement programmes and asylum systems, and all face domestic political pressure when irregular arrivals increase as upstream protection capacity collapses. EU financing for UNHCR and IOM should also explicitly route a share of funds to local civil society organisations and sub-national governments in displacement-affected countries. The direct channelling of humanitarian and development resources to local actors was already a recognised priority in the humanitarian reform agenda even before the US budget cuts (Grand Bargain 2016–2026). The collapse of US funding has made the case for localisation more urgent as local organisations offer deeper community trust and greater operational resilience when large UN agencies face funding disruptions (Lombardo and Patrick 2025). The EU should make localisation a formal condition of its bilateral migration governance partnerships.

The collapse of US funding has made the case for localisation more urgent.

Recommendation 5: Align External With Internal Commitments

Aligning domestic and global migration regulations requires the EU to model best practices in its own conduct, reduce barriers to civil society participation, and ensure representation of marginalised actors in multilateral processes. The EU currently falls short on all three. The EU's credibility in global migration forums rests on whether its own conduct is consistent with the standards it advocates externally. Currently, several member states carry out pushbacks at EU external borders that are incompatible with the 1951 Refugee Convention and the GCR obligations that the EU supports in UN forums. The Pact on Migration and Asylum, which enters into full application in June 2026, establishes border procedures that human rights organisations have criticised for restricting access to asylum in ways that risk violating non-refoulement. The pattern of making development assistance conditional on cooperation in migration control blurs the distinction between refugee protection and migration management in a way that mirrors the state-centric governance model the EU claims to oppose (Carrera et al. 2024). The legal basis for addressing this is Article 208 TFEU, which requires the EU to ensure its policies do not undermine its development objectives. Externalisation arrangements that transfer protection obligations to third countries as a condition of development cooperation are difficult to reconcile with that requirement.

Migration is a significant driver of development in its own right: remittances to low- and middle-income countries reached $669 billion in 2023, more than three times global official development assistance (ODA) (World Bank 2024). An EU approach that treats migration purely as a security problem to be reduced misses this and foregoes influence over origin and transit countries, for whom migration governance is inseparable from development policy. The positive reformulation is to make development cooperation conditional on whether partner countries uphold refugee protection standards and involve civil society, rather than on whether they reduce migration numbers. Operationalising this through NDICI-Global Europe programming and EU positions within IOM and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) would align external migration policy with both treaty obligations and stated multilateral commitments and would give the EU a substantive offer for Plural South partners.

The Annual Migration Management Cycle, which produces a publicly available assessment of member-state asylum system performance and enters its first full operating cycle in 2026, is the instrument best placed to surface the internal coherence gap. Its primary function is to determine solidarity contributions under the Pact on Migration and Asylum. But its assessment outputs document the gap between EU advocacy and EU practice in a publicly available form. Linking that documentation explicitly to the EU's positions in GCR review processes would be a form of self-binding that costs little institutionally but carries significant credibility value with Plural South partners that remain sceptical of European double standards.

The pact was adopted in May 2024 against the votes of Hungary and Poland, and with abstentions from the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Peerboom, Tsourdi, and Kenkel 2025). Poland's government has since stated it will not implement the relocation mechanism. Direct enforcement through infringement proceedings has a poor track record in this domain and is slow across the legislative agenda. The more tractable instrument is the thematic facility within the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, where approximately 30 percent of the total fund is not pre-allocated to national programmes. These non-pre-allocated funds can be directed towards member states that contribute to solidarity mechanisms. This creates a positive incentive structure without requiring confrontational enforcement action.

Digitalisation

Digital governance has become a central and increasingly urgent topic in global policy discussions, reflecting both its enduring relevance and the growing complexity of the international context in which it is embedded. Despite mounting challenges and persistent strains on the multilateral system, the governance of digital technologies continues to command high-level attention across a wide range of international forums.

Institutional developments further illustrate the sustained momentum behind efforts to shape shared and permanent digital governance platforms and frameworks — e.g., the first convening of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) as a permanent UN body and the replacement of the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) by the *Global Mechanism on Developments in the Field of ICTs in the Context of International Security and Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in the Use of ICTs*. At the same time, the adoption of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law represents a significant milestone. It stands out as a rare example of international cooperation delivering tangible results in an increasingly contested area of global governance.

The case of cryptocurrencies offers a different perspective. Recent shifts in the United States' approach to crypto regulation have reignited debates over existing international standards, with some central bankers questioning the applicability of the Basel Committee framework in the current environment. Likewise, the emergence of a US stablecoin regulatory framework has prompted reactions across jurisdictions, including within the European Union, where policymakers are reassessing aspects of the Markets in Crypto-Assets (MiCA) Regulation. These developments highlight the difficulties of achieving regulatory convergence among major actors. At the same time, the cross-border nature of crypto-assets continues to underscore the need for international cooperation, particularly in areas such as anti-money laundering and the fight against illicit financial flows, where a core set of common norms remains broadly shared.

Taken together, these developments confirm that, even in a fragmented and uncertain global context, digital governance remains a critical domain with far-reaching implications, and that its inherently cross-border nature makes multilateral approaches particularly decisive in shaping effective outcomes.

Recommendation 1: Reframe and Own the Narrative

Reframing and strengthening the narrative around multilateral governance is particularly important in the digital domain, given the inherently transnational nature of the associated challenges and risks. In this regard, EU institutions should present multilateral cooperation as the most effective way to preserve the interests and values affected by the evolution of the digital sector.

Beyond the traditional scope of multilateral institutions, there are growing efforts to address the rapid rise of cryptocurrencies. In this area, the EU and its institutions, including the European Central Bank, would be well advised to promote a narrative that frames multilateral governance as a key tool to safeguard financial stability and monetary sovereignty, given the cross-border nature of crypto-assets, which makes unilateral regulation ineffective and exposes the system to regulatory arbitrage. In cyberspace governance, the EU should insist on favouring dialogue on legitimate, future-proof governance frameworks for responsible state behaviour that reduce the risk of conflict and benefit society. Similarly, in the domain of artificial intelligence, the EU has strongly contributed to moving away from a narrow emphasis on technological competition towards the construction of a governance framework grounded in human dignity and fundamental rights. The Council of Europe's Framework Convention on AI represents a key reference point in this regard, as it anchors AI development in principles such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Emphasising this approach allows for a narrative in which rights-based governance of trustworthy AI and innovation are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

Recommendation 2: Build Coalitions

Strengthened cooperation with like-minded partners is especially relevant across the digital domain, where geopolitical fragmentation increasingly challenges the effectiveness of multilateral governance. In the current geopolitical context, however, maintaining stable coalitions has become more difficult. On crypto, the EU must not follow the recent American shift. It should instead deepen engagement with partners like Canada and the United Kingdom, which share a cautious approach to unbacked cryptocurrencies and aim to limit the risks to financial stability posed by the spread of stablecoins. In cyberspace governance, longstanding divisions remain between supporters of an open and rules-based internet and countries advocating stronger state control and cyber sovereignty. The EU should continue to promote a cooperative and rules-based approach, while using the transition to the new UN mechanisms as an opportunity to strengthen existing partnerships and build new coalitions around shared governance principles. Similarly, in the domain of artificial intelligence, the EU has played a significant role in shaping the principles and standards underpinning the Council of Europe's Framework Convention. As the convention is now open to worldwide signatories, coalition-building is central to transforming it from a primarily regional initiative into a global standard for rights-based governance. Therefore, the EU has a strategic interest in encouraging the participation of states outside of the Council of Europe, and in sustaining outreach to partners in the Plural South to avoid perceptions of exclusivity and broaden the treaty's legitimacy. Expanding membership beyond Europe would strengthen the convention's legitimacy, promote greater regulatory convergence, and support the development of a more coherent international framework for AI governance.

Recommendation 3: Improve Monitoring and Defend Compliance

Regarding cryptocurrencies, targeted institutional reforms should focus on enhancing transparency, improving representation, and strengthening monitoring mechanisms. First, the high level of confidentiality characterising these bodies has exposed them to criticism, including concerns about limited accountability and the risk of regulatory capture. Addressing this issue could involve publishing more detailed meeting records (drawing inspiration from the European Central Bank's model) that reflect the range of positions expressed while preserving the anonymity of individual representatives. Second, European representation within these institutions warrants reconsideration. Moving towards a more unified representation by EU institutions could better reflect the distribution of competences in economic and financial governance and enhance coherence in external engagement. Finally, improving monitoring and domestic uptake requires expanding access to information. Providing a broader and more systematic set of data to national policymakers and the public would support more informed legislative processes and facilitate greater acceptance and implementation of multilateral standards at the domestic level.

In cyberspace governance, the EU has contributed to the institutionalisation of cybersecurity dialogue, ensuring greater continuity and coherence. The Global Mechanism, which brings together all 193 UN member states in a permanent, multilateral framework after years of ad hoc processes, will now require a streamlined design to foster coordination between plenary and thematic work while avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy. The introduction of Dedicated Thematic Groups is particularly significant, as it marks a shift towards implementation by translating agreed norms into concrete policy actions. At the same time, accountability is strengthened through mechanisms such as a five-year cycle, biennial progress reports, and a review conference. A similar logic applies to the evolution of the IGF. It has moved beyond the uncertainty of periodic renewals towards enhancing its practical relevance, including through more policy-oriented outputs and stronger linkages with broader UN frameworks, such as the Global Digital Compact. That is, it has moved from a deliberative space to one that generates actionable insights for policymakers.

Improving monitoring and domestic uptake requires expanding access to information.

In the field of artificial intelligence, the effectiveness of the Council of Europe Framework Convention will depend on the design of its institutional follow-up mechanisms. As the treaty enters into force, establishing a robust Conference of the Parties (CoP) will be essential to ensure it evolves into a dynamic and adaptive framework. The CoP should be mandated to review progress, issue recommendations, and develop credible procedures to monitor and verify state compliance. In parallel, transforming the current Committee on Artificial Intelligence into a permanent body would provide a stable platform for ongoing oversight, allowing the governance framework to evolve in response to technological developments. Such a structure should also incorporate formal channels for civil society participation, thereby strengthening transparency and democratic accountability. In addition, promoting practical tools for implementation will be key. In this regard, the HUDERIA methodology (Human Rights, Democracy, and Rule of Law Impact Assessment) offers a valuable, risk-based approach to operationalising treaty principles.

Recommendation 4: Secure Predictable Financing

Across the three domains, several key multilateral bodies currently operate under unstable funding models or face significant budgetary constraints that may threaten their long-term effectiveness. The main international standard-setting bodies for cryptocurrencies (FSB, FATF, and BCBS) benefit from relatively stable funding arrangements. However, maintaining this stability remains critical in light of potential geopolitical shifts. This is particularly important where the “robustness of multilateralism” is at stake. For instance, if a shift in US policy towards unilateralism were to eventually threaten the budgets of these international bodies, sustained EU funding would be a primary tool to protect their independence and norm-setting mandates.

As for cyberspace governance, the issue of predictable funding was particularly relevant for the IGF, which for many years relied on voluntary contributions rather than on the UN regular budget. In this context, the EU has played an important role as a major supporter of the forum. The establishment of the IGF as a permanent UN body, together with more stable funding and staffing arrangements within the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), has helped address some of these long-standing concerns. Finally, for artificial intelligence, ensuring adequate and predictable funding is essential for the effective implementation of the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention. The organisation currently faces budgetary pressures, which were exacerbated by the loss of contributions following Russia’s expulsion due to its invasion of Ukraine. These constraints raise concerns about its capacity to manage and support the treaty over time, especially regarding capacity-building initiatives — crucial for translating treaty commitments into domestic practice. Financial and technical support from the EU and other parties will be key to strengthening the convention’s role.

Recommendation 5: Align External With Internal Commitments

Establishing a clearer domestic-to-global regulatory alignment, while avoiding duplication and fragmentation, involves creating a seamless link between high-level international principles and concrete national laws. In this regard, the EU often acts as a bridge, transposing global soft law into binding domestic regulations and then using those frameworks as a template for other nations to follow. For cryptocurrencies, the EU’s domestictoglobal regulatory alignment is already solid, but further improvements are possible. The EU should address existing asymmetries in international representation by moving towards a more unified external representation that reflects the centralisation of competences at the European level and ensures equal weight for all member states. In cyberspace governance, the EU is well positioned to strengthen the link between international norm-setting and domestic implementation. Building on its cyber diplomacy efforts and regulatory framework, the EU can play an important role in supporting the implementation of the UN framework of responsible state behaviour and promoting a rules-based approach to cyberspace. In this context, the newly established Global Mechanism represents an important step forward, as it aims to bridge the gap between international norms and their practical application by clarifying how global commitments translate into national conduct.

In the field of artificial intelligence, a structured model of alignment is already emerging and should be further reinforced. This three-tiered approach consists of: (1) the Council of Europe's Framework Convention, which provides a common set of overarching principles grounded in human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, (2) the HUDERIA methodology, which offers a practical tool for translating these principles into measurable, risk-based practices, and (3) the EU AI Act, which operationalises these standards through binding regulatory requirements. To strengthen this model, the EU should ensure greater integration between international commitments and domestic implementation by encouraging key institutions — such as the Fundamental Rights Agency and the AI Office — to embed the convention's principles into their operational activities systematically.

Conclusions

Multilateral governance today is marked by a widening gap between functional interdependence and political fragmentation. Across the environmental, digital, trade, health, and migration domains, the need for coordinated international action has never been greater, yet the institutional capacity to deliver such coordination is increasingly under pressure from geopolitical competition, widening technological divides, rising economic coercion, and declining trust in collective problem-solving. Even if some systems are close to collapse (e.g., migration), most existing regimes remain formally in place. Their effectiveness, however, increasingly depends on supplementary arrangements such as coalitions of the willing, plurilateral agreements, and informal coordination mechanisms. As a result, global governance is becoming more fragmented, hybrid, and multi-layered, combining formal multilateral institutions with plurilateral initiatives, informal coalitions, and unilateral action.

For the EU, this changing landscape reinforces a dual imperative. On the one hand, the EU remains one of the few actors with both the capacity (in terms of diplomatic and regulatory power as well as economic and financial weight) and the interest to sustain rules-based international cooperation across multiple areas of global governance. On the other hand, maintaining this role requires a shift from defending multilateralism in abstract terms to actively shaping its practical evolution. This includes investing in institutional repair where possible, while also engaging more strategically in alternative governance formats that preserve *human* rights (not AI) and core principles of good governance such as transparency, predictability, and non-discrimination.

Whether in tackling climate change, trade and taxation, global health, migration and refugees, or digitalisation, the EU faces a common set of strategic questions: how to reconcile normative leadership with geopolitical realism; how to sustain multilateral institutions under conditions of contestation; and how to translate internal unity into external credibility. In synthesising the five main recommendations across these domains, it becomes clear that, while each policy area faces unique challenges, the EU's strategic approach must be both differentiated and coherent.

Reframing and owning the narrative is universally critical, yet the emphasis varies. In climate and health, the EU is urged to highlight tangible benefits and democratic inclusivity, countering scepticism with evidence of the practical utility of multilateralism. In trade and taxation, the narrative must reconcile the EU's traditional commitment to rules-based openness with its pragmatic turn towards strategic autonomy. Migration and digitalisation require the EU to clarify the non-binding nature of compacts and the need for multilateral governance, thereby making the case that collective action is a strategic necessity. The EU thus faces a trade-off between idealism and realism: projecting a unified, values-based narrative may expose internal contradictions or risk weakening its normative leadership if pragmatic adaptations are not transparently acknowledged.

Building coalitions emerges as a shared imperative, but the modalities differ. Climate and health policy advice prioritises issue-based alliances with like-minded partners, leveraging platforms such as the G7, G20, and MEAs to foster broad-based cooperation. In trade and taxation, coalition-building is recommended both within and outside the WTO, using bilateral and regional agreements to preserve multilateral templates amid stalled global progress. In migration policy, pre-coordination with key swing states and the Plural South is stressed, with voluntary peer-review mechanisms to enhance transparency. In digitalisation, coalition-building is essential to counter fragmentation, with the EU encouraged to expand participation in AI governance and cyberspace frameworks, especially among partners in the Plural South. Yet, building broad coalitions often requires compromise on ambition, speed, or values, potentially diluting outcomes or risking fragmentation of global governance if some partners are left behind.

Improving monitoring and defending compliance is a cross-cutting concern, but again, the instruments and focus vary. Climate and health policy call for clearer mandates, stronger leadership, and robust compliance frameworks, linking transparency and information disclosure to funding and representation. Global governance in trade and taxation would benefit from compatibility assessments and pilot projects to demonstrate feasibility, while migration policy requires voluntary peer review and linking solidarity contributions to funding incentives. The EU must balance effectiveness with inclusivity: stricter compliance mechanisms can incentivise better behaviour but are likely to provoke resistance by clashing with member-state sovereignty and/or by excluding or penalising weaker third states. Digitalisation demands enhanced transparency, unified governance, and streamlined monitoring mechanisms, particularly in the context of cryptocurrencies, AI, and cybersecurity, to ensure accountability and domestic uptake of ethical standards. In the global race for digital dominance, which is mainly between the US and China, the EU can leverage its power as a customer.

> In the global race for digital dominance, mainly between the US and China, the EU can leverage its power as a customer.

Securing predictable financing is a recurring theme across many multilateral institutions, reflecting the systemic funding crisis across domains. The climate calamity and persistent global health needs require a shift from project-based to core, long-term funding, combined with performance-based accountability, to enhance institutional stability. Global governance in trade and taxation requires multi-year funding commitments and more unearmarked contributions to reduce dependence on annual negotiations and improve flexibility. Similarly, the collapsing migration regime highlights the need to safeguard less-tied operational funding for key institutions such as UNHCR and IOM, while promoting compliance and civil society engagement. In digitalisation, the need for predictable financing is less prominent but remains relevant to supporting secretarial capacity and technical assistance within emerging governance frameworks. The trade-off here lies between budgetary stability and the flexibility of international institutions, and between internal coherence and member-state control over resources, potentially limiting the EU's ability to direct funds to its priorities or risking criticism for self-serving allocations.

Aligning external with internal commitments is essential for credibility and effectiveness. Climate restoration and health protection point to the transfer of competences and resources from the national to the EU level, creating uniform frameworks and strengthening agencies like ECDC and EMA. In trade, systematic WTO compatibility assessments and greater inclusiveness should be demanded. In taxation, consultation with developing-country partners and constructive engagement with UN-led processes should be sought. Similarly, the EU ought to link internal assessments of migration policy with external review mechanisms, operationalising conditionality through funding incentives. In the realm of digitalisation, the EU would be well advised to involve civil society, reduce procedural barriers, and apply best practices to ensure that its regulations and external advocacy are mutually reinforcing. To be sure, regulatory alignment may constrain policy flexibility, require politically sensitive transfers of competence, or expose domestic shortcomings, posing risks of internal tension or political backlash. Once again, a careful calibration will be required.

While the five policy areas require tailored policy responses, the EU's overarching challenge is to harmonise its strategic narrative, coalition-building, compliance mechanisms, financing, and regulatory alignment, thereby strengthening the robustness, effectiveness, and democratic legitimacy of multilateral governance in an era of profound disruption. Achieving coherence and consistency demands that the EU transparently acknowledge and navigate the inherent trade-offs between ambition and inclusivity, centralisation and flexibility, values and pragmatism, and internal unity and external effectiveness.

Ultimately, the future of global governance will depend less on restoring a single, comprehensive multilateral order and more on managing a complex ecosystem of overlapping institutions and arrangements. The EU's strategic task is therefore to ensure coherence within this system: aligning its internal policies with external commitments, building durable coalitions across regions and regimes, and supporting institutions that can translate norms into implementation. In doing so, it can help preserve the substance of multilateral cooperation even as its formal architecture continues to evolve.

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In an era marked by global challenges, international cooperation is more essential than ever. Yet multilateral initiatives too often end in gridlock, as dominant states seek to bend the global order to their own interests. Enter ENSURED, a Horizon Europe-funded research consortium studying how the EU and its member states can better defend multilateralism and make global governance more robust, effective, and democratic.

ENSURED focuses on key policy domains that by their very nature pose complex transnational challenges. Our research assesses the state of play in these different areas and investigates the EU's strengths and weaknesses as an actor working to defend and transform multilateralism. Embracing the ethos of multilateral cooperation, the ENSURED consortium comprises universities, think tanks, and civil society groups from across Europe, Brazil, India, South Africa, China, and the United States. We aim to equip policymakers in the EU with evidence-based insights, actionable recommendations, and practical tools to promote better global governance for a world in transition.

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Editorial coordination: Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi)

Reinhardtstr. 7
10117 Berlin
Germany
ensured@gppi.net