Strategic Reflections for the EU and Its Neighbours in an Era of AI Transformation and Multi-Level Geopolitical Pressures

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A TRANSFORMING EUROPEAN STRATEGIC ECOSYSTEM

The contributions assembled in *L'Europe Unie – Special Volume 23/2025* reveal a European strategic environment undergoing profound, simultaneous transformations. The Union, its neighbours, and its global partners confront a convergence of systemic pressures: disruptive technological innovation, legal and ethical challenges in digital governance, widening financial vulnerabilities, and resurgent geopolitical competition shaped by Russian aggression, instability in the wider neighbourhood, and the impact of Mediterranean social and political change.

Across all chapters, a common thread emerges: **Europe's resilience depends on strengthening technology governance, consolidating democratic cultures, and building coherent geopolitical strategies grounded in historical understanding and institutional credibility**. While the drivers of instability differ—from algorithmic opacity to hybrid warfare, from fintech-driven inequalities to unresolved security guarantees—the solutions converge around robust legal frameworks, institutional trust, and strategic depth.

The volume's interdisciplinary lens—drawing on law, economics, history, political science, sociology, and anthropology—confirms that European security in the digital age is not reducible to military or technological capabilities alone. Instead, it emerges from the intersection of **normative regulation, socio-economic inclusion, historical memory, and geopolitical alignment**.

I. AI, Cybersecurity and the Changing Conditions of Digital Trust[4]

The first chapter of the volume demonstrates convincingly that **artificial intelligence is no longer a sectoral issue**, but a **structuring condition** of contemporary governance, democracy and security.

The analysis of **digital trust in game development through AI** extends this logic into a sector often underestimated in policy debates. The gaming industry is not marginal: it is a laboratory of

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[4] See also: Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *EU Law and Politics at the Crossroads: Navigating the Complexities of AI, Digitalization, Data Protection, Security, and Radicalization (L'Europe unie/United Europe, Paris, 20/2023, special volume),* Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023. DOI 10.5281/zenodo.15182658

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immersive environments, behavioural data extraction and real-time interaction on a massive scale. By asking how AI can both enhance and undermine digital trust in games, the article points to a broader lesson: **trust is not a by-product of innovation; it is a precondition for sustainable digital markets.**

Defining the components of digital trust—transparency, fairness, data protection, content moderation, accountability—within an empirical framework that includes case studies and EU hard and soft law, the study implicitly warns that **Europe may lead in creation but lag in distribution and monetisation if trust deficits persist**. For the EU's neighbours, which often host development studios or serve as testing grounds while lacking robust regulatory infrastructures, this question becomes existential: they may either align themselves with European trust standards or slide into a fragmented digital landscape dominated by extraterritorial platforms and opaque business models.

The paper on **Deepfake Threats and EU Law: Navigating Disinformation, Cyber Violence, and the Risks of Digital Manipulation"** situates itself at the intersection of Chapter I and Chapter III: **AI-assisted manipulation as a vector of disinformation and cyber violence**. Deepfakes do not simply threaten personal reputations; they **erode the evidentiary foundations** of public life, creating structural uncertainty about what is real, especially in election contexts or conflict zones. The volume therefore, establishes a continuum between:

- technical vulnerability disclosure;
- trust frameworks in consumer industries like gaming;
- and the **weaponisation of AI-generated content**.

The paper on **brain–computer interfaces (BCIs)** extends the discussion beyond conventional privacy concerns. By connecting the human brain directly to external devices, BCIs raise questions about **neurorights, cognitive liberty, identity, and integrity**. The author argues that existing human rights categories—freedom of thought, privacy, bodily integrity—are strained by these technologies, which blur the line between internal mental life and externalised data.

For the EU and its neighbours, this is not speculative philosophy. Medical applications of BCIs are already being explored; military and dual-use research is not far behind. If the EU aspires to be a **normative power in AI and neurotechnology**, it cannot stop at data protection; it must articulate **substantive standards on mental autonomy** and dignified use of neurotechnology. Neighbouring states will have to decide whether to adopt these standards, align with other regulatory models, or fall into a grey zone of experimental practices without robust legal guarantees.

Finally, the study on **biohacking** reveals another frontier where **regulation, ethics and innovation collide**. By examining DIY biology practices and community labs in Europe and Latin America, the authors show that biohacking can both **empower local communities** and **amplify risks**: biopiracy, exploitation of indigenous genetic resources, environmental externalities, and cybersecurity gaps in biological data and connected devices. The article's crucial contribution is to demonstrate how instruments like the GDPR intersect with biohacking—not only in terms of data, but also in relation to **knowledge governance and benefit-sharing frameworks**.

For the EU and its neighbours, this confirms that **AI transformation is entangled with broader socio-technical movements**, which cannot be policed solely through high-level regulations. A multi-level governance approach must recognise grassroots innovation while preventing the instrumentalisation of biohacking for exploitative or destabilising purposes.

In sum, Chapter I demonstrates that **AI transformation reshapes trust, vulnerability, identity, and rights at a systemic level.** The EU and its neighbours are not merely regulating devices; they are redefining the basic conditions under which citizens can still believe in institutions, in information, and in the continuity of their own mental and bodily integrity.

2. Digital Governance and the New European Regulatory Paradigm

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The studies in Chapter II illuminate a critical dimension of European resilience: the governance of data, artificial intelligence, and financial technologies. Three overarching conclusions arise.

2.1. Data Protection as a Structural Condition for Innovation

Fintech's transformative potential—algorithmic lending, digital wallets, automated savings, and mobile-first financial inclusion—is dependent on trust, transparency, and enforceable rights. The research demonstrates that:

- GDPR remains the cornerstone of digital constitutionalism in Europe.
- Data protection does not restrict innovation; it **enforces the conditions under which innovation becomes socially legitimate**.
- Regions with weak data governance experience higher risks of algorithmic discrimination, digital exclusion, and predatory lending.

As multiple papers note, fintech can democratize financial access *or* extend inequalities depending on the normative frameworks governing personal data. The conclusion is clear: **GDPR and the EU AI Act form the normative backbone of responsible digital finance**.

2.2. Sensitive Data and the Ethical Foundations of European Law

The study on Article 9 GDPR shows that sensitive personal data constitute not mere informational categories but **moral and constitutional constructs**. Their misuse affects identity, dignity, and equality. The reversal of the justification burden—demanding that processors justify necessity—embeds an ethical architecture into EU law that distinguishes European governance from that of other global actors.

This approach strengthens:

- human-rights-based policymaking,
- non-discrimination safeguards,
- democratic legitimacy in the digital sphere.

In a geopolitical context where authoritarian regimes use data as an instrument of control, the EU insists that **data governance reflects a model of democratic ethics**.

2.3. Financial Literacy, Behavioural Anchors, and Socio-Economic Inclusion

The findings of the empirical study on financial perceptions reinforce Europe's long-standing recognition—also echoed in OECD policies—that **financial literacy is a structural component of social resilience**.

Income, saving practices, financial goal-setting, and initial perceptions significantly influence stability. Meanwhile, motivation, employment status, and deferred payments play weaker roles.

These results highlight that:

- Successful financial education must operate cognitively (knowledge), attitudinally (confidence), and behaviourally (habits).
- EU and OECD frameworks remain relevant and empirically validated by Romanian evidence.
- Structural vulnerabilities can be mitigated through behaviourally informed public policy.

Together, the contributions in Chapter II demonstrate that Europe's digital transformation must be anchored in **legal clarity, ethical rigor, behavioural insight, and institutional trust**.

3. Democracy and Geopolitics: Continuity and Rupture in Russian Power Projection[5]

[5] See also: Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Maria; Costea, Simion. *EU Security and Multicultural Societies. Dealing with a Russian Empire Revival*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2024. Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *EU Law and Politics at the Crossroads: Navigating the Complexities of AI, Digitalization, Data Protection, Security, and Radicalization (L'Europe unie/United Europe, Paris, 20/2023, special volume),* Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023. DOI 10.5281/zenodo.15182658 . Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *The EU foreign and security dilemmas in a challenging world (L'Europe unie/United Europe 19/2023, special volume)* Cluj- Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023

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Chapter III provides a multi-layered examination of Russian behaviour in Europe—from hybrid interference to historical military occupations, and from informational operations to failed security guarantees in Ukraine.

3.1. Historical Continuities of Russian Hybrid Interference[6]

The study on Russian electoral interference demonstrates that the Soviet/Russian playbook has displayed remarkable **continuity across a century**:

- cultivation of influence networks,
- narrative manipulation,
- exploitation of political polarisation,
- coordinated disinformation campaigns.

While technologies have evolved, the strategic objectives—weakening adversaries, fostering confusion, and undermining democratic legitimacy—remain constant. The historical approach shows that democratic states have *not sufficiently learned* from documented Soviet "active measures" of the 1980s.

The conclusion is evident: **European democracies must integrate historical memory into contemporary counter-disinformation strategies**.

3.2. The 2024 European Parliament Elections in Romania: SOE Model Persisting

The article on Romania's 2024 European elections reveals:

- the durability of the Second Order Election (SOE) model,
- persistent under-Europeanisation of political discourse, and
- structural dependence on domestic triggers for increased turnout.

Despite higher participation rates in 2019 and 2024, campaigns remained domestically focused, with European themes marginalised. The findings expose a critical democratic weakness: **European elections in Romania still fail to build genuine deliberative engagement with EU policy debates**.

This reflects broader European challenges: insufficient political socialisation, low visibility of MEP roles, and domesticisation of EU-level contestation.

3.3. The Budapest Memorandum: The Limits of Security Assurances

The re-evaluation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum demonstrates that:

- Ukraine received assurances, not guarantees.
- The arrangement ensured denuclearisation but failed to establish deterrence.
- Grey-zone aggression (Crimea, Donbas, 2022 invasion) exploited the non-coercive nature of the document.

The consequences extend to the EU's strategic culture:

- post-2014, Europe shifted toward resilience and sanctions-based responses;
- post-2022, it accelerated defence-industrial coordination and EU–NATO convergence;
- yet Budapest's structure cannot be retroactively enforced.

The lesson is unambiguous: **European security cannot rely on political assurances alone; it requires capabilities, alliances, and enforceability**. [7]

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[6] See also: Costea, Maria, and Simion Costea. *Diplomație și actori geopolitici în epoca interdependenței complexe [Diplomacy and Geopolitical Actors in the Age of Complex Interdependence]*. Cluj-Napoca, Napoca Star, 2021. Costea, Maria, Costea Simion, "Ukraine between EU and Eurasian Regional Project in 2013", p.113-131, in *Transylvanian Review*, Vol. XXIV, Supplement No. 1, 2015 DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15564422

[7] See also: Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Maria; Costea, Simion. *EU Security and Multicultural Societies. Dealing with a Russian Empire Revival*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2024. Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *The EU foreign and security dilemmas in a challenging world (L'Europe unie/United Europe 19/2023, special volume)* Cluj- Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023

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3.4. Russian Imperial Military Presence in the 19th Century: Moscow Archival Revelations

The scholarly review of Ela Cosma's volume demonstrates:

- long-term strategic patterns of Russian intrusion in the Romanian Principalities;
- military, political, and administrative mechanisms of occupation;
- Moscow's reliance on direct control and logistical dominance;
- the value of rare archival sources in reconstructing imperial behaviour.

These documents bridge 19th-century occupation with contemporary Russian geopolitical behaviour, reinforcing the conclusion that **Russian power projection follows a consistent historical logic**.

Taken together, the contributions of Chapter III reveal that **European democracy and security are inseparable from historical memory and geopolitical clarity.**

4. The Mediterranean and the EU Neighbourhood: Identity, Tension, and Structural Change

The studies in Chapter IV examine Tunisia[8] as a micro-laboratory of Mediterranean transformation, illustrating how geopolitics, identity, migration[9], and local socio-economic strategies intersect.

4.1. Mediterraneity as a Construct, Not a Given

The notion of "Mediterraneity" emerges as an **ambiguous, contested, and political space**. The Tunisian case shows:

- asymmetries in Euro-Mediterranean frameworks,
- shifting post-2011 representations,
- the influence of migration flows on symbolic and social identities,
- the role of civil society as a corrective force.

Rather than a natural space of cooperation, Mediterraneity appears as an arena of negotiation shaped by power relations.

4.2. Indigenous Enterprises and Social Entrepreneurship

The study on indigenous enterprises argues convincingly that:

- local entrepreneurship reflects hybrid forms of social solidarity,
- conventional paradigms of entrepreneurship (actor, context, process) do not fully explain local realities,
- analytical models based on opportunity and ecosystem frameworks better capture the formation of indigenous enterprises.

This confirms broader EU–neighbourhood evidence: **local development requires adaptive models, not wholesale transfer of Western frameworks**.

Together, these contributions highlight that the EU's southern neighbourhood remains a space of profound socio-political creativity, but also vulnerability—requiring nuanced, historically informed, and culturally sensitive approaches.

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[8] *Histoire et mémoires. Entre savoirs, interprétations et transmission Colloque international en hommage au Professeur Hedi Saidi BOOK OF ABSTRACTS / LIVRE DES RÉSUMÉS*, ed Simion Costea, coord Adel Bouzid et alii, University of Sousse (Tunisia), 17–19 April 2025. Costea, Simion, *Preface – Hedi Saidi, La Franc-maçonnerie dans la Tunisie coloniale, Saga de la loge « L'Aurore du XXe Siècle » de Bizerte (1900-1940),* Paris, Editions du Cygne, 2024, 187 pages, ISBN: 9782849247761, 2849247766, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.30740.31369,

[9] See also: Costea, Maria, and Simion Costea. "Challenges of the EU in the Migrant/Refugee Crisis in 2015." In *Discourse as a Form of Multiculturalism in Literature and Communication. History and Cultural Mentalities*, ed. Iulian Boldea, 166–175. Târgu-Mureș: Arhipelag XXI Press, 2015. ISBN 978-606-8624-21-1. WOS:000450493600018. DOI 10.5281/zenodo.15712863.

5. Cross-Cutting Lessons for the EU and Its Neighbours[10]

Across the chapters, several **cross-cutting lessons** emerge.

1. **AI transformation is constitutional, not merely technical.** From digital trust in gaming to BCIs and biohacking, the volume shows that AI reshapes fundamental rights, institutional trust and the boundaries of personhood. The EU and its neighbours must therefore treat AI governance as a matter of **constitutional design**, not only of market regulation.

2. **Data protection and inclusion are inseparable.** Fintech, financial education and sensitive-data governance converge on the same point: without robust rights, transparency and accountability, digital inclusion becomes **precarious integration into opaque systems**. This applies equally to EU citizens and to neighbouring societies exposed to European regulatory influence.

3. **Security assurances without enforceable commitments are fragile.** The Budapest Memorandum case, when read alongside Russian interference, Trump's deals, Trump's 28 points in November 2025, and the archival history of Russian campaigns, underscores a hard truth: **political assurances and "soft" tools cannot replace credible deterrence**. For the EU, this demands a clearer articulation of when it is prepared to move from norms and sanctions to tangible security guarantees, especially for neighbouring states that have taken high-risk decisions aligned with European expectations.[11]

4. **Perception has become a central arena of conflict:** Deepfakes, disinformation, second-order election dynamics and long-standing active measures all point to the same diagnosis: **political authority now depends on controlling or at least stabilising informational environments.** The EU and its neighbours must invest not only in cyber-defence and platform regulation, but also in **media literacy, public-service media and resilient democratic institutions**. [12]

5. **Historical research is a strategic asset.** The Ela Cosma volume review reminds us that access to, and critical editing of, archives is not just an academic luxury; it is a **precondition for resisting revisionist narratives**. The EU should treat support for independent historical research and archival cooperation as part of its **security and democracy toolkit**.[13]

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[10] See also: Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Maria; Costea, Simion. *EU Security and Multicultural Societies. Dealing with a Russian Empire Revival*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2024. Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *EU Law and Politics at the Crossroads: Navigating the Complexities of AI, Digitalization, Data Protection, Security, and Radicalization (L'Europe unie/United Europe, Paris, 20/2023, special volume),* Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023. DOI 10.5281/zenodo.15182658. Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *The EU foreign and security dilemmas in a challenging world (L'Europe unie/United Europe 19/2023, special volume)* Cluj- Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023.

[11] Mihaela Daciana Natea, Veronica Zaharagiu, Lucian Săcălean, Simion Costea (eds).Resilient Multicultural Societies in the Face of Hybrid Threats, București: Eikon, 2025 Mihaela Daciana Natea, „From Education for Democratic Culture to Education for Resilience. Are they Different in Building Competences to Combat Disinformation?", in L'Europe Unie, France, nr 19/2023: *The EU Foreign Policy and Security Dilemmas in a Challenging World*

[12] See also: Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Maria; Costea, Simion. *EU Security and Multicultural Societies. Dealing with a Russian Empire Revival*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2024. Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *EU Law and Politics at the Crossroads: Navigating the Complexities of AI, Digitalization, Data Protection, Security, and Radicalization (L'Europe unie/United Europe, Paris, 20/2023, special volume),* Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023. DOI 10.5281/zenodo.15182658, Natea Mihaela Daciana, „Fabricating truth: from a hybrid war to political fake news. Study case on Romanian illiberal parties' discourse in the context of the Ukrainian war", *Civil Szemle*, Special Issues V/2023, pp. 155-168, Natea Mihaela Daciana, „The European Knowledge-Security Nexus: Science Diplomacy as a Policy Tool Against Hybrid Threats", *Europolity-Continuity and Change in European Governance*, nr6/2025. Natea Mihaela Daciana, *Disinformation crossing borders. The Multilayered Disinformation Concerning the War in Ukraine*, L'Harmattan, Paris France, 2022. Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *The EU foreign and security dilemmas in a challenging world (L'Europe unie/United Europe 19/2023, special volume)* Cluj- Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023

[13] *Histoire et mémoires. Entre savoirs, interprétations et transmission Colloque international en hommage au Professeur Hedi Saidi BOOK OF ABSTRACTS / LIVRE DES RÉSUMÉS University of Sousse (Tunisia), 17–19 April 2025,* Napoca Star 2025.

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This special volume does not offer comforting narratives. It reveals a European and neighbourhood landscape where **AI transformation, financial digitalisation, geopolitical rivalry and socio-economic fragility** intersect in complex and sometimes destabilising ways.

Yet the collective message is ultimately one of **qualified optimism**. The contributions show that the EU and its neighbours possess **intellectual, legal and institutional resources** to respond: robust data-protection principles, emerging AI regulation, deep historical expertise, vibrant civil societies and innovative local economies.

6. Europe at a Strategic Crossroads

The special volume[14] demonstrates that Europe stands at a decisive moment. The convergence of AI transformation, digital vulnerabilities, Russian aggression, and Mediterranean tensions compels the EU to articulate a coherent, future-oriented strategic vision.

Three overarching imperatives emerge:

1. **Strengthen resilience through law, ethics and civic culture:** The EU's distinctive model—rooted in rights, transparency, and normative clarity—remains its strongest defence against authoritarian pressures.
2. **Integrate historical depth into strategic policymaking:** From 1848 to 2024, European security challenges reveal recurrent patterns; understanding them provides foresight.
3. **Deepen cooperation with neighbours:** Whether in the Eastern Partnership or the Mediterranean, Europe's security architecture depends on inclusive, credible, multi-layered partnerships.

Ultimately, the volume affirms that European resilience is not a static condition but a **dynamic process of adaptation**, requiring vision, institutional courage, and the capacity to learn from history.

The challenge is one of **coherence and political will**. Technological governance must be integrated with security strategy, financial regulation with social policy, and neighbourhood frameworks with genuine recognition of partners' agency. If the EU and its neighbours can internalise the lessons articulated in this volume—about trust, rights, perception, power and memory—they may yet transform an age of AI and multi-level geopolitical pressures into an era of **more resilient, dignified and genuinely shared European futures**.

[14] This special volume is one of a series, including also:
Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *The EU foreign and security dilemmas in a challenging world (L'Europe unie/United Europe Paris, 19/2023, special volume)* Paris – Cluj- Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023.
Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *EU Law and Politics at the Crossroads: Navigating the Complexities of AI, Digitalization, Data Protection, Security, and Radicalization (L'Europe unie/United Europe, Paris, 20/2023, special volume),* Paris- Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2023. DOI 10.5281/zenodo.15182658.
Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *EU and its neighbours: resilience and multicultural harmony (L'Europe unie/United Europe Paris, 21/2024, special volume)* Paris – Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2024.
Natea, Mihaela Daciana; Costea, Simion (eds), *EU Enlargement and Resilience: Legal and Economic Reforms on Georgia's Path to Integration, (L'Europe unie/United Europe 22/2025- special volume),* Paris-Cluj Napoca: Napoca Star, 2025.

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