

THE GREAT HOMECOMING · A STRUCTURAL LOOK

What's Pulling Europe Apart — and What Could Hold It Together

A plain-language read of the European Union: where the strain really comes from, and what to do about it.

This is a structural assessment written for the general reader — no jargon required. It uses traffic-light readings (green = holding, amber = strained, red = weak) rather than precise scores, because the honest level of confidence here is "which way things are heading," not "exactly how much." It weighs the obvious alternative explanations, backs its claims with public data, and ends with concrete suggestions.

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Data: Eurostat, Eurobarometer

The short version

The core problem. Europe's trouble isn't that Brussels is incompetent or that countries refuse to cooperate. It's that the Union has taken on more shared rules and shared costs than its sense of *common belonging* can comfortably carry.

It can do a great deal together; it just doesn't yet feel enough like one community to bear the expensive parts.

The twist most people miss. Europeans actually trust the EU about as much as — often more than — their own national governments (roughly 49% trust the EU, 36% their national government). So the problem isn't general approval. It's the willingness to share *real costs* — to help pay for another country's pensions or debts, or accept binding rules — and that's where the sense of "we're one" runs thin.

The pressure building. Europe is ageing and having far fewer children (1.38 children per woman; heading toward roughly three working-age adults for every two retirees). That forces more cost-sharing exactly where belonging is weakest — the strain most likely to crack things.

The wrong fix, and the right direction. Breaking the Union into competing nations *without* rebuilding that shared belonging would split it apart, not set it free (Switzerland works because its regions compete inside a strong shared framework). The way forward is to rebuild belonging through things people can actually see and vote on — and push decisions to the right level. Not a choice between "more Brussels" and "blow it up."

1 · How to read this

We look at five simple things about the Union, and give each a traffic light:

- **Belonging** — how much people genuinely identify with, trust, and accept the EU's authority. When this is strong, people accept shared costs willingly; when it's weak, the same costs feel imposed.

- **Strain** — the visible friction right now: deadlock, disputes, protests, rules being ignored.
- **Hidden weakness** — problems not yet visible on the surface that could crack things later.
- **Direction** — what the Union is really aiming at: the shared whole, or each part for itself.
 - **Depth of unity** — how deeply the parts are actually woven together, not just how many rules they share.

green holding / improving

amber strained / mixed

red weak / worsening

2 · The core problem

The EU is the most ambitious attempt in history to unite very different nations by choice, and its founding values — solidarity, fairness, dignity, the rule of law — are genuinely admirable. Its strain doesn't come from incompetence: at writing rules, running trade, and coordinating standards across 27 countries, it is genuinely capable. The strain comes from a mismatch: it has extended shared rules and shared costs — especially the costly, identity-touching ones — faster than the shared sense of belonging can make them feel legitimate. So in places, integration is felt less as common purpose and more as something done *to* people, and that turns into resentment and friction.

Europe isn't failing for lack of competence, or for lack of cooperation. It's straining because it has built more

*togetherness than its sense of belonging can yet carry
— most of all where the costs are shared.*

3 · The signs

WHAT WE LOOK AT	READING	WHY
Belonging	fine in general, thin where it's costly	See the note below — this is the key one.
Strain	rising	Rule-of-law fights with Hungary and Poland; repeated deadlock over enlargement, money, and sharing out migration; one country (the UK) has already left.
Hidden weakness	high	Falling birth rate (1.38 in 2023, the lowest since 2004); a fast-ageing population; heavy debts in several countries; weak everyday ties between east and west.
Direction	mixed	The stated aims are genuinely about the whole, but day-to-day it drifts toward box-ticking and toward defining itself against outside threats.
Depth of unity		The ambition is high; the actual woven-togetherness lags behind it.

big
ambition,
modest
reality

The belonging question, answered honestly. On the surface, belonging looks fine — even improving. People trust the EU (about 49%) more than they trust their own national governments (about 36%), and most countries still want to be members. So the weakness isn't general dislike of the EU. It's something narrower and more important: people are far less willing to share *expensive* things — to fund another country's pensions or debts, or accept binding burden-sharing. Belonging is strong enough for cheap cooperation and thin for costly cooperation — and that's exactly where the next pressure is coming from.

4 · The ageing-and-money squeeze

This is the part that's easy to overlook and may matter most. Europe is having far fewer children — 1.38 per woman in 2023, the lowest in two decades, with births falling 5.4% in a single year. At the same time it is ageing fast: where there are nearly three working-age adults for every retiree today, that's heading toward roughly three for every two by the end of the century. And the Union has built up a web of shared financial promises and guarantees. Fewer working people, more retirees, more shared bills.

The catch: it can *look* stable today while quietly weakening underneath — the kind of pattern that often holds steady until it suddenly doesn't. And here's where it connects to belonging: people only pay willingly for others when they feel part of the same community. A German taxpayer helping

cover an Italian or Bulgarian shortfall has to feel "we're one" — which is exactly the costly kind of belonging that's thin. So the money-and-ageing pressure doesn't just sit beside the belonging problem; it's the force most likely to *break* it.

One clarification, so the picture stays accurate: there isn't a single east-west or north-south divide. The arguments about *money and transfers* have mostly run north-south (richer creditors vs. struggling debtors); the arguments about *rules and sovereignty* have mostly run east-west; and the ageing burden falls differently again. These are separate strains that all pull on the same belonging.

5 · Competition vs. togetherness — a false choice

A popular argument says the EU centralised too much and should be broken into smaller, competing countries — with Switzerland held up as the model. There's a real insight buried in it, but the conclusion is backwards, and here's the simple reason.

Competition is great *when there's shared glue holding the competitors together*, and corrosive when there isn't. With shared glue, rivals compete to contribute the most to a common project, and everyone gains. Without it, rivals just fight over a fixed pie, and the whole thing splits. Switzerland — the very example the breakup-advocates cite — proves the point: its regions compete hard, but *inside* a strong shared framework and a disciplined common currency. That's competition with glue. Breaking up the EU *without* rebuilding the glue wouldn't produce a Switzerland; it would produce fragmentation. The honest takeaway: the EU

doesn't have to choose between "more Brussels" and "break it up." It needs to rebuild the shared belonging *and* let healthy competition run at the right level.

6 · Could it be something else?

To be fair, there are other explanations for Europe's strain, and they each capture something:

EXPLANATION	WHAT IT GETS RIGHT	WHAT IT MISSES
Economic gaps between members	The rich-vs-struggling tensions	Doesn't explain loss of belonging even in well-off countries
Outside pressure (e.g. security threats) forcing more central control	Why the EU keeps centralising	Doesn't explain the loss of trust that started earlier
It's just too big	Why people feel distant from it	Doesn't explain why some big systems hold together better
Thin belonging (this report)	Ties all of the above together as one underlying problem	Is the hardest of the four to measure precisely

We lean on the "thin belonging" explanation because it's the simplest one that pulls the others together — economic gaps and sheer size both *feed* the belonging problem, and outside pressure drives centralisation that thin belonging can't

absorb. It's our best single lens, not the only cause; in reality they all interact.

7 · Someone else reached the same diagnosis

A widely-read June 2026 essay — Frank-Christian Hansel's "*Europe 2.0, Beyond Brussels*" (American Greatness, building on Gunnar Heinsohn's 2011 "Europa 2.0") — arrives, from a very different starting point, at much the same problem: too much faceless administration, legitimacy that should come from people rather than officials, and the same ageing-and-money math. That an independent writer sees the same thing is reassuring. Where we part company is the cure: the essay says break it up and let nations compete, which — for the reason in section 5 — we think fragments rather than heals. (Two fair caveats: the UK's exit showed strain but also resilience, since most stayed; and "the east resents Brussels" is true in places but not everywhere — Poland, Estonia, Czechia and Hungary differ a lot.)

How Europe feels, area by area

Beneath the headline, here is how the Union feels from the inside — each area with a simple traffic light and which way it is heading. (A sense of the trend, from public surveys and data, not a precise grade.)

AREA OF
LIFE

READING

TREND

WHAT WE LOOK AT

Safety & security

amber

↓

perceived safety; jobs, prices and housing (harder for the young); worry about outside threats

Belonging & solidarity

amber

→

loneliness and community ties; solidarity strong in a crisis, patchier day-to-day

Fairness & justice

amber

↓

rule of law (strong on paper, uneven in practice); whether people feel rules apply equally

Energy & vitality

green-amber

→

innovation, learning, cultural life — the strongest area, though opportunities for the young are narrowing

Calm & cohesion

amber-red

↓

social trust, polarisation, a thin shared identity outside cities and the educated

Flourishing

amber

→

overall wellbeing — broadly there, but increasingly unequal by age and region

Shared meaning

amber-red

→

a felt sense of "one Europe" — thin; the belonging problem in everyday form

A common-sense checklist: what a healthy society needs

Step back from Europe for a moment. Asked what a healthy society needs, most people would name roughly the same things — shared principles people actually believe in, trustworthy information, leaders who live the values, real ways to be heard, investment in the future, passing it on to the next generation, and the wisdom to tell a healthy challenge from a real threat. It's a common-sense list, not a theory — which is exactly why it makes a good test: a good framework should be able to explain why these matter and check whether they hold. Here is how the EU reads on each:

WHAT A HEALTHY SOCIETY NEEDS	EU READING	NOTE
Shared principles people believe in	amber	The values are genuine; belief in them is thin in places, especially the east.
Trustworthy information & institutions	amber	Strong in the north-west; under pressure where the rule of law is contested.
Leaders who embody the values	amber-red	Selection rewards competence over actually embodying the shared purpose.
Real ways for people to be heard	amber	The formal channels exist; people don't feel genuinely listened to.
Investment in the future, not just today	amber	Plenty goes to physical things; too little to trust, cohesion and shared story.

Passing it on to the next generation

red

The weakest: fewer children, an ageing population, thin youth ownership.

Telling healthy challenge from real threat

amber

Still mostly does — but risks over-reacting defensively under outside pressure.

These aren't separate from the rest of the report — each comes down to the same few things (belonging, direction, strain, hidden weakness, depth of unity). That a common-sense checklist lines up with the report's deeper read is a sign the read is catching something real.

8 · What to do

There are several legitimate routes (institutional reform, simpler treaties, shared budgets, voting changes). We point to "rebuild belonging + push decisions to the right level" because the root problem is belonging, not the wiring — so fixes that don't rebuild belonging are likely to disappoint.

1 · Rebuild belonging through things people can

see and choose. Let people vote for some Europe-wide candidates directly (a real European choice, not just national ones); give the Union a visible job people feel protected by (a shared external border and credible common defence); and publish an honest yearly report on where the EU is failing its own values, with a real vote on the worst gaps. Belonging grows when people have a say and can see results.

2 · Push decisions to the level where people

consent — by a clear rule. The framework gives a simple rule for *which* level: match how much the centre does to how capable and willing each level is. Where a

country or region is capable and the issue is local, the centre should set the direction and step back; where something is genuinely fragile, the centre should provide the floor — security and structure — and do more hands-on; in between, it connects. The more capable the level, the more it is trusted to run itself — but never cut off. Two ways to get it wrong, and the EU mostly makes the first: over-managing capable members breeds resentment ("done to us, not with us"); under-supporting fragile ones lets things slide. Real subsidiarity both gathers up and hands down — and the EU's habit of gathering without handing down is the over-management mistake.

3 · Be honest, together, about the ageing-and- money math. Put the real numbers on the table — who pays in, who draws out, how the population is changing — so shared costs are discussed openly rather than imposed and resented.

4 · Give young people a real stake. Genuine say over the issues that shape their lives (climate, housing, the digital world), not token panels — because whether the next generation feels ownership is the single biggest question for the EU's future.

9 · How sure are we?

This is a structured read of the evidence, not a crystal ball and not a laboratory result. It's based on how things look today, and we're tracking the key signs forward (trust,

friction, the ageing-money gap) so the picture can be checked as events unfold. We'd change our minds if: trust kept falling but friction and hidden weakness stayed flat for a decade; well-bonded and poorly-bonded members turned out to have the same problems (meaning belonging isn't the driver); a region broke away *with* a strong shared framework and still fell apart; or the ageing-money gap kept widening for years with no rise in strain.

How we read it: we use named, public indicators (trust surveys, deadlock and disputes, birth and ageing rates, debt) and rate each red/amber/green. We keep the measures independent so we can't accidentally confirm our own story, and we deliberately don't reduce it to a single score — because that would fake a precision we don't yet have.

Data: Eurostat (births 2023; ageing); Eurobarometer Spring 2024 (trust). Figures rounded and indicative. · The Great Homecoming · a plain-language companion to the fuller structural read · for discussion.



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European Development And Research Academy

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