

FINAL REPORT: EUROPEAN CONFERENCE 2026

EU BALANCING BETWEEN UNITY AND FRAGMENTATION?

MAY 18, 2026



The yearly European conference took place on May 18th 2026 in Bratislava and provided a platform for expert discussion on three topics that are currently shaping the EU politics and the future of the European project. The conference was organized by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association in cooperation and with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe. Further partners of the conference were the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia and the European Parliament Liaison Office in Slovakia.

The conference consisted of three expert panel discussions which examined topics currently dominating the EU affairs, ones that both unite and divide the EU partners.

Is Europe ready for a “post-NATO” era?

American call for more European independence in terms of its security and defence is finally being heard, as the US security guarantees became less reliable and after decades of not assuming primary responsibility for it. It is nowadays even more needed due to lack of consensus on many issues and importantly, diverse strategic threat perception of the US and the European one.

We do not find ourselves in a post-NATO era yet, but the setup is significantly different from what we have been used to. Trust as the primary and crucial value and basis for a security community has been undermined by the US administration, especially in the Nordics. This current transition period of NATO has an open ending. On a positive note, the current US administration’s posture can be viewed positively in the light of being more open to Europe strengthening its strategic autonomy and building up a stronger defence dimension of the Union.

The planned changes in force posture are still accompanied by the US ensuring no serious gaps in European security appear while Europeans replace some of the capabilities. In some areas, such as nuclear deterrence and the ISR capabilities, the transition will be more difficult.

The European Union as a non-defence born project has stepped up. Creating a specific Commissioner’s post for defence and several instruments to mobilize finances and help “rearm” Europe in this new reality, NATO is bound to become more European in

the future. There has definitely been a shift in the discussion from burden sharing to burden shifting.

This concerns institutional transformation (structure and decision-making being transferred to Europe), but also changes in internal dynamics of European member states within NATO (bilateral defence agreements, sharing French nuclear deterrence umbrella, or practical steps such as learning and development based on cooperation and data from Ukrainian battlefield). Still, all of the deepening of defence integration within Europe is happening within NATO's framework and is not against it. As defence continues to be a member state driven area, the EU operates more of a coordinating, supporting and uniting force rather than any kind of challenger to NATO.

To ensure that financial incentives actually translate into sufficient, relevant and interoperable defence capabilities and command structures within Europe, we need to overcome the main obstacles. These are the demand production gap in the European defence industry, fragmentation of procurement, limited military mobility, insufficient skilled workforce, strategic dependency on raw materials from China, and the technology gap which strengthens our continuous dependency on the US.

It is also important for the European NATO member states to focus on spending as much as possible of the recently agreed increased 3,5% GDP in Europe. The European Union can be helpful in terms of supporting industrial cooperation, common regulations and procurement, in order to overcome the existing European defence industry fragmentation.

Europeans also need to work on restoring trust to an extent that is possible with the US, even under this administration. This can be based on becoming more self-reliant in terms of defence and military capabilities in Europe, but also on shared interests – economic, industrial, security related. It is also important to build respect by acting more collectively as the EU.

Reassessing the EU's role as a soft power in an increasingly intensifying geopolitical competition

The EU has historically understood itself as a soft power. In the traditional meaning, it focused rather on projecting it outside, while nowadays the EU's soft power debate aims also more on ensuring internal resilience of its societies towards malign external influence.

Furthermore, the EU also has a superpower potential, which would provide her with even more respect in the global arena, however political leaders of the member states often hesitate to use resources at their disposal. In a crumbling rules-based order, Europe needs to be able to secure and defend itself and its way of life.

Soft power in its more traditional understanding of projecting attractiveness abroad has been broadened by internal struggles of the EU, for example with some governments undermining our own narrative, the very basic values and democratic principles that the EU is based on. The slow reaction time to such cases, caused by the rule of unanimity, is further complicating the situation. Eliminating this requirement

would make the EU a more credible actor. For example, it would be a more respected partner in international consultations on Iran, Gaza, Cuba and Venezuela, and in the enlargement process.

Soft power today is not only about winning the battle of narratives, but also about trust and defence of human rights in times of rising geopolitical tension and challenges related to the use of AI. Recent example of citizens assemblies in Slovakia shows that democratic discussion, fair and open dialogue is still possible in European societies that are nowadays burdened by polarisation and propaganda. It can bring positive results in helping to support narrative of democracy and EU values in a changing world.

EU's soft power is real and it can be found in various layers. In a changing world, a predictable partner acting based on rules is an asset itself. The EU also has its enlargement policy as a power of attraction, or the normative power of some EU legislation (such as DSA) serving as inspiration around the world.

What Is the actual future of European competitiveness as seen in two years after the Draghi report?

Two years ago, Mario Draghi road mapped the future for the EU and talked about a choice that is standing in front of it – a choice between dissolution, paralysis or further integration. Over the past two years since the report presentation, the EU has been criticized for being quite traditionally slow in adoption of the listed recommendations. The root problem of the EU, when wanting to work on its competitiveness in a global scale, is that it innately remains a puzzle of 27 member states represented by politicians who observe primarily own national, rather than wider European, interest. This complicates further integrations and Europeans need to adjust their expectations to this reality. Unanimity in the decision-making processes related to competitiveness-related issues is also making things more difficult.

In the Slovak context, the government insistently connects a need for cheap energies (from Russia) to being able to stay competitive in Europe. While this is rather a political message than a reflection of reality, the trend of the conversation focusing on energy dependency and energy prices is limiting. It is only one piece of a much broader puzzle. It is definitely not the only reason why Europe is lagging behind the US and China.

Another problem identified currently in Europe is that the diversification of energy supplies cannot lead to creating dependence on simply another actor when lowering the Russian supply. Such is the case of LNG import from the United States. Another issue on diversification of production of energy is overinvestment in nuclear energy as an alternative source, as it is more time-consuming to build and also more expensive than renewables.

To revive the business in the EU, old European industrial base needs to change. The best way to do so is to provide businesses with better opportunity to grow. To improve the risk-reward equation for entrepreneurs, access to capital needs to be improved (amount and rate), crucial legislation has to be unified and a true single market needs to be finished and savings union implemented. It is now up to political leaders to create

such an environment. However, a tension exists between simplifying bureaucracy and ensuring essential standards, as some fear that radical deregulation could undermine critical environmental and social protections.

Anyway, the deadlines recently set by the European Commission in its strategies are evaluated as rather unrealistic, expecting early progress in complex areas which actually require more time to reach significant macroeconomic changes.

From a regional perspective, CEE countries and especially the V4 show relatively strong economic performance, with solid growth, low unemployment, and fiscal discipline, but lag in institutional strength, innovation, and political cohesion. Their reputation and influence within the EU are weaker than their economic fundamentals would suggest. To improve both regional competitiveness and global influence, these countries should strengthen their institutional integrity and broaden their focus beyond a narrow focus on sovereignty to integrate more effectively into the wider European economy.