A Union of Unions: Pragmatic Federalism as Multidimensional Project for the EU Reform

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1. Executive Summary

The demise of the Liberal International Order (LIO) — the placenta of European integration — imposes the EU to undergo a paradigm shift. In a fragmented global arena, Europe risks marginalisation and paralysis leaving Europeans "truly alone together, squeezed between the United States and China" (Draghi, 2026). The emergence of Pragmatic Federalism (PF) reflects an urgent push to counter decline and reform European integration. As a proactive political project, PF aims to bypass the EU's slow decision-making and unanimity traps. Championed by Mario Draghi, it is framed as the only viable path for Europe "to act with the speed, scale and intensity of other global powers" (Draghi, 2025), amid a lack of central governance in strategic fields. Ultimately, PF seeks to revitalise the Union by using flexible, issue-oriented coalitions to achieve federalist ends.

This paper analyses the Europeanist rhetoric for EU renovation through a political and institutional lens across four stages. Section 2 maps the structural problems PF addresses. Section 3 conceptualises PF as a modular method for strategic autonomy, built on a network of sectorial coalitions around a reformed, Brussels-based federal core – a model termed "Union of the Unions". Section 4 zooms into specific clusters – Defence, Space and AI – to demonstrate

PF's potential in sensitive domains where differentiated integration is already emerging. Section 5 offers two bold recommendations to operationalise PF: reforming the Commission as the EU's federal core and establishing a Union of Unions around variable integration clusters.

While this epoch-making shift requires political courage and institutional creativity, it bypasses the need for a constitutional overhaul or treaty change. Instead, PF offers a flexible, incremental alternative to a federal "big bang". In defence, space and AI, it drives integration via coalitions of the willing and the strategic use of existing EU mechanisms where common policies are urgently required.

Nevertheless, a Union of Unions carries inherent risks. Without a shared strategic direction, the EU could drift toward fragmented governance, unstable coalitions, and competing interests. Furthermore, because clusters *per se* do not foster public engagement, the model faces questions of democratic legitimacy. To avoid an executive-centric system, a holistic strategic vision must guide these coalitions, and supranational institutions must retain popular mandate. Ultimately, political creativity is insufficient without political direction. Achieving a more autonomous, agile, and united Europe depends less on institutional design than on the willingness of European leaders to commit to the destination.

2. The (worrisome) State of the Union

Status Quo

Presently, the EU's governance model suffers from structural weaknesses embedded in the logic of the treaties. Overall, the EU represents a "compound union": a constitutional hybrid (neither an international organisation nor a federal state) characterised by multiple overlapping *demoi,* asymmetric competences, and the absence of a single sovereign locus of decision (Fabbrini, 2025).

The political equilibrium is under growing strain. Sovereigntist movements have reshaped domestic landscapes across member states (MSs), making intergovernmental consensus harder to achieve and sustain, while repeated crises increasingly expose the need for faster and more coherent collective action. Yet, the Union lacks the normative authority to compel MSs to bridge these gaps (Patberg, 2016). Even though the system's legitimacy has historically rested

on policy outputs rather than democratic inputs, the accumulation of missed responses is now directly eroding that output legitimacy (Follesdal & Hix, 2006).

In this era of overlapping crises, citizens no longer experience the Union through market freedoms, rather, through discrepancies: uneven crisis responses, diverging national measures and the absence of a unified European voice. It is precisely against this backdrop that PF emerges as a response.

Structural Weaknesses: the Competence Deficit and the Joint-Decision Trap

The principle of conferral under Article 5(2) TEU has contributed to a systematic competence deficit in the areas where collective action is most needed: defence, taxation, foreign policy, social protection. These remain intergovernmental domains subject to veto and voluntary coordination.

The combination of shared competences and unanimity requirements produces the joint-decision trap (Scharpf, 1988): decisions emerge only at the lowest common denominator. The shift of the EU's centre of gravity toward the European Council, institutionalising "new intergovernmentalism", has made this trap a permanent feature of crisis management rather than a temporary legislative hurdle (Bickerton et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the treaty architecture itself encodes an asymmetry: Articles 26 and 114 TFEU provide robust Qualified Majority Vote (QMV) mechanisms for negative integration (barriers removal), while positive integration (construction of common institutions and policies) is systematically subjected to stricter competence limits and unanimity.

Institutional Asymmetry: the Marginalisation of Supranational Authority

In order to establish a realistic form of federalism (the Union of the Unions), a federal core is required. The Commission could be such a linchpin. In the last few years, the Commission has reasserted a degree of political initiative, as shown by the European Green Deal and the Next GenEU, acting as negotiator in domains where fragmented intergovernmentalism had previously prevailed. These developments signal that the Commission retains a latent capacity for supranational leadership that should not be dismissed.

Yet, this recovery remains partial and precarious. The progressive empowerment of the European Council over the past three decades has not been reversed. Despite Article 15(1) TEU's explicit prohibition on legislative functions, the European Council continues to shape the Union's political agenda, concentrating executive authority among heads of government. The Commission's recent assertiveness has largely operated within the limits set by that intergovernmental framework, rather than overcoming them. Moreover, the unanimity rule governing treaty revision and constitutional questions gives every Member State (MS) a structural veto. In a Union of twenty-seven members, this guarantees the lowest common denominator. The pathology is recursive: abolishing unanimity itself requires unanimity. The EU cannot, through existing procedures, reform its own decision-making rules.

Yet centrality within a flawed framework is not the same as the institutional authority a federal core would require. PF calls on the Commission to transcend the boundaries that the current institutional architecture has impeded.

Differentiated Integration: a Tool, Not a Substitute for Reform

The EU has already developed extensive differentiated integration arrangements, from opt-outs formalised in Protocol No. 22, to enhanced cooperation procedures under Article 20 TEU and Articles 326–334 TFEU, allowing subsets of MSs to advance integration without requiring universal participation.

PF is a form of differentiated integration, but a peculiar one vis-à-vis the existing ones. So far, differentiated integration has manifested along three axes (Stubb, 1996): time (multi-speed integration, where all states share a destination but proceed at different paces); space (variable geometry, where states may permanently opt out of certain policy areas); and policy areas (*à la carte* integration, where states choose which policies to join). This phenomenon has grown substantially since the 1990s, producing an increasingly fragmented governance landscape where "the EU" refers not to a single polity but to a complex of overlapping integration circles (Holzinger & Schimmelfennig, 2012) .

This fragmentation risks entrenching a core–periphery structure whereby smaller or less wealthy MSs are permanently excluded from the deepest levels of integration (Koenig, 2015). PF seeks to channel these instruments toward a more federal setting, one assumed to deliver more coherent, accountable, and politically integrated governance.

Unexpressed Constitutional Potential

A striking feature of the EU's constitutional landscape is the gap between what the treaties formally authorise and what has been implemented. The treaty framework already contains the tools for a more ambitious integration without revision.

The potential of enhanced cooperation under Article 20 TEU, read with Articles 326–334 TFEU, provides a clear safety valve against the veto trap, allowing willing MSs to establish binding common rules. The *Passerelle clauses* (Article 48(7) TEU for general matters and Article 31(3) TEU for foreign policy) permit the European Council to switch specified decision-making procedures from unanimity to QMV without treaty revision. Their persistent non-activation proves that the EU's current paralysis is driven as much by political risk-aversion as by legal design.

PF can transform EU legislative powers without treaty change. It requires activating the opportunities already embedded in the existing treaty framework. PF is, above all, a deliberate choice about how to use the powers the treaties already provide; a choice whose political conditions are still maturing, and whose timing cannot, at this stage, be determined with any analytical precision.

3. Conceptualising Pragmatic Federalism

What is and what is not

The whole debate on PF is still conditioned by semantic and, therefore, conceptual ambiguity. This latter is calculated and political: PF represents a public appeal that facilitates convergence among a variety of Europeanist policymakers and movements sharing the bold principle of a more ambitious global Europe, but not the same interpretation of the means, implications and potential drawbacks of this shift.

While ambitious, PF is not revolutionary action invoking a federal ‘big bang’. While PF supporters may dream of the United States of Europe, they are not claiming its urgent establishment as the sole way to express the EU’s potential. As a matter of fact, PF requires no Hamiltonian moment nor imposes any clear separation of powers between the federal and the national level.

Instead, PF prescribes better coordination, adaptability and creativity: the EU should protect its core values and interests in case of crisis, relying on its forces, on its political versatility, operative flexibility, and economic preparedness. Indeed, PF resembles another key notion of

the so-called geopolitical turn of EU politics: strategic autonomy. Indeed, PF serves the cause of strategic autonomy as it reshapes the very functioning of the Union to better mobilise its own resources, reduce external dependencies and implement common policies in key strategic fields. Strategic autonomy and PF are both designed to expand the EU's room for manoeuvre whenever needed, through better shock absorption, diversification of alliances and retaliation (Alcaro, 2026). From this perspective, strategic autonomy, PF and cluster integration constitute a trinity at the core of the dominant Europeanist consensus: they represent the main objective, the method of integration and the institutional framework, respectively.

Accordingly, we dare to define PF as follows: *a modular integrative method aimed at achieving EU strategic autonomy step by step, through cluster integration with variable geometries. PF realises closer union by reshuffling the EU as an umbrella organisation made of issue-specific coalitions or voluntary sub-Unions, in which supranational and national authorities jointly execute common policies around shared strategic interests.*

This definition is based on four core conceptual pillars:

A) The first is the "coalition of the willing". Instead of demanding unanimity or forcing all MSs to move at the same pace, PF views integration as being driven by specific groups of states aligning around a common vision. MSs wishing to halt progress, in this sense, cannot hold back those with higher ambitions, though non-participating states retain the option of joining later (Draghi, 2025; Maillard, 2026).

B) The second is feature is that of "bottom-up democratic legitimacy" which envisions, rather than a top-down imposition, choosing to opt-in to the aforementioned coalitions needing to first secure democratic support at the domestic level over strategic shared goals (Draghi, 2025).

C) Thirdly, PF is characterised by *de facto* integration. It avoids grand institutional overhauls and relies on concrete political actions, possibly outside the existing EU institutional framework.

D) Lastly, PF is characterised by a dialectic view of the EU breaking down the dichotomy between a confederation and a federation. It acknowledges that the EU can operate with confederal decision-making in some areas and federal authorities in others, allowing for a fluid transition depending on the subject matter (Balaguer Callejón, 2026).

While the actual shape of European PF is unknown given its novelty, we should bear in mind that PF has already been applied in other (federal) countries, like Australia. There, PF is traditionally defined as an *ad hoc*, problem-oriented approach characterised by experimentalist and anti-foundationalist components which translates to a mode of flexible, multi-speed, and issue-specific frameworks (Hollander & Patapan, 2007; Smullen, 2014)

Problems and Contradictions

Although the debate over PF is still in its infancy, it is growing rapidly. Clashes over its applicability, viability and desirability are already visible. Firstly, tensions revolve around the term 'federalism' itself, which could act as an unnecessary lightning rod that inflames, polarises and creates divisions in European politics (Maillard, 2026). In countries like France, the term is virtually a taboo, risking a teleological debate about the nature of the EU which directly contradicts the "pragmatic" intent of the proposal.

In addition, a significant practical contradiction is raised regarding the timeline of this approach. The current era is one of rapid technological and geopolitical ruptures that require immediate responses. The deliberate consensus-building nature of pragmatic coalitions may simply be too slow to address these urgent, existential threats, making the "pragmatic" process potentially incompatible with the necessity for rapid EU action.

Besides, there is a longstanding contradiction regarding whether the EU can ever be truly democratic without becoming a formal federal state. However, the democratic dimension raises another issue: whether or not it is necessary to create a European people(s), and the capability of European patriotism to facilitate the Europeanisation of core state powers.

Deciding to opt-in to initiatives like PESCO has historically lacked broad democratic processes. Aside from select referenda in few MSs, these integration steps were primarily driven by national governments without direct public consultation.

Is Pragmatic Federalism democratic?

Draghi's PF aligns with a modern legal interpretation that the EU does not need to become an overarching state. Rather, it can exist as a democratic union of democratic states (Hoeksma, 2025). This "democratic turn" would be highly innovative, given the traditionally top-down and executive-centric nature of EU functional integration. Reconciliating pragmatic execution with genuine democratic participation is one of the most daunting challenges of PF. In fact, sector-by-sector pragmatic integration may not ultimately foster citizen engagement or lead to a political federation.

So far, speeches and actions inspired by PF have seldom and vaguely addressed the EU democratic deficit. The legitimacy of cluster integration has largely been based on outcomes; citizens are seen more as beneficiaries than as active participants (Balaguer Callejón, 2026). In

its most feasible yet modest conceptualization, PF is a technocratic show run by executive authorities cooperating in the name of efficiency.

To avoid this scenario, the Union must transition toward a model of a “Parliamentary Union” (Fabbrini, 2015). This paper proposes two possible institutional solutions to achieve this great leap forward. PF can turn democratic by: 1) holding each cluster (i.e. the unions of the Union) accountable to specific European Parliament’s committees, as will be further explored in the next section; 2) electing the president of the European Commission through a pan-European election, thereby granting this figure a direct popular mandate. Yet, this most federalist second point will be explored in the final section.

4. Pragmatic Federalism Across Policy Areas: Defence, Space, and Artificial Intelligence

PF expands the scope of EU action into new strategic areas where the EU's voice remains weak and contested. To examine the features and potential implications of this flexible approach, this section compares three key strategic sectors where geoeconomics and geopolitics converge, namely Defence, Space and AI, which have recently experienced the most significant shifts in European differentiated integration. Although historically kept under distinct mandates, these fields have become deeply structural and, at times, codependent. Other relevant clusters that could have been analysed in more depth include energy and the single market, inter alia.

However, PF’s institutionalisation in these areas risks creating an “accountability vacuum”, occurring when executive power separates from democratic scrutiny in a Union of Unions (Fabbrini, 2015). To realise the aforementioned Parliamentary Union, the EP should be involved and ensure supranational oversight over clusters' activities. Specifically, a committee should be formed for each functional cluster, either by creating one ad hoc or by extending existing mandates (Leruth & Lord, 2015). For instance, the Defence sector requires an enlargement of the Security and Defence (SEDE) branch’s scope and greater participation in intergovernmental institutions; AI governance could fall under the supervision of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) (Scazzieri, 2025). By establishing distinct supervision for Defence, Space, and AI, the Parliament can directly monitor new operational bodies, such as the European Union Space Services Agency (EUSSA) (Heuking Space Law, 2026).This framework transforms PF’s “regulatory momentum” into a legitimate

“repertoire of governance” (Balaguer Callejón, 2026), generating federal-style outcomes from functional necessity while upholding the Union’s identity as a “democratic union of democratic states” (Hoeksma, 2025).

Defence

The fragmented attempts for integration established a precedent: when uniform and traditional integration fails, alternative and flexible mechanisms arise. This led to the foundational rationale for PF, which emerges as a necessary framework when analysing the current defence institutional architecture. The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) stands out from all other policies of the Union due its intergovernmental character: a domain, therefore, fundamentally in the hands of the States despite the mutual defence clause and voluntary mechanism of enhanced cooperation introduced by the Lisbon Treaty (Daniele, 2024).

The geopolitical instability of the last decade has introduced new challenges, addressed by recent institutional acts redefining the defence architecture through a more pragmatic lens. Noteworthy is the Rearm Europe Plan (Clapp et al., 2025), aiming at strengthening European resilience and strategic autonomy. Rather than pursuing traditional, top-down integration, the plan relegates the role of the Commission only to that of administrative oversight, managing financial incentives while leaving procurement and strategic decisions in national hands. This demonstrates that while MSs remain deeply reluctant to surrender formal military sovereignty, they are increasingly open to flexible, functional systems.

Considering also the legal roadblocks to a single European army, PF emerges not as a mere alternative, but as the only realistically viable way. Instead of or in between pure intergovernmental cooperation and fully integrated EU defence, PF supporters envisage a third way: cluster integration. The defence framework is not a unitary system; it is split into distinct, overlapping “modes of governance”, such as the *coordination mode* of PESCO and the *financial-industrial mode* of the European Defence Fund (Iso-Markku & Helwig, 2026).

While traditional critics argue that flexible coalitions remain short-term and strictly intergovernmental, PF bypasses this limitation when anchored to supranational EU resources. Within this framework, the Commission acts as a policy entrepreneur, utilizing financial incentives to institutionalize industrial cooperation. A semi-federal output – collectively developed capabilities and shared supply chains – stems from mini-lateral inputs, avoiding the need for formal Treaty revisions. Yet, the current fragmentation allows MSs to prioritise national autonomy and vetoes, stalling progress.

PF provides the ideal mechanism to bypass legal and bureaucratic obstacles, allowing smaller, highly capable coalitions of willing countries – such as the core military group – to voluntarily deepen defence cooperation through concrete actions based on deliberate national choice. A PF approach would enable Europeans to experimentally consolidate military demand, optimise economies of scale, and give operational substance to the mutual defence clause.

Space Policy

Space governance is structured around access, coordination, and resilience, making it dependent on collective technical and financial capacities that no single MS can sustain alone (Pavesi & Wouters, 2023; De Man & Wouters, 2026). This functional necessity historically produced a fragmented "governance triangle" involving the MSs, the EU, and the European Space Agency (ESA) (Müller & De Man, 2026). This sector serves as a primary laboratory for PF, demonstrating how the Union can develop federal-style capacities through sectoral integration where collective action is required for survival in a contested global environment.

Driven by functional necessity, EU integration in this domain advanced through mechanisms of layering and conversion, incrementally adding security objectives to civilian programs like Galileo and Copernicus (Balaguer Callejón, 2026). This shift marks a transition from merely using space data for terrestrial needs toward the active protection of the orbital environment (Müller & De Man, 2026; Papadimitriou et al., 2019).

This evolution operates within the complex constitutional limits of the Lisbon Treaty. Article 189 TFEU grants the Union a specific competence in space but explicitly excludes the "harmonisation" of national laws. To bypass this "unanimity trap", the proposed EU Space Law (2025) pragmatically utilises Article 114 TFEU as its legal basis.

A critical element of this transformation is the restructuring of European Union for the Space Program Agency (EUSPA) into the European Union Space Services Agency (EUSSA). Proposed in April 2026, the Agency transforms from a management body into the Union's 24/7 operational arm for security and service delivery. This move clarifies the institutional boundaries with the ESA, which remains an independent intergovernmental organisation focused on R&D, while the new Agency ensures the operational protection of sovereign infrastructures (Heuking Space Law, 2026).

However, European strategic ambitions remain constrained by severe technological dependencies, exposed by the "Starlink incident". Addressing these vulnerabilities requires strengthening sectors such as space infrastructures and satellite communications. In this

context, opening such initiatives to strategic non-EU partners (Canada) illustrates the flexibility of PF, which functions as an open "Policy Union" to build the industrial scale necessary for survival (Leruth & Lord, 2015). This reveals the emergence of a "community of destiny" in orbit, where the EU acts as an umbrella of Policy Unions (Müller & De Man, 2026).

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents one of the most prominent fields in which the EU regulatory power is overcoming national autonomies. Global AI governance is a varied landscape: the US adopts a decentralised agency-base framework and the Chinese a centralised strategy (Al-Maamari & Alabdulatif, 2025). The EU strategy instead represents distinct approach in this area, with the adoption of the Regulation 2024/1969 (AI Act). The framework assumes a central control but delegates further implementation to national authorities. This exemplifies an attempt by the supranational institutions to adopt PF and, consequently, to broaden the scope of the Union. The Commission profited from the internal market powers to sneakily enforce a supranational and centralised strategy on AI. To pursue this objective, the EU established the European AI office, a centralised and supranational body among the branches of the European Commission, which will exercise a direct enforcement of the Act, by supervising and monitoring AI models across all MSs, from August 2026 (Parisini, 2025).

Notably, the EU's PF path in AI governance has proceeded with friction from Germany and France. The two countries stopped the final stages of the negotiations, since they feared the Commission threatening their national champions, Mistral AI and Aleph Alpha (Csernatoni, 2024). This resistance exemplifies the core dynamic of the PF, namely the advancing of integration through regulatory momentum and not trough consensus. Furthermore, the defence sector was explicitly excluded from the scope for the Act, because of institutional necessity, also due to the choice by MSs to preserve autonomy in a strategically sovereign domain.

Debate persists over whether PF in AI governance is consolidating or still fragile. While some argue the EU regulatory power cannot effectively shape the AI field (Calderaro & Blumfelde, 2022), optimists contend a unified approach will successfully drive institutional reconfiguration (Parisini, 2025). In conclusion, the PF approach represents the line of action in which the EU is progressing, but with the resistances of MSs, the achievements the institutions are carrying might be constrained.

5. A Conclusion with Two Institutional Recommendations

Overall, PF can be defined as a political project in the form of an integrative method ultimately aimed at increasing EU reactivity and resilience towards internal pressures and global shocks. Like other Europeanist notions *en vogue* such as strategic autonomy, PF presents a paradoxical nature: it empowers the Union with new prerogatives in critical sectors but does not transform it into a fully-fledged global actor democratically legitimised. PF is ideologically European and designed to pave the way toward a federal polity, but the concrete mechanisms by which it occurs - policy cluster dominated by executive powers - may pose an additional strain on the EU's democratic credentials.

To realise the most noble (i.e. democratic) declination of PF, this paper provides two institutional recommendations: the reform of the Commission's role and authority and the establishment of the Union of Unions. A caveat is needed: for the time being, any assessment of a concrete trajectory for a PF-inspired reform of the EU remains premature. The electoral cycles concluding in Estonia, France, Greece, Italy, Spain, Slovakia and Poland through 2027-2028 represent a necessary, if not sufficient, precondition for any such analysis.

The Reform of the Commission

The Commission's current weaknesses are structural. The twenty-seven Commissioners board creates internal coordination costs and political constraints that can impede decisive action.

Reform proposals may converge on several key themes. First, there is a strong case for reducing the size of the College (possibly to fifteen Commissioners under a rotation scheme) to improve coherence and decision-making efficiency. Crucially, this reform was already mandated by Article 17(5) TEU, which stated that the Commission should comprise a number corresponding to two-thirds of the number of MSs. However, the European Council exploited a built-in treaty loophole favourising intergovernmental self-interest.

Second, stronger politicisation of the Commission's leadership (going beyond the current Spitzenkandidat process, which has already been undermined by the European Council) is required. The current system grants MSs governments decisive gatekeeping authority over the Commission's political identity (Costa, 2022). A democratising reform would move beyond convention toward a binding pan-European electoral mechanism. A President elected with a direct or reinforced parliamentary mandate would derive legitimacy from European citizens

rather than from intergovernmental consensus, structurally reducing the Commission's dependence on MSs favour and enabling it to act as a genuine federal agenda-setter.

Third, the Commission's capacity to act as a genuine agenda-setter in areas such as defence, industrial policy, strategic autonomy, and the green and digital transitions requires both an expanded budgetary base and a willingness to use the full range of its treaty powers (Scharpf, 1988).

Finally, EP's growing role in the investiture and scrutiny of the Commission has created the conditions for a more "parliamentarised" system, but these conditions have not been fully exploited (Costa, 2022). A clearer convention that the Commission governs with and for a parliamentary majority would strengthen both the Commission's political mandate and the Parliament's claim to democratic governance.

A Union of Unions

Clusters are the concrete emanations of PF's spirit, thus a key feature of any PF-inspired agenda. From this perspective, the EU of the future appears as an umbrella organisation or common political platform from which many other voluntary sub-Unions, made of a variable number of national and supranational institutions, might flourish.

As highlighted in section 4, Defence, Space, and AI provide us a privileged look at the potential features and implication of PF in key strategic domains at the crossroads of geoeconomics and geopolitics. In these critical sectors, the PF approach seems the only feasible and adequate way to bypass systemic paralysis and safeguard European sovereignty at the same time. In these domains traditionally hampered by bureaucratic roadblocks, PF offers a mechanism that involves a shift from total consensus to targeted action, allowing highly capable coalitions of willing countries to voluntarily deepen cooperation in specific fields. The Union can successfully escape the "unanimity trap", by establishing shared infrastructures while formally respecting national sovereignty.

Yet, the concrete features and implications of this iridescent project remain blurred. One factor that has not been considered here and that could profoundly alter any reform plan inspired by PF is enlargement. In fact, the number, composition and logic of the clusters would change enormously as the number of candidates and MSs fluctuates. How many members will the EU have: 27, 30, 35 or 50? How many political actors can a Union of Unions accommodate? Enlargement will strengthen the Union of the future, but territorial or ideological-based sub-Unions might jeopardise EU unity.

In this sense, PF is a sub-optimal solution compared to a treaty change or constitutional turn. But PF's fundamental premise is precisely this: the EU risks paralysis and passivity if it waits for an unlikely constitutional change. Something must be done first – it must be done now. Political creativity, not normative elegance, must guide the reform process.

The transformation from the existing EU to a federal-oriented Union of Unions is an epoch-making challenge with potential threats. Without a coherent and shared strategic direction, the Union could drift toward fragmented governance driven by competing national interests and unstable coalitions. To avoid such an outcome, European integration should be guided by a holistic, long-term, and collectively endorsed agenda. A pragmatic application of cluster integration might seem sufficient to empower the Union with a new arsenal of tools and alliances. This is not the case. A key federalist principle must be preserved: the Union is one and indivisible, despite being modular and plural. Reforms in one cluster should not jeopardise the Union's global action. Hence, by reversing the perspective from federalism to pragmatism, we conclude that a comprehensive strategic vision for the future of Europe must guide the formation of clusters, not vice versa. Such a vision can channel all the coalitions towards a common destination, that is a more autonomous, agile and versatile Europe capable of being alone together.

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