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FROM TRANSFORMATIVE TO PROTECTIVE POWER: DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND THE LEGITIMACY OF EUROPEAN NORMATIVE POWER

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The reconfiguration of European development cooperation is not merely a change in aid policy, but a diagnostic of a broader reorientation in European power: from a predominantly transformative orientation towards a more protective one, organised around the reduction of European vulnerability.

Over the past decade, European military expenditure has increased substantially, while official development assistance (ODA) has followed more uneven trajectories across European states (OECD, 2026; SIPRI, 2026). Some governments have expanded defence spending alongside sustained or increased aid, while others have combined higher military expenditure with stagnant or declining ODA. These developments form the empirical backdrop to a broader question about European external action: as the strategic environment changes, are the purposes assigned to the instruments through which Europe acts abroad changing as well?

The divergence becomes more interesting when defence and development are considered within the language now used to justify them. Defence is increasingly discussed in terms of deterrence, resilience, strategic autonomy and the protection of European interests. Development cooperation, meanwhile, is being drawn more explicitly into debates over migration management, economic security, supply-chain resilience, connectivity and geopolitical influence. The European Union is therefore not simply adjusting the amounts devoted to particular instruments. It is reconsidering what those instruments are for.

This paper argues that the reconfiguration of European development cooperation is not merely a change in aid policy, but a diagnostic of a broader reorientation in European power: from a predominantly transformative orientation towards a more protective one, in which transformative capacities are increasingly organised around the reduction of European vulnerability. The contribution is therefore analytical rather than institutional: it identifies a change in the purposes for which existing forms of European transformative capacity are mobilised. The question this raises is not whether Europe has ceased to be normative, but whether it can sustain a normative project under increasingly geopolitical conditions without reproducing the universalist assumptions that historically accompanied it.

> Security implications have long been part of development cooperation; what matters here is what their changing prominence tells us about the transformation of European power.

The analysis centres on the European Union, while using Member State trajectories to situate EU external action within a wider European political environment. "Europe" refers here to that broader space of interaction between Member States and EU institutions; the empirical focus remains EU policy, its instruments and the strategic language through which they are justified.

The argument begins from the long-standing debate over European normative power. Ian Manners famously called attention to "the ability to shape conceptions of 'normal' in international relations" (2002, p. 239). Normative Power Europe was consequently never reducible to the possession of material resources. Its distinctive claim concerned the capacity to influence the standards by which conduct is judged legitimate and, in doing so, to alter the terms on which international relations are conducted. Yet that capacity has always involved a politics of representation. Thomas Diez observes that the discourse of normative power "constructs a particular self of the EU (...) while it attempts to change others through the spread of particular norms" (2005, p. 614). European normativity thus operates simultaneously through the projection of norms and through the construction of a European political identity.

Development cooperation has long been one of the principal arenas in which these dynamics have played out. Aid was never politically innocent, nor was development policy sealed off from questions of security, stability or European interests. Keukeleire and Raube's analysis is important precisely because it shows that the security-development nexus had already been incorporated into EU policy discourse, instruments and institutional arrangements well before the present geopolitical turn (2013). Furness and Gänzle likewise demonstrate how the post-Lisbon search for policy coherence increasingly brought development policy into closer relation with stability and security objectives (2017).

The claim is not that Europe once possessed a benign development policy and has now abandoned it. The instruments may remain recognisably similar even as the purposes attached to them shift. Security implications have long been part of development cooperation; what matters here is what their changing prominence tells us about the transformation of European power.

From transformative to protective power

The analytical distinction therefore concerns purpose rather than capability. Transformative power refers to the capacity to shape the external environment through institutions, cooperation, economic relations and regulatory influence. It seeks to alter the conditions within which political and economic relations unfold. Protective power, by contrast,

FIGURE 1. LONGITUDINAL TRENDS IN EUROPEAN DEFENCE AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION, 2014-2024[1]

Country-specific annual trends estimated from all observations over the period

Source: Author's elaboration based on SIPRI (2026) and OECD (2026).

Notes: [1]For each country i, annual changes in defence expenditure and ODA are estimated through separate country-specific linear trend models:

Defence $it = \alpha i + \beta i\ Yeart + \varepsilon it$

ODA $it = \alpha i + \gamma i\ Yeart + \varepsilon it$

where t denotes the year, αi is the country-specific intercept, and βi and γi represent the estimated annual change in defence expenditure and ODA, respectively. The resulting coefficients are plotted against each other, such that each country is represented by a single observation: the x-axis captures the annual trend in defence expenditure (% of GDP), while the y-axis captures the annual trend in ODA (% of GDP). For the post-2022 specification, the same procedure is applied to the 2022–2024 period.

Each point represents a country-specific linear trend estimated from annual observations, 2014-2024. Zero lines indicate no average annual change. Defence data: SIPRI-based series in the source.

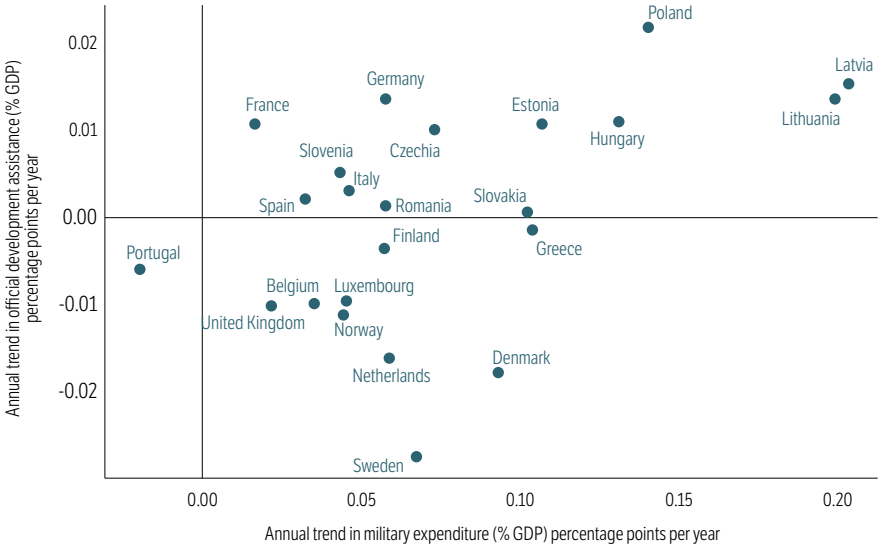
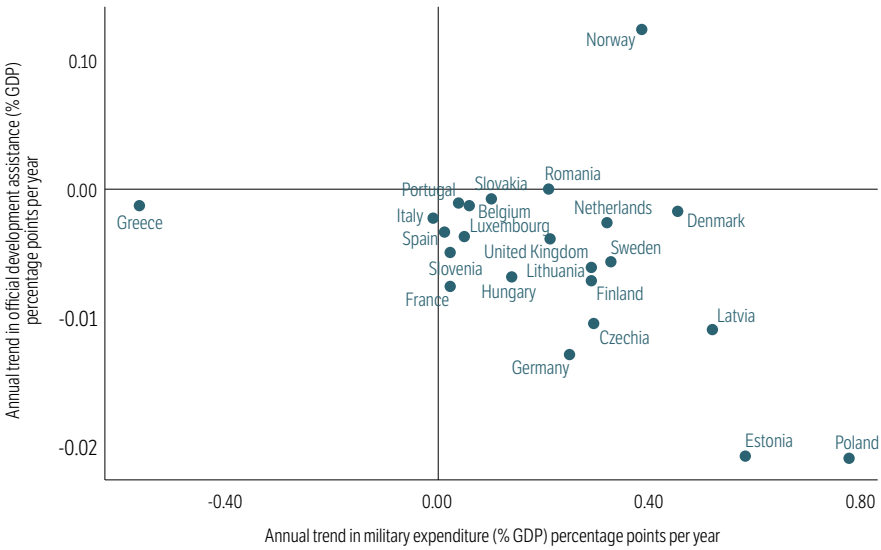


FIGURE 2. EUROPEAN DEFENCE AND DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AFTER 2022

Country-specific annual trend, 2022-2024

Source: Author's elaboration based on SIPRI (2026) and OECD (2026).

Notes: Each point represents a country-specific linear trend estimated from annual observations for 2022-2024. Zero lines indicate no average annual change, Defence data: SIPRI-based series in the source.



places European vulnerability at the centre of the purposes assigned to those capacities. It concerns the reduction of European exposure to an external environment understood as increasingly competitive, unstable or threatening.

The two orientations frequently overlap. Development assistance can strengthen institutions abroad while also addressing sources of instability that European governments regard as consequential for their own security. Infrastructure investment may support development while opening or securing channels of European connectivity. Trade can deepen interdependence while also being used to diversify strategic dependencies. The distinction is therefore less about the instruments themselves than about the purposes for which their transformative capacity is mobilised.

The difference becomes politically consequential when protection from European vulnerability becomes a more central purpose of transformative capacity. A capability once valued primarily for its effects on the external environment may increasingly be valued for the protection it affords Europe within that environment. The geopolitical turn is therefore not a transition from transformation to protection, but a reorientation of transformative power towards protection.

Protective power differs in this respect from the more specific concepts of strategic autonomy, resilience, economic security, geoeconomics and the geopoliticisation of EU external action. Those concepts identify particular strategies, policy objectives or manifestations of changing European power. Protective power names the broader orientation that connects these otherwise distinct developments through a common concern with the reduction of European vulnerability. (Damro, 2026). It is not a new policy doctrine, nor an additional capability to be placed alongside resilience or economic security. It is an analytical term for a change in what European transformative capacity is increasingly expected to accomplish.

The institutional evolution of European development policy makes this shift visible. The 2017 European Consensus on Development already placed poverty eradication alongside peace, security, migration, climate change and sustainable development (European Union, 2017).

Security considerations, therefore, did not suddenly arrive in European development policy during the 2020s. The change lies not in the emergence of security considerations, but in their increasing institutional weight and in the purposes around which external action is organised.

The 2021 Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, Global Europe (NDICI), institutionalised a broader set of strategic objectives within the Union's external financing architecture, including through its rapid-response capacity for crises, resilience and foreign-policy priorities (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021). The Global Gateway subsequently carried this logic into infrastructure, connectivity, investment and economic relations, linking these domains more explicitly to both partner needs and European strategic interests (European Commission and High Representative, 2021).

That change is visible in the growing weight of strategic considerations. The OECD's 2025 Peer Review describes a recalibration of EU external action towards stronger attention to defence, economic security and mutual interest while retaining poverty reduction, peace and sustainable development as central commitments (OECD, 2025). Development has not simply disappeared into strategy. Strategic considerations have acquired a more prominent place within the architecture through which development cooperation is conceived and defended.

Recent debates over the future of NDICI point in the same direction. Jones et al. (2025) identify economic security and defence as increasingly prominent themes in EU external-action discourse, while noting that these priorities are not fully anchored in the instrument's original policy foundations. Their analysis also brings out a tension between large-scale investment organised around shared interests and other priorities, including fragility, governance and human development. This ECDPM assessment is useful for a related reason: it documents an institutional environment in which strategic considerations increasingly influence how development policy is organised and steered.

That tension becomes particularly consequential when European strategic interests meet priorities defined by partner governments and societies. The issue is not the sudden discovery of European interests; donor interests have always been present. What changes under geopolitical pressure is their relative weight and, with it, the language through which development cooperation is justified. Mutual interest can therefore coexist with solidarity; what changes is the political significance of the balance between them. (OECD, 2025).

Strategic considerations have acquired a more prominent place within the architecture through which development cooperation is conceived and defended.

The empirical threshold therefore needs to be higher than the mere presence of security implications. Development cooperation has always had them. What matters is whether security, resilience and strategic vulnerability increasingly enter into the rationale and institutional design through which development instruments are conceived and prioritised. A project producing security effects is one thing. Those effects becoming part of the reason for its place within European external action is another. It is this shift in rationale, rather than the mere presence of security effects, that defines the analytical threshold of protective power.

These differences are not analysed here as evidence of a fiscal trade-off between defence and development. They provide the empirical backdrop to the argument by showing that changes in military expenditure and ODA do not follow a uniform pattern across European states. The analysis instead turns to the changing purposes and strategic rationales attached to European external action.

The question is not whether Europe still transforms. It plainly does. The more difficult question is what that transformation is increasingly for.

The Great-Power trap

The reorientation of European power raises a deeper problem. European integration developed, in part, through an effort to move beyond the destructive logic of great-power rivalry. Its distinctive forms of external influence consequently came to depend less on command than on institutions, interdependence, regulation and the capacity to act collectively. The return of geopolitics puts that inheritance under strain.

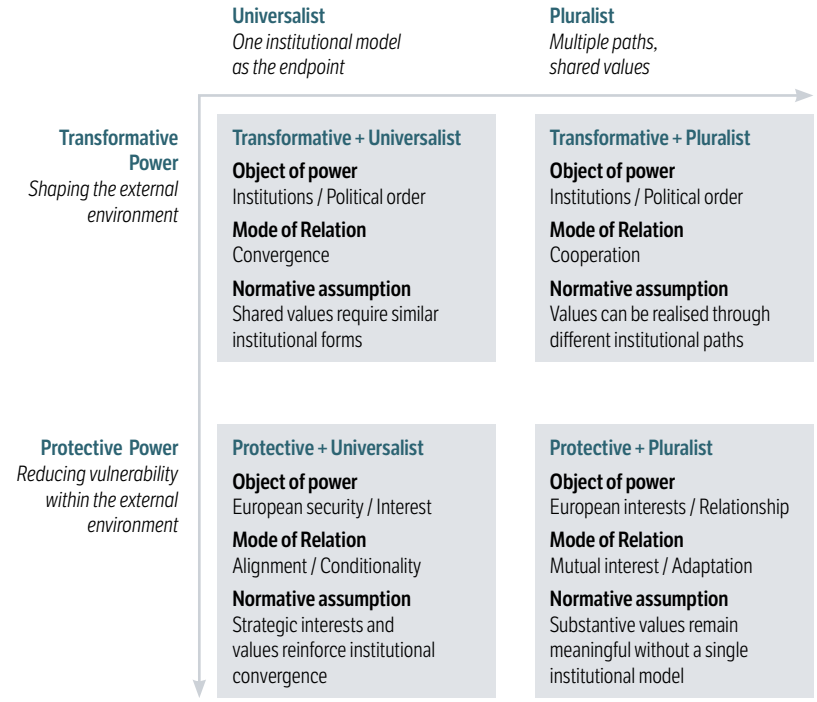
Laffan captures an important part of this distinctive capacity through the idea of European "power to": the ability to mobilise resources and instruments and thereby affect outcomes (2023, p. 625). The formulation is significant because the Union's power has historically rested less on conventional command than on its ability to coordinate, regulate and shape the environment within which other actors operate. Yet a more competitive international environment presents a different problem. How can European power protect itself when the external environment can no longer be assumed to remain responsive primarily to cooperation and mutual accommodation?

The answer is increasingly sought in familiar strategic terms. Trade, investment and market relations are assessed not only for the prosperity they generate but also for the dependencies they produce; resilience becomes a means of managing the security risks associated with those dependencies (Damro, 2026). At the level of integration itself, Hansen argues that the logic of European integration has become increasingly sovereignty-centred as the international environment has grown more contested (2026).

The EU's geopolitical adaptation should not be equated with its becoming a conventional great power. Tonra describes the movement towards a state-like model as a "Westphalian mirage that conflicts with the Union's unique institutional DNA" (2026, p. 631). His point is useful precisely because it resists an easy conclusion. European power has not ceased to be distinctive. The conditions in which that distinctiveness has to operate, however, have changed considerably.

A deeper tension follows. Can the EU respond to great-power competition without reproducing the conception of power that its own historical development sought to transcend? The difficulty lies less in geopolitical adaptation itself than in what follows if protection becomes an increasingly central measure against which external action is judged. Instruments once justified through transformation, cooperation or solidarity may then be assessed increasingly according to

FIGURE 3. EUROPEAN POWER AND THE CONCEPTION OF NORMATIVITY
Source: Author's elaboration.



the resilience or strategic advantage they provide Europe.

What may once have been justified primarily through the transformation of external conditions may now also be justified through the protection of Europe within those conditions. Transformation and protection are not opposites. But once vulnerability becomes a central organising concern, transformation acquires a different political meaning. Nor is the difficulty that Europe has interests, or that its external policy should somehow be insulated from security concerns. What matters is whether a more protective orientation can coexist with a conception of European power that remains recognisably different from conventional realpolitik.

This is precisely where the reorientation towards protection becomes a problem for normative power. If geopolitical adaptation need not entail its abandonment, what might normative influence look like if substantive commitments were separated from the assumption of institutional convergence?

Normative power beyond institutional convergence

Berlin offers a useful way of thinking through this problem because his value pluralism treats conflict among political goods as a permanent feature of political life rather than a failure awaiting resolution. He challenges the idea that political values can ultimately be reconciled within a single comprehensive order. As Berlin writes, "Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss" (1998, p. 14).

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For European external action, the significance of the argument lies in what follows from that premise. Berlin's pluralism is not a claim that all values or all political arrangements are equally legitimate. It is a rejection of the stronger proposition that commitment to substantive values necessarily entails convergence upon one determinate institutional form. Liberty, equality, justice and human dignity may all be defended while recognising that they can conflict, and that political communities may resolve such conflicts differently. Defending a value does not, by itself, require universalising the institutional form through which it is realised.

The move from Berlin to European external action should nevertheless be understood as an analytical extension rather than a claim about Berlin's own theory of foreign policy. The purpose is to bring value pluralism to bear on a problem that the normative-power literature has already exposed: how can an actor seek to influence what others regard as legitimate without assuming that its own political trajectory constitutes the necessary endpoint of political development?

Manners' formulation remains important precisely because normative power concerns the ability to shape what counts as "normal." Diez's intervention complicates that picture by showing how the exercise of such power constructs a European self and external others at the same time. Taken together, these insights sharpen the legitimacy problem at the centre of this paper: under what conception of political difference can European normative influence remain legitimate?

The question acquires greater urgency as European power becomes more protective. A Europe increasingly organised around resilience, security and strategic vulnerability may face stronger incentives to instrumentalise its external relationships. Development cooperation could then become more closely conditioned by European interests even while retaining a vocabulary of values and partnership. A pluralist conception of normative power does not resolve that tension; it changes the terms on which its legitimacy can be considered. It would, however, provide a basis for separating substantive normative commitment from the universalisation of European institutional preferences.

Nothing here suggests that European external action has already become pluralist. Nor does pluralist normative power describe a settled European doctrine. The empirical argument identifies a change in the orientation of European power that can be obscured when normative, economic and geopolitical dimensions are treated as separate. The theoretical move is different: pluralism provides a way of

thinking about the legitimacy of normative influence once European power becomes more protective.

The reorientation towards protective power creates the problem; pluralist normative power provides a conceptual way of thinking through its implications for legitimacy.

Development cooperation makes the distinction concrete. If partnerships increasingly combine poverty reduction with European strategic interests, their legitimacy depends partly on how the relationship between European priorities and partner priorities is understood. Are partners primarily objects of European transformation, or political actors whose own priorities and institutional choices carry normative significance? The distinction matters because a partnership can pursue shared interests without assuming that those interests require institutional convergence.

Conditionality, financing and infrastructure provision may continue to embody European values, but their justification becomes more contested when strategic objectives are added to developmental ones. The point is not to imagine an external policy cleansed of interests. It is whether those interests can be pursued without collapsing the distinction between a commitment to particular values and an insistence upon one institutional model as their necessary expression.

Pluralism, on this reading, is not a retreat from normative power but a different account of the conditions under which normative influence can remain legitimate. It is an attempt to make normative power more reflexive about the limits of its own universalising tendencies. In this respect it extends, rather than abandons, the reflexive strand of the normative-power literature. If European influence is partly constituted through the ability to shape what others regard as normal, then awareness of the historical and institutional contingency of Europe's own conception of the normal becomes part of the exercise of that power.

Conclusion

European development cooperation offers an unusually revealing window into the transformation of European power because it occupies an unsettled space between solidarity, transformation, economic interest and geopolitical strategy. Changes in the rationale attached to aid do not demonstrate that Europe has ceased to be normative, nor do they establish a simple trade-off between development and defence. They reveal something subtler: a reorientation in the purposes for which European transformative capacity is increasingly mobilised, with protection from external vulnerability becoming more consequential.

The larger question is consequently not whether Europe should choose between development and defence, nor between values and interests. It is what kind of power Europe wishes to become as the geopolitical conditions of its power change.

The movement towards protective power is best understood as a reorientation of transformative capacity, not its abandonment. Development cooperation remains capable of pursuing poverty reduction, institutional development and sustainable transformation. Yet it now operates within an external-action architecture in which resilience, economic security, connectivity and strategic interests carry greater political weight.

That shift creates a difficulty for normative power. The more European external action is organised around protection, the stronger the temptation to assess partners according to their strategic utility. A normative vocabulary can survive such a shift, but vocabulary alone does not settle the question of legitimacy. The harder question is whether European normativity can remain substantive without turning European institutional experience into a universal model.

Berlinian value pluralism offers a way of posing that problem. It separates commitment to values from commitment to a single institutional form while rejecting the relativist conclusion that every political arrangement is equally defensible. Applied to European external action, the distinction opens conceptual space for a form of normative power that takes political difference seriously without surrendering substantive commitments.

The larger question is consequently not whether Europe should choose between development and defence, nor between values and interests. It is what kind of power Europe wishes to become as the geopolitical conditions of its power change. European power can become more protective while European normative power is exercised through a more pluralist conception of normativity. That proposition does not dissolve the tensions inherent in Europe's external role. It does, however, offer a way of understanding European power that takes geopolitical protection seriously without reducing normativity to either universalist transformation or conventional realpolitik. ●

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