



Quotation: Sabourin, The EU at the crossroads of values and interests, NSM BLOG December 2025, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

1 December 2025

The EU at the Crossroads of Values and Interests

by Amandine Sabourin

The global landscape for international partnerships is changing rapidly. Governments face stretched budgets, inflationary pressures, and mounting demands for large-scale investments in energy, infrastructure and digitalisation. At the same time, geopolitical competition is intensifying, pushing the EU to become more assertive in protecting its strategic interests, such as geopolitical stability, strategic autonomy, trade, natural resources, and member states' economic interests. The tilt toward economic interests is also driven by domestic political pressures in Europe, where governments and voters are increasingly questioning the strategic relevance of international cooperation.

All this has accelerated a significant shift in the EU's external actions. Where Brussels once grounded its external engagement in a narrative of human rights, democratic norms and sustainable development, it is now increasingly guided by the logic of strategic competition and protecting '[European economic security](#)'. As a result, policy choices that once centred on promoting good governance or supporting civil society are now weighed more explicitly against Europe's industrial priorities, market access needs and the race to secure critical technologies and resources, i.e. how to ensure Europe's global competitiveness and security.

With [last summer's proposal for the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework](#), the debate around values is back on the table, raising legitimate (although not new) questions. What happens to the EU's values agenda when it is overshadowed by (geo) economic priorities? And what does this shift mean for civil society and other actors who have long been positioned as guardians of democracy and accountability?



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From a moral compass to a competitiveness one

For a long time, the EU's traditional "moral compass" in foreign policy has been closely linked to an understanding of democracy rooted in transparency, pluralism and the rule of law. Despite the flaws in the EU's approach to promoting these values, the EU aimed to support a model of democracy, which is broader than elections, and which relies on civic space, accountability mechanisms, independent media, and the ability of citizens to shape public choices. This set of values long informed the EU's vision of sustainable development, positioning democracy as both a principle and a pathway for prosperity.

As investments become more central to EU external action, notably with the Global Gateway, the narrative of "European competitiveness" replaces this moral compass. Values are still present in the official language, but less as a guiding compass shaping the EU's ambitions and interests, and more as an EU standard for specific investments. The question is not whether the EU should pursue its interests – it must. The question is instead whether it can do so in a way that protects civic space, supports pluralism, and reinforces democratic governance rather than letting these dimensions quietly erode.

The launch of the [Democracy Shield](#) earlier this year is framed as a renewed commitment to democratic principles at [a time of rising authoritarianism](#). In our previous ECDPM work on [democracy support](#) and on the [EU and its member states' answers to shrinking civic space](#), we showed that the EU's normative ambitions have long coexisted with competing geopolitical, commercial and security interests. **What is new is the intensity and clarity with which geo-economic interests now drive the EU's agenda, with the risk of a growing imbalance between those and its stated values.**

Civil society: Governance actors or implementers?

This shift matters deeply for civil society organisations (CSOs). They are central to democratic accountability, pluralism and inclusive policymaking. Yet, in an approach structured around investments, strategic influence and economic partnerships, the democratic functions of civil society risk being overshadowed by more instrumental expectations.



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Their role has evolved since the [2012 EU Communication on civil society](#), which positioned them as governance actors and contributors to democracy. Over the last decade, CSOs have been [progressively treated as implementing partners](#), delivering services in increasingly donor-driven frameworks.

This blurring of roles has implications for how to support CSOs. If civil society is primarily seen as a delivery channel within investment-heavy initiatives like the Global Gateway, its ability to challenge, scrutinise, or shape public policies weakens, focusing merely on the specific respect of EU values and standards in particular investment deals. This is the risk we highlighted in our work on [shrinking civic space](#): **as civic roles diversify, the EU may unintentionally reinforce dependency rather than autonomy.**

The nature of civic space itself is also transforming. Digital activists, informal youth groups, religious leaders, business associations, local journalists, social-media collectives: many of these actors fall outside traditional donor categories. Yet they shape public debate and legitimacy.

A broader understanding of civic space is therefore required to capture the diversity of these actors. But this level of understanding and engagement is currently suboptimal. First, stakeholders such as the EU delegations and EU member states' representations do not necessarily have the mandate and/or the resources to engage with civil society and explore the changing civic space, particularly at the partner country level. Second, it is vital that CSOs engage proactively with them, more so in light of the EU's new interest-driven approach. Especially in contexts where governance is fragile, and the EU increasingly depends on investments for influence, CSOs remain a critical source of [grounded knowledge and accountability](#) - well beyond the investment remit.

The EU's [Team Europe Democracy](#) (TED) network illustrates ongoing commitments to democracy, governance and electoral integrity, among other priorities. One key challenge remains to draw bridges between the new interest-driven approach and the value-based one, inherited from a more traditional vision of development cooperation, yet key to ensuring sustainable, long-term investments.



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Global Gateway and the 360-degree approach: ambition vs. practice

The [Global Gateway](#) reflects the values vs. interest shift in the EU's engagement towards international partnerships. Launched with the dual ambition to support partner countries' growth while [promoting a "values-based" model of connectivity](#), on paper, it is framed around shared values - [democratic values and high standards, good governance and transparency, equal partnerships, green and clean, security-focused, and catalysing the private sector](#). However, in reality, it is primarily a response to key EU structural pressures: the need to mobilise capital at scale, reduce strategic dependencies, secure supply chains, and position Europe as a global competitor.

In this sense, the objective is no longer simply to "meet partner's needs" as defined in "traditional" development cooperation. It is to identify [mutually beneficial interests](#), with EU priorities clearly in the foreground. This is not inherently problematic - partners, too, act based on interests. But it does raise questions about how values are interpreted, operationalised, and sometimes stretched, as well as how civil society and more broadly democracy can be further supported by the EU.

The EU's [360-degree approach](#) builds on **complementary or "satellite" initiatives that support a broader ecosystem**, combining investments with reforms, governance support, capacity building -also on resource mobilisation- and strategic diplomacy, for instance. In theory, this is where values should matter most, including but not only focusing on citizens' participation and inclusion, social cohesion, safeguards for communities, and accountability. These are the democratic ingredients that help ensure investments are legitimate, equitable and sustainable.

Reconciling interests, values and partnership

In practice, implementation remains uneven and often reveals a tension. **The promotion of large-scale investment pipelines may gain prominence over longer-term democratic aspirations and processes –including citizen engagement, oversight, institutional reform, coalition-building– which require political incentives and patient engagement.** To support this, the *360-degree approach* to build up a so-called conducive environment for investments will not suffice. Without active efforts to integrate democratic values beyond the design, sequencing and monitoring of investments, they risk becoming decorative principles rather than operational commitments.



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The rapid scaling up of Global Gateway should prompt a critical reflection on the EU's engagement with civic space and civil society -beyond their place in investment pipelines- to better understand their broader societal functions and the inherent limits of what Global Gateway and the *360-degree approach* can do. More than ever, the EU and its member states must find innovative ways to address the [trilemma](#) that the EU external action is facing: **reconciling its strategic interests, the values and principles on which the EU is grounded, and the partner country's needs.**

Ultimately, the real test of the EU's values agenda in the Global Gateway era is whether democracy, civic space and accountability remain seen as strategic assets, and whether these principles still hold weight when they collide with geopolitical urgency or geo-economic opportunity.



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