



STRATEGIC SOVEREIGNTY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: BETWEEN COGNITIVE DEPENDENCE AND CIVILIZATIONAL AUTONOMY

Gorazd Hladnik, MSc, MBA

In my presentation at the International Scientific Conference "Philosophy of the Future: Ideas and Meanings" at Lomonosov Moscow State University, I put forward a thesis that may be uncomfortable, yet one that is – I believe – necessary for reflecting on the future of Europe and the broader civilizational space. Sovereignty is no longer defined solely by the capacity to act, but increasingly by the capacity to shape reality – perceptions, interpretations, and the strategic frameworks within which decisions are made.

This distinction between autonomy and sovereignty is crucial. Autonomy is the ability to act within a given framework – to manage resources and implement decisions. Sovereignty, however, is the ability to define that framework itself – to set priorities, shape narratives, and determine strategic direction. A state or union may possess considerable autonomy while remaining strategically dependent if the frameworks of its action are shaped outside its control. The ability to act does not necessarily imply the ability to choose.

Human history has largely been shaped by military power. The nineteenth century belonged to armies, the twentieth to industry and finance. But the future, I argue, will increasingly be shaped by cognitive power – the ability to shape what people perceive, what they believe, and how they make decisions. We are moving from the age of physical coercion into the age of psychological influence. This does not mean that military power is no longer important – it means that the nature of power has expanded into the domain where it is decided what is true, what is normal, and what is desirable.

Psychological influence is not necessarily harmful. Persuasion, education, and debate are essential parts of a free society. However, psychological influence becomes problematic when it systematically weakens informed and autonomous decision-making. When it exploits human cognitive vulnerabilities – the need for belonging, fear of exclusion, cognitive dissonance, and conformity. These are not character flaws. They are characteristics of human psychology. And in the age of algorithms and platform capitalism, they are being exploited on a scale previously unimaginable.

Physical violence is strictly regulated. Theft, assault, fraud – these are criminal offences in every legal system. Criminal codes cover physical coercion almost completely. Economic transactions are also extensively regulated – fraud, insider trading, deception – all are legally defined and punishable. Yet systematic psychological influence – algorithmic manipulation, dark patterns, micro-targeting based on emotional vulnerabilities, narrative control, personalized perception shaping – remains largely unregulated. The level of regulatory coverage of psychological influence is less than ten percent. This is a regulatory asymmetry that represents one of the most significant blind spots of contemporary governance. While



physical coercion is closely monitored by judicial systems, psychological violence – which can have equally destructive consequences for individuals and societies – operates within a legal grey zone. Dark patterns in user interfaces, algorithms that intentionally amplify polarization, platforms that exploit human cognitive vulnerabilities to increase profit – all of this was, until recently, entirely legal. With the adoption of the Digital Services Act in 2024, the European Union took the first step toward regulating dark patterns, but this is only the beginning. We need a comprehensive regulatory framework that treats cognitive engineering as a systemic risk – as serious as physical violence or economic fraud.

Cognitive sovereignty is the ability of individuals, societies, and institutions to form judgments and make decisions independently – within their own civilizational and strategic frameworks. It is a precondition for all other forms of sovereignty. Without cognitive sovereignty, it is impossible to control the economy, security, or energy policy, because it is impossible to control how problems are perceived and how solutions are defined. Cognitive dependence emerges when perception is shaped externally. People continue making decisions. They continue voting. They continue expressing opinions. Yet the range of available interpretations – narratives, algorithms, media ecosystems, educational frameworks – is increasingly defined elsewhere. The mechanism is simple. Information shapes perception. Perception shapes decisions. Decisions shape policies. Policies shape reality. Whoever controls the informational layer indirectly controls everything beneath it.

Someone will object: I am saying nothing new. Churches, politicians and merchants have been using the same tricks for thousands of years. And at the level of psychology – they are right. Human psychology has not changed. The environment has changed.

What is new is the scale – from thousands to billions in real time. Personalization – from one message to billions of different realities. Automation – manipulation without a human manipulator, as algorithms learn by themselves. Global reach – without borders, without jurisdiction. Regulatory asymmetry – physical coercion is regulated, psychological influence almost not at all. And the sixth novelty, perhaps the most important: professionalization and a global industry. In recent decades, entire services, departments and global corporations have emerged that systematically combine information and communication technologies, behavioural psychology, data science, narrative engineering and strategic communication. This is no longer occasional propaganda. This is a global industry – with career paths, budgets, key performance indicators and clear objectives – serving state and corporate clients. The novelty, therefore, is not influence itself, but the emergence of an integrated influence infrastructure that operates continuously in digital societies. This phenomenon may be called cognitive engineering – the intentional, systematic and non-transparent shaping of perceptions, interpretations and decision-making of individuals, groups or societies through communication, educational, media, political, cultural, institutional or technological systems – with the objective of obtaining political, economic, ideological or strategic advantages for the influencing actor or a third party.

Europe demonstrates the paradox of modern sovereignty. It has a strong economy – although its share of world GDP at purchasing power parity declined from 20.4 percent in 2000 to 13.0 percent in 2023. It has strong institutions – the rule of law index places it at 0.78, above the United States and Japan and far above China and Russia. But Europe has weak cognitive sovereignty. European cloud service providers hold less than two percent of the global market share. In 2016, 62 percent of Europeans trusted the news. By 2024, that share had fallen to 31 percent. A strong economy and strong institutions therefore mean little if the cognitive



environment – the space in which we perceive problems and define solutions – is shaped elsewhere.

Before I continue, I must look back into history. After the Second World War, Europe was devastated. The Marshall Plan was presented as charity. But it was also something else – a systematic cultural, economic and technological subordination. This was not malicious. It was strategic. And it worked. Today Europe is no longer occupied by armies. It is occupied by platforms, narratives, capital and institutions.

At this point I must introduce a concept that may be uncomfortable, but is analytically useful: mental colonialism. Henry Kissinger, former United States Secretary of State, once said something that I find revealing: "The US are difficult for its enemies and deadly for its alliances and partners." This is not anti-Americanism. It is a structural observation. And it explains much about Europe's position today. Alliance with the United States is not free of charge – it has a price. And that price is increasingly cognitive dependence.

Unlike traditional colonialism, mental colonialism does not require physical occupation. It operates through language, popular culture, science and media. It replaces moral imperatives with relativism. It replaces community with the atomized individual. It replaces compassion with economic calculation. In Europe, it has replaced the European synthesis of the spiritual, the aesthetic and the rational with banal functionality, aesthetic noise and consumer impulse.

Cultural occupation has multiple dimensions: language as a carrier of consciousness; popular culture and the aesthetics of banality; science and the collapse of epistemological sovereignty; media perversion and the trivialization of everything; an alien value system as a tool of re-education; extravagance as the new norm; the exploitation of human psychological characteristics; information pollution and psychological aggression; and psychological violence as a new paradigm of subjugation. All of this occurs without physical force. Without a single soldier. Without a single shot. Voluntarily. Sometimes unconsciously.

Here it is worth mentioning an interesting linguistic observation. Just as northern peoples have dozens of words for snow, English has an unusually large number of words for deception – "scam", "swindle", "fraud", "hoax", "grift", "con", "hustle", "racket" – each with a slightly different nuance, whereas some European languages have only a few such expressions. This is not proof, but it is an observation consistent with experience: deception is not an exception, but often a socially tolerated tactic. The same can be observed with hypocrisy, double standards, concealed arrogance and political opportunism – which are often in contradiction with European values of honour, responsibility and integrity.

Mental colonialism therefore represents a transition from moral imperative to relativism, from community to the atomized individual, from compassion to economic calculation, from the European synthesis of the spiritual, the aesthetic and the rational to banal functionality, aesthetic noise and consumer impulse. Its consequences are visible at all levels of European institutions: loss of values, erosion of European identity, ideological colonization, legal-technocratic deconstruction of Europe, the ideological apparatus and control, economic-administrative subordination, and, in foreign and security policy, the growing subordination of European interests to globalist agendas. Cognitive dependence in the European Union developed voluntarily, although at times unconsciously.



Strategic sovereignty rests on four layers. At the bottom is civilization – values, culture, historical memory and identity. Above it is cognitive sovereignty – narratives, education and interpretation. Then institutional sovereignty – democracy, law and governance. And at the top operational sovereignty – economy, technology, energy and defence. Sustainable power is built from the bottom up. If the civilizational foundation erodes, the upper layers cannot endure. No great power survives without a coherent civilizational narrative. China has Confucian continuity. India has civilizational continuity. Russia has historical-spiritual continuity. The United States has American exceptionalism – the narrative of the "indispensable nation". And Europe? Europe has a question mark. What is the European civilizational narrative? This is not a rhetorical question. It is the most important strategic question facing the European Union today. Strategic power begins as a cultural phenomenon before it becomes political.

Democratic systems are facing new structural vulnerabilities. Elections remain democratic. Procedures remain intact. But informational environments increasingly do not. Informational asymmetry – unequal access to information shapes perceptions and choices. Algorithmic amplification – algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy, speed over nuance, polarization over coherence. Narrative concentration – a limited number of narratives dominate public attention and displace alternatives. Visibility over competence – the attention economy rewards visibility, not expertise or problem-solving capacity. All this leads to a phenomenon that psychological literature calls negative selection.

Negative selection is a phenomenon in which electoral and political systems, instead of selecting the best candidates, select those who are most visible, most adaptable and most skilled at managing narratives – not necessarily those who are most competent, responsible or capable of long-term thinking. In digitally mediated political spaces, where attention becomes a scarce resource and the speed of communication often replaces thoughtful deliberation, traits associated with the so-called Dark Triad – Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy – become structural advantages. This does not mean that all politicians possess these traits. It means that the systemic logic of the attention economy and algorithmically mediated political arenas creates selective pressure in their favour. Individuals with these traits are often better equipped to operate in environments that reward strategic manipulation, self-promotion and rapid adaptation to changing narratives.

The Dark Triad is therefore not the cause, but a consequence of negative selection within otherwise democratic electoral systems. And this is a structural weakness of representative democracy. When visibility, adaptability and control over narratives prevail over competence, long-term responsibility and structural thinking, political leadership becomes increasingly oriented toward short-term positioning rather than long-term strategy. Decision-making processes become reactive, driven by immediate pressures rather than structural considerations. Institutional accountability weakens. The result is a growing mismatch between the values of the elite and the values of the population. Representatives no longer defend the interests of the people, but the interests of narrow interest groups, their own careers or external influences. Democratic legitimacy erodes – not because democratic procedures disappear, but because their substantive function is weakened.

Addressing these limitations requires the introduction of corrective mechanisms that operate within the democratic system without undermining its fundamental principles. Direct and digital democracy represent one such mechanism. Rather than replacing representative structures, they introduce an additional layer of participation that can mitigate the effects of negative selection and informational asymmetries. Mechanisms of direct democracy enable



more continuous interaction between citizens and institutions and provide a way to confirm or challenge political decisions in real time. The role of direct democracy in this context is not ideological, but functional. It acts as a corrective to structural distortions that cannot be eliminated through representative mechanisms alone. By distributing influence more broadly, it reduces the concentration of decision-making power and increases the resilience of the system to manipulation and bias. In addition to direct democracy, other corrective mechanisms are required: public oversight of politicians – including the possibility of recall before the end of a mandate; oversight of media and information – transparency of ownership, financing and editorial policies; oversight of narratives – preventing the concentration of narratives in the hands of narrow interest groups; and informational integrity – standards for algorithmic transparency, dark patterns and micro-targeting. Direct democracy and public oversight are not a substitute for representative democracy, but a necessary complement that keeps it healthy and accountable.

But a diagnosis without therapy is only half the job done. If the analysis I have presented is correct – if Europe truly suffers from cognitive dependence, if its democratic institutions are exposed to negative selection, if its informational space is under the control of external powers – then we must ask: what should be done? How can Europe dig itself out of this mud?

The answer begins with recognition. The first step toward recovery is acknowledging the disease. European elites must stop denying cognitive dependence and recognize it as a systemic vulnerability that requires a systemic response. This means that they must stop complacently repeating that Europe is a "regulatory superpower" and begin acknowledging that regulatory power without cognitive sovereignty is merely a façade. Recognition of cognitive dependence is the foundation of everything that follows – without it, all other measures are merely firefighting rather than building a fire protection system.

Instead of warmongering, which pushes Europe into conflicts that are not in its interest, Europe must invest in development. This does not mean naïve pacifism, but a strategic redirection of resources from military adventures toward long-term competitiveness. Every euro spent on weapons is a euro unavailable for research, education and technological development. Europe cannot afford to be simultaneously a military subcontractor of the United States and a technological subcontractor of China. It should choose a third path – the path of civilizational development based on knowledge, quality of life and sustainable prosperity.

Control of the informational space is the next key step. Europe must no longer allow its public discourse to be shaped by media that are not under European control and do not defend European interests. BBC, CNN and other Anglo-American media are not neutral observers – they are part of an informational system serving the interests of their owners and their states. Europe needs its own independent media that will inform the European public from a European perspective. This is not about censorship or banning foreign media – it is about establishing a balance that does not exist today. The European media space must become sovereign, which means that European citizens must have access to information that is not filtered through foreign editorial policies and foreign interests.

Financial sovereignty is equally necessary. Europe cannot be strategically autonomous if its financial system is under the control of external powers. BlackRock, Vanguard and State Street – three American asset management companies – are the largest shareholders of most European corporations. This means that strategic decisions of European corporations – from energy to technology – are made under the influence of American financial interests. Europe must



develop its own financial system that is independent of the American dollar, American banking institutions and American credit rating agencies. This does not mean autarky, but strategic diversification and the strengthening of European financial institutions. The European Investment Bank, the European Fund for Strategic Investments and other European instruments must become the central actors of European financing rather than merely subcontractors of global financial flows.

Systems and technologies – this is the area in which Europe has fallen furthest behind. European cloud service providers hold less than two percent of the global market share. European digital platforms hold less than two percent of the European market. This is a catastrophic situation that must be changed urgently. Europe must develop its own technologies – not because foreign technologies are bad, but because dependence on foreign technologies is a strategic risk. This requires systematic investment in research and development, support for European technology companies and the creation of conditions for their growth. The European technological ecosystem must become competitive with the American and Chinese ones – not through protectionism, but through intelligent policies that encourage innovation and entrepreneurship.

Digitalization as public infrastructure – this is the key conceptual shift. The internet, browsers, social networks and artificial intelligence platforms are no longer merely private services. They are public infrastructure, as important as roads, the electricity grid or water supply systems. And as public infrastructure they must be subject to public oversight and public interests. This does not mean nationalizing Google or Meta. It means that Europe must develop its own digital platforms operating in the public interest and that foreign platforms operating on European territory must respect European standards, European legislation and European values. Digital infrastructure must be treated as critical infrastructure – just like the energy grid or the transport system.

Rebalancing financial capital with intellectual capital is the next necessary step. Over recent decades, the global economy has been characterized by the growing dominance of financial capital over intellectual capital. Short-term returns, speculation and financial derivatives have become more important than long-term investment in knowledge, research and innovation. Europe must reverse this trend. Intellectual capital – education, research, knowledge and innovation – must become the central source of European competitiveness. This requires systematic investment in education at all levels, support for research and development and the creation of conditions for the transfer of knowledge into the economy. The financial system must serve intellectual capital, not the other way around.

Developing competitive advantages toward the highest quality of life – this is what truly distinguishes Europe from other civilizations. Europe's comparative advantage is not low labour costs or centralized efficiency, but quality of life – stable, inclusive and high-quality living conditions that Europe can offer. Longer life expectancy, better work-life balance, higher security, quality healthcare and social cohesion – these are Europe's competitive advantages. And these advantages must be systematically developed and strengthened. Europe must not compete with China on labour costs or with the United States on financial speculation. Europe must compete on quality of life – and this is a competition Europe can win.

And finally – the regulation of psychological violence and cognitive engineering. This is perhaps the most overlooked and at the same time the most necessary measure. This is not about restricting freedom of expression or imposing censorship. It is about establishing legal standards that prevent the systematic exploitation of human cognitive vulnerabilities for



political, economic or ideological objectives. Specifically, this means the prohibition of dark patterns in user interfaces – deceptive buttons, hidden costs and forced subscriptions; algorithmic transparency – users must have the right to know why specific content is shown to them and who is behind it; the prohibition of micro-targeting based on emotional vulnerabilities, psychographic profiles or behavioural data for political purposes; limitations on personalized perception shaping – algorithms must not intentionally create information bubbles or intensify polarization; platform accountability for the dissemination of disinformation and harmful content – equivalent to the accountability of print media for published content; and independent supervisory bodies for monitoring and sanctioning violations in the field of cognitive engineering. Without this regulatory dimension, any discussion of cognitive sovereignty remains incomplete. Cognitive sovereignty is not merely a philosophical concept – it is a legal and political challenge that requires concrete institutional responses. Just as in previous decades we established regulatory frameworks to protect consumers, the environment and workers, today we must establish frameworks to protect the human psyche from systematic manipulation.

All of this, however, must be institutionalized within a new political framework. I propose a model of a modular federation – unity without uniformity. Europe is not one nation and never will be. It is many nations, many languages, many historical experiences. A federal model that imposes uniformity will fail. A modular model that enables differentiated integration – one that respects diversity while strengthening sovereignty – has a chance of succeeding. At the European level, the exclusive competences should include the constitutional order, foreign policy, common security, strategic defence, the protection of external borders, the common market and critical infrastructure – including digital infrastructure, cloud services and data ecosystems. At the shared level, competences should include migration, energy, research, transport, the environment, healthcare, demography and strategic industrial policy. At the national level, competences should include culture, language, education, family policy, most taxation, social policy, police forces and tactical military forces. The principle is simple: shared where necessary, national where possible. This model allows different states different levels of integration while preserving the coherence of the overall system. States wishing to cooperate more deeply in specific areas may do so; those wishing to preserve greater autonomy are not forced into a form of unity that does not suit them.

Finally, all of this must be implemented in a manner compatible with Europe as a whole – not only with its core, but also with its periphery; not only with the West, but also with the East. Europe is a continent, not merely a union. Its future must not be determined solely from offices in Brussels, but by all its peoples and cultures. A modular federation makes it possible to include those states that wish to participate in a manner that respects their sovereignty and identity while simultaneously building common European interests.

During the preparation of this presentation, I also developed a visual conclusion that I would like to share with you. I called it *What We Leave Behind*. If we continue along the path of dependence, we leave behind cognitive dependence, democratic degradation, strategic vulnerability and civilizational decline. If we choose the path of sovereignty, we leave behind cognitive sovereignty, democratic resilience, strategic autonomy and civilizational confidence. It serves as a visual reminder that the choice is ours and that the time to make it is now.

I have also prepared an overview of concrete actors of cultural colonization: in the field of digital platforms, Google, Meta, Microsoft, Amazon, Apple and TikTok; in the field of media, CNN, BBC, Politico and Axios; in the field of finance, BlackRock, Vanguard and State Street;



and in the field of institutions, the U.S. Department of State, NATO, the IMF and the World Bank. These are not conspiracy theories. They are structural realities that must be recognized if Europe is to free itself from cognitive dependence.

Let me conclude with what I consider the central question of the twenty-first century. If sovereignty once rested upon control of territory, and later upon control of industry and finance, can political communities remain sovereign without control over the informational and cognitive environments within which decisions are made? I believe the answer is no. Territory shaped the past. Cognition will shape the future. Cognitive sovereignty leads to strategic sovereignty. Strategic sovereignty leads to democratic resilience. Democratic resilience leads to peace and prosperity.

The path toward that goal, however, is demanding. It requires recognizing cognitive dependence not as a theoretical concept but as a concrete and measurable vulnerability. It requires mastery of the informational space, not merely through regulation but through the construction of an independent informational infrastructure. It requires financial sovereignty, not as isolation but as strategic independence. It requires technological sovereignty, not as autarky but as the capacity for independent technological development. It requires rebalancing financial and intellectual capital, not as a moral aspiration but as an economic necessity. It requires developing competitive advantages aimed at achieving the highest quality of life, not as social policy but as a strategic advantage. And it requires the regulation of psychological violence and cognitive engineering – not as a curtailment of liberty, but as a necessary safeguard for the human mind against systematic manipulation. All of this must be institutionalized within a modular federation that includes the whole of Europe in a compatible and coherent manner.

If the diagnosis I have presented today is uncomfortable, that does not indicate weakness but relevance. Analysis without synthesis, vision and strategy is like a diagnosis without therapy. The future will not belong to those who control territory, but to those who preserve the capacity for independent thinking, decision-making and action. The question is not whether this is happening only to Europe. The question is whether any civilization is immune. For this reason, it is essential that Europe finds a path from cognitive dependence to cognitive sovereignty – immediately, thoughtfully and decisively.

Gorazd Hladnik, MSc, MBA
Libertas Europa, Ljubljana, Slovenia