

The EU's Sovereignty: 404 Error?

Few political concepts have loomed as large in contemporary European discourse as sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Yet, their ubiquity and prominence have frequently obscured rather than enhanced conceptual clarity.

In traditional terms, political science treats sovereignty as the highest form of authority within a political system. Whether phrased as supreme power (1), supreme political power, absolute authority, or supreme will - concepts discussed by theorists from Hugo Grotius to Jean Bodin (33) - the common thread is that sovereignty stands above all other forms of authority over a territory and population (2). Within this conventional conception, sovereignty is commonly associated with four key elements: supremacy, absoluteness, indivisibility, and exclusivity.

Former French minister for Europe and foreign affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, defined the term "European sovereignty" as the capacity of Europe to determine its own direction, safeguard its core values and exercise authority over matters falling within its competences (3).

Meanwhile, "strategic autonomy" refers not primarily to possession of political authority, but to the ability to develop and maintain the economic, technological, military and institutional capabilities required to pursue strategic objectives without being compelled to rely on external actors.

Despite the connection between the two terms, treating both as interchangeable would appear to be misleading. Hence, Daniel Fiott describes strategic sovereignty and strategic autonomy as two "different animals", and also notes the "existing social contract between citizens, states and institutions", in the Chaillot Paper number 169 (Institute for Security Studies (ISS), July 2021) (4). Additionally, the contrast between political terminology and conflicting institutional and material realities constitutes another subject of matter.

This overall discrepancy raises the central question of this paper: to what extent can the European Union (EU) be viewed as sovereign, and what does European sovereignty mean in practice?

Rather than treating sovereignty as a binary condition, this paper examines the concept through several dimensions, including legitimacy, skepticism, competing viewpoints, capabilities, external dependencies and international influence.

One dimension of the debate concerns the political salience of European sovereignty. "The timing of the current European debate is attributable above all to ... Trump's rejection of central elements of the liberal international order", as noted in a research paper published by the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) on March 21, 2019 (6).

Generally speaking, European sovereignty is increasingly an issue in political debate. Today, only half of Europeans regard Europe as sovereign, according to an Ipsos survey of 8,000 Europeans conducted on behalf of the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung between December 2020 and January 2021 (5). This aggregative figure obscures substantial variations; the concept of sovereignty is appreciated and evaluated quite differently in the various European states. A minority of 21 percent of surveyed Italians evaluate it positively, by contrast, 73 percent of Germans view it positively. Plausible explanations for negative findings of the study can be found in concerns over economic pressure, the loss of national autonomy, perceived democratic deficit and a lack of solidarity during major crises, such as the pandemic. Public support for strengthening European sovereignty is substantial; nearly three-quarters of Europeans endorse this objective.

A second dimension concerns the EU's material dependencies. The EU faces its most frequent and critical strategic dependencies in raw materials (including rare earths), advanced technology, chemicals and energy (8). Notably, the EU maintains an overall import dependency rate of over 50 per cent for its energy needs, importing significant shares of oil, natural gas, and coal from partners including Russia, Norway and to a lesser extent the United States (7). This creates significant pressure for structural transformation, including the transition towards a more diversified, decarbonized and resilient energy system (34). The implications of such a transformation ultimately shape "Europe's position in the global landscape", states Teresa Ribera, Spanish commissioner responsible for clean, just and competitive transition, in her article in the Financial Times that was published on November 27, 2025 (9).

In the past, the EU has often been characterized as the "rule-maker": A regulatory power capable of setting global standards that extend far beyond its borders, for example with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and shaping the behavior of international actors. Nowadays, some experts have argued that the so-called „Brussels-Effect“ is slowly fading (10). The regulatory

influence thus does not automatically translate into comprehensive strategic autonomy. Under certain circumstances, the EU risks increasingly transitioning from rule-maker to rule-taker - a first indication of a “404 Error” in the European sovereignty debate (30). Significantly, the digital technology governance reveals the core paradox: Nora Alice von Ingersleben-Seip’s research on the EU’s role in the digital technologies shows how Brussels sets standards for AI, data privacy and platform behavior - yet remains dependent on U.S. and Chinese technological infrastructure to implement these very rules (11). Cloud computing, semiconductor manufacturing and artificial intelligence capabilities remain consolidated among the U.S. and Asian firms (40). Inter alia in relation to this, Mario Draghi, former European Central Bank president, proposed in 2024 a comprehensive package of 176 measures: enhancing innovation, reductions of energy prices and dependencies, as well as securing annual investments of 750 to 800 billion euros (12).

From a federalist perspective, sovereignty must be actively constructed at the European level to project hard power and compete with superpowers like the U.S. and China - in figurative terms, a path towards the “rule-maker” (29). The French perception of European sovereignty provides perhaps the clearest political articulation to this approach. In his 2017 Sorbonne speech, Emmanuel Macron argued that European sovereignty does not constitute a negation of national sovereignty, but rather an attempt to preserve collective decision-making capacity in an international environment (14). Macron consequently linked European sovereignty to the ability to determine Europe’s own preferences and destiny rather than passively adapting to what is established elsewhere.

“All civilizations are mortal” - the widely known aphorism by Paul Valéry can be read as a reminder that political and economic weight cannot be treated as self-perpetuating conditions. The 2022 European Sovereignty Index depicts a differentiated picture: Europe performs “good” in health and economy, merely “satisfactory” in defense, climate, and migration, and “poor” in technology (15). Notably, neither “excellent” nor “failing” appears among the categories. The index highlights a potential gap between political commitments and material capabilities. Overall, five countries are referred to as “leaders”: Germany, France, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, while eleven are classified as “underperformers”.

Critics, particularly across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), caution that pushing for EU-level autonomy risks reallocating defense resources away from NATO commitments and diluting the U.S. security guarantee (16, 18). Moreover, where Western theorists see sovereignty as political authority, CEE thinkers tend to view sovereignty through the pragmatic lens of military deterrence (22). This skepticism is not merely theoretical; it is reinforced by concrete realities. References include the historical and contemporary Polish-Belarusian relations, the “European Sky Shield Initiative” (ESSI), and the security implications of Russian aggression. Moreover, when France reacted with outrage to the cancelled submarine deal with Australia (AUKUS), viewing it as “a blow to European strategic autonomy”, several CEE states remained notably silent or explicitly sided with Washington (17, 39). In addition, almost immediate friction is caused by U.S. military interceptions and engagement in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East (19).

Complementing the named concerns, Thierry Breton, former commissioner, argued that “globalization has gone too far” and in 2020 proposed a new industrial policy with the ambition “to make the most of localization as an opportunity to bring more manufacturing back to the EU in some sectors” (20). In response, some experts, like Fredrik Erixon in his European Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE) policy brief, warn that pursuing economic sovereignty risks breaking international trade rules (WTO), alienating allies, and lowering European competitiveness (21).

According to the survey by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 26 per cent of Italians and French people also mention protectionism in this explicit context (5). In volume 24 of the Journal of Industry, Competition and Trade, *Protectionism in Disguise?*, both authors evaluate whether the anti-dumping measures constitute legitimate actions to ensure overall market fairness (23). The available evidence does not support interpreting the policy primarily as protectionism, since the tariffs promoted market substitution without creating long-lasting production inefficiency and without favoring domestic firms within the EU. This illustrates another tension inherent in the sovereignty debate: reducing external dependencies may strengthen European resilience, while excessive self-reliance may simultaneously undermine the openness to the global markets on which European prosperity depends. This is particularly critical for the EU’s service-based economy, where trade in services represents approximately 25% of GDP (37).

Another difficulty concerns legitimacy and public acceptance. In *European Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and Power*, legal scholar and political scientist Bart M.J. Szewczyk conceptualizes European sovereignty as a multi-layered, relational authority which exists across multiple tiers of government rather than resting solely in national capitals. Instead of defining sovereignty based on centralized power and statehood, Szewczyk grounds European sovereignty in European citizenship, mediated through various political levels - from local city halls and councils to national governments and EU institutions. This conception therefore represents a significant departure from the traditional model outlined at the beginning of this paper: sovereignty is no longer understood as indivisible authority concentrated in a single political centre.

A different assessment emerges from the opposing perspective. Václav Klaus, former president of the Czech Republic, compares Brussels' oversight to Soviet-era domination and extends the comparison to dictatorship (25). He has directly refused to fly the EU flag over his official seat in Prague during his presidency, declaring that the country was not an EU province (28).

A more indirectly related critique can be found in the work of *The Virtue of Nationalism* by Yoram Hazony, which questions the political consequences of supranational integration and a political vacuum.

Furthermore, the legitimacy problem becomes particularly apparent in the German Federal Constitutional Court's Lisbon Treaty judgment of 2009 (26, 27). Although the court accepted the treaty's compatibility with the Basic Law, including Article 23(1)'s constitutional framework for European integration, it emphasized two main concerns: (1) the EU's democratic deficit relative to state democracies, and (2) member states' continuing responsibility for European integration.

Finally, requirements such as "joined-up internal and external action" need to be met in order to create "a stronger and more resilient EU" noted in the *Trade Policy Review - An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy* - published by the European Commission on February 18, 2021 (31). This conception does not regard interdependence and autonomy as mutually exclusive. Instead, it seeks to combine resilience, competitiveness with openness, sustainability and rules-based cooperation - while maintaining autonomous instruments for circumstances such as global crises and conflicts in which European interests require them (32). "Open, but on our terms and at our conditions", as commissioner Thierry Breton expresses it in his speech at the Bruegel annual meeting (36).

To conclude, the question of whether the EU should be viewed as a sovereign element in the global polis ultimately resists a clear answer. The EU possesses substantial international influence to shape internal and external outcomes, shared political values, regulatory authority and economic weight. Nevertheless, ambitious political commitments do not straightforwardly imply actual sovereignty in a traditional sense. The regularly discussed exposure to external factors - institutional arrangements, energy, raw materials, technology, and supply-chain issues - along with divergent member state interests markedly constrain the EU's collective action. Yet, reducing the EU purely to the status of an organization would overlook the considerable authority it has accumulated and exercised over the last three decades of European integration (38).

This dynamic illustrates how foundational the process of change and transformation becomes tangible (35). The terms like "strategic sovereignty", "European sovereignty" and "strategic autonomy" describe something neither fully established nor entirely absent. The subject of sovereignty remains contested, mostly contingent, and ultimately depends on the willingness of the member states to transform nation-specific capabilities into collective action.

In this sense, the "404 Error" should not necessarily be understood as a straightforward diagnosis of non-existing sovereignty. Rather, it indicates that the conventional search for a clearly identifiable European sovereign continues to return to no definitive result.

Sources (Footer):

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