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Trump 2.0: Implications for EU soft power and international cultural relations strategy

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The second mandate of President Trump and the MAGA movement have brought about political and cultural tensions in the transatlantic relationship, and impacted both the United States (US) and European Union (EU) soft power. In the context of negotiations of the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028–2034, this cS brief makes recommendations for the upcoming EU international cultural relations (ICR) strategy. It argues that the Trump 2.0 presidency is actively dismantling key components of US soft power, traditionally rooted in cultural attractiveness and global influence. As a result, the EU is prompted to reconsider and strengthen its own cultural and strategic positioning globally, particularly in the digital tech and AI sectors. The brief highlights the evolving balance between hard and soft power, noting the EU's increasing investment in supranational mechanisms and defence capacities. It concludes that the preparation of a new EU ICR strategy offers a timely opportunity to redefine its approach to soft power independently from the US.

Introduction

Soft power is the capacity of a political entity to develop its attractiveness while combining it with coercive means. In the words of Joseph Nye, “it is even better for powers and rulers to be both feared and liked”.¹ In his view, hard and soft powers were two sides of the same coin: **there is**

no soft power without hard power. Hard power can help rulers in the short term but soft power often prevails in the long term.

Since the Second World War, the United States (US) have been developing a set of soft power tools producing various forms of American attractiveness through the

1. Nye, J., “Le soft power culturel américain survivra-t-il au déclin de leur soft power politique?”, *Le Monde*, 24 May 2025; Bernard, P., “Donald Trump, en sacrifiant le soft power américain, alimente l’impopularité de son pays et invite les Européens à exercer le leur”, *Le Monde*, 15 Feb. 2026.

American dream and way of life: the combination of technological audiovisual supremacy, robust public financing and back-up, rights-based values and storytelling, urban and country aesthetics, artistic excellence open to migrants and cultural diversity produced powerful cultural industrial giants and popular artwork. This soft power model is now being eroded by technological transformations and sabotaged² by **MAGA's culture wars and Trump's new foreign policy.**

For decades, the European Union (EU) has been analysed as an international actor with no real political clout. However, since the 2008 financial crisis, Member States have established several union-level supranational mechanisms and policies that have a **strong external impact**: the financial control mechanisms, Eurobonds to finance counter Covid-19 and support economic reboot, supranational border management, successive digital regulation frameworks as well as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), to name but a few. In the security and defence realms, the EU has adopted the groundbreaking European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) regulation, joint ammunition purchase mechanisms and, in 2026, member states committed to contract a 90 million collective loan to provide additional financial assistance to Ukraine.

Such supranational trends of the EU institutional system, indicated by unprecedented investments in hard security, the defence industry and armament, **signal structural transformations of the EU as an international power.**

Recent analyses³ converge in stating that it is time for the EU to develop its soft power⁴ **independently from the US.** Easier said than done: they usually end with this conclusion without detailing how Europeans could actually do it.

The brief first analyses the impact of Trump 2.0 on US soft power. Part 2 looks at the implications for the EU in the preparation of its new international cultural relations (ICR) strategy.

Part 1: The US soft power suicide and its impact

A. How US soft power is being reshaped

1. Golden Age, perpetual expansion and fake narratives

Trump and his team are developing a **narrative based on a mythical Golden Age of America** leading to the promotion of reactionary values and identity policies. This approach crystallised with the adoption of the US National Security Strategy⁵ (NSS) in November 2025 explicitly referring to a **“new golden age”**. According to the document, the American people have been given natural rights by God and the country has “inherent greatness and decency”.⁶ In practice, the **militarisation** of border control and migration policies with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) police has led to profound discontent in certain federated states, thereby **undermining the image of a self-confident and attractive America.**

Europe is described in the NSS as a continent in need of restoring its **“civilisational self-confidence and Western identity”**. This narrative

2. “USAID and the willful sabotage of American soft power”, *Financial Times*, 4 Feb. 2025.

3. van Middelaar, L. “Avec Trump, l'Europe encaisse une attaque idéologique de la part de son protecteur historique”, *Le Monde*, 30 Jan. 2026.

4. Bernard, P., art. cit. *Le Monde*, 15 Feb. 2026.

5. National Security Strategy of the United States of America, The White House, 4 Dec. 2025.

6. See for instance jurisprudence on the US constitution's First Amendment and US government's obligations in the field of religion. The First Amendment prohibits US Government from “establishing” a religion.

obviously ignores the complex historical, migratory, social and cultural processes that resulted in today's composition of US and European populations. It actually functions and uses **post-truth** as a basis: the core of the strategy is to have MAGA leaders' speech made and **occupying the media space to entertain their audience**⁷, not the veracity of what is said.

The MAGA culture wars' narrative is based on a **theological, ethno-centric and essentialised conception of identity**, as if the American and European people had always been the same. It is different from the worldviews promoted by the EU's public policies on **cultural diversity**. Trump 2.0 presidency also refers to 19th century **libertarian nationalism** seeking perpetual expansion⁸, a stance seen by many in the EU as **neo-imperialist**.

MAGA Golden Age and expansionist mythical paradigms have been **counterproductive** both in the US and in Europe. They have divided the MAGA camp and disenfranchised former allies, as shown by several opinion polls and studies published in 2025 (Pew Research Center) and early 2026 (Politico).⁹ The second impact is that it has **polarised European societies** between the pro-Trump (described as patriotic European parties in the NSS, themselves not all united on Trump's US foreign policy) and the rest, **to such extent that two "West" now co-exist**.¹⁰ As a consequence, Europeans and other societies in the world are seeing Trump's America as less attractive

politically: **a soft power decline at the level of perceptions.**

2. War on domestic cultural policies and cultural rights

At home, Trump's culture wars have focused on defunding supposedly subversive and "woke" universities¹² and federal institutions such as the National Endowment for the Arts.¹³

MAGA has been at war with **cultural rights** in the US. The new administration has made diversity **illegal** at the federal level and reintroduced **censorship** through several supposedly "anti DEI" Executive Orders (EO): a **direct attack against fundamental rights** leading to numerous successful law suits (regarding EOs 14187, 14151, 14168, 14173). Time will tell how many EOs are actually put on hold and how their implementation (when it is confirmed) will still be challenged in court.

While European societies have increasingly valued diversity, the Trump administration, in the NSS, praises itself for having "rooted out so-called 'DEI' and other discriminatory and anti-competitive practices".

Many institutions and companies have officially applied new counter-DEI measures, while their staff or executives hope to continue applying fundamental rights in practice.¹⁴ However, **freedom of speech is at threat** in the workplace and there is a risk for staff to be denounced by

7. Kandel, M., "Comment Trump et son camp fabriquent une infrastructure médiatique de propagande", Froggy Bottom, 24 Jan. 2026, <https://froggybottomblog.com/2026/01/24/comment-trump-et-son-camp-fabriquent-une-infrastructure-mediatique-de-propagande/>.

8. Tournès, L., "Trump ne vise plus le retour à l'«American dream» d'après 1945, mais à l'Amérique originelle de l'expansion perpétuelle", *Le Monde*, 16 Jan. 2026.

9. Bernard, P., art. cit., *Le Monde*, 15 Feb. 2026.

10. Kuisz, J., "Parler de deux Occidents n'a rien d'exagéré : l'Europe et les Etats-Unis ont des modèles politiques distincts et des systèmes de valeurs incompatibles", *Le Monde*, 7 Feb. 2026.

11. The term "woke", at the core of debates that have reached academic circles themselves, would deserve a dedicated research piece. As a starting point: Maad, A. "Qu'est-ce que la pensée Woke ? Quatre questions pour comprendre le terme et les débats qui l'entourent", *Le Monde*, 23 September 2021. See also some references in Samaras, Georgios, S. *Battleground Europe: the rise of anti-woke movements and their threat to democracy*, *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7. 10.3389/fpos.2025.1568816.

12. "Universités : coupe sur les campus", *Cultures Monde*, France Culture, 22 April 2025.

13. Liebelson, D., "Inside Trump's bizarre campaign to bend the art world to his will", *The New Republic*, 2 May 2025.

14. "Universités : coupe sur les campus", *Cultures Monde*, France Culture, 22 April 2025.

their colleagues. In government agencies and in universities funded by federal budgets, each institutional situation is being dealt individually, leading to a **fragmentation and potential competition** among organisations summoned to **limit cultural rights**.

Donald Trump's coup on the Kennedy Centre for the Arts, which has triggered protests and shows cancellations by critical artists, is a caricature of **MAGA's symbolic brutality**. It also tells a lot about the **personality cult** the president is developing around his own image. After a year of purge, crisis and MAGA self-imposed contradictions, including rulings promoting **"diversity"**, the arts centre has been closed for **"renovation"**.

Content-wise, Trump's real-estate-like method has produced no content that would result in enhanced attractiveness of the US culture. **The short-term objective and result is the erasing of the influential and embarrassing American liberal cultural elite and its replacement by personalities expected to align with MAGA authoritarian aesthetics and populist mobilisation methods and styles.** This strategy and certain leaders' behaviours and gestures (such as Elon Musk and Steve Bannon) have raised debates about the resurgence of **fascism** in the US.¹⁵ By weakening American capacities to support high-level artistic and scientific productions in various arts forms, the Trump federal administration is actually **undermining America's artistic soft power**.¹⁶

3. The end of the Hollywood soft power model?

Until the emergence of global digital audiovisual platforms, the US film industry producing enduring soft power was dominated by Hollywood, a model which has faced several setbacks since 2020 and is now being deeply **transformed by new digital forms** of production and distribution.¹⁷ As in other cultural sectors, Trump has criticised **the evolution of Hollywood as decadent and "woke"** and promised to restore the golden age of American movies, for instance by **installing trade tariffs against foreign films**¹⁸ and appointing aged actors as cinema ambassadors. The increased fragmentation of the cinema industry¹⁹ echoes the **ideological polarisation of American society**.

While unions such as American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and older generations of movie stars²⁰ are organising cultural resistance²¹ against Trump leadership, **new types of investors**, tech tycoons and CEOs²² close to the president and his family as well as Saudi funds²³, are running the show. After several strikes, price increases in California, the relocation of several studios in Texas and the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) companies' investments in the industry²⁴, **vulnerable cinema professionals** fear losing their job if they express opposition to power.

The American society will still enjoy the universal dividends of its critical and value-based cinema and series' soft power²⁵ but it remains to be seen how the

15. Zeitz, J., "Trump and Fascism: A Pair of Historians Tackle the Big Question", *Politico Magazine*, 29 October 2024; Dupont, M., Lazar, M., "Is Trumpism a form of fascism? Two historians debate", *Le Monde*, 3 May 2025; Bowmna, P., "MAGA and Fascism", *Medium*, 12 March 2026.

16. Dale, M. (Associated Press). "Slavery exhibit returns to Philadelphia's Independence Mall after Trump administration ordered its removal", *PBS News*, 19 Feb. 2026.

17. Radsch, C., "Netflix and Paramount deals are both wrong for Warner Bros Discovery – and democracy", *The Guardian*, 11 Jan. 2026.

18. Ferragamo, M., *Anatomy of a Film Tariff: Trump's Proposed Movie Tariffs Cast a Shadow on Cannes*, Council on Foreign Relations, 13 May 2025.

19. Borzakian, M., Fumey, G., Duterme, R., Rouiaï, N., Dougnac, M., "Make Hollywood Great Again : le cinéma américain au cœur d'une bataille idéologique", *Mediapart*, 3 Sept. 2025.

20. Committee for the First Amendment, <https://www.committeeforthefirstamendment.com/>

21. Fall of Freedom, <https://www.falloffreedom.com/>

22. Goldszal, C., "Face au gouvernement Trump, Hollywood fait de la figuration", *Le Monde*, 16 Dec. 2025.

23. Masunaga, S., "Hollywood's script for 2026: Media mergers, Disney and the streaming wars", *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Dec. 2025.

24. Lee, W. Masunaga S., "Disney invests \$1 billion in OpenAI, licenses Mickey Mouse to Sora AI platform", *Los Angeles Times*, 11 Dec. 2025.

reshaped American film industry, AI impact²⁶ on cinema and Trump's federal movie policies **will impact the country's influence and attraction.**

4. American tech soft power

The business convergence of the tech and cinema industry with gigantic mergers and investments in AI is the latest phase in the era of American tech domination. Since the launch of the first Personal Computer (PC) in the 1980s, the US computing industry has developed effective **marketing strategies** on product design and user-experiences and has established a new kind of global soft power domination. People have become attached to their notebook, iPad and other laptops alike. **This digital and internet culture came from the US and has become global.**

Social media platforms, another innovation from America, are now competing for societies' attention time and personal data and have created **new (addictive²⁷) cultural ways of life**, raising issues about **disinformation**, threats against democratic governance and digital regulation. Donald Trump and the MAGA movement have benefited from and contributed to this **post-Truth new era**. They have heavily invested in **disinformation** on social media, producing effective new forms of **attraction based on fake news** and lies, abusively and hypocritically hiding behind the constitutional rights of freedom of speech.

2022 was a turning point for generative AI with the launch of ChatGPT. Again, American AI companies have created extremely attractive capabilities that are now spreading **new types of global soft power domination**, triggering debates about digital sovereignty, mental health,

child protection, and the future of work.

5. Replacing the soft power of development aid and American radios

The decision in early 2025 to **drastically cut USAID funds** for programmes not aligned with MAGA America First principles was a turning point in US foreign policy with numerous consequences for American soft power.

The immediate termination of key USAID-funded **health, education, and crisis response programmes** in the poorest countries will leave scars on populations' hearts and minds. Thousands of human rights and peace activists and professionals²⁸ have been left out overnight. In a few days, the Trump administration has **gotten rid of one of US strongest soft power tools**.²⁹ By doing so, it has expelled thousands of pro-democracy staff motivated by those same liberal democratic values that MAGA is fighting against.

Once the purge has been achieved, the administration's plan is to build a completely **revamped US international cooperation architecture based on transactional mercantilism**, a boosted Development Finance Corporation (DFC)³⁰ fostering investments and loans, and focused on priority countries for US national interest - even by keeping certain old USAID initiatives and aid instruments alive.³¹ The narrative used to justify Trump's **post-USAID strategy**, repeated in the NSS, maintains that the US will remain the most generous nation in the world by **prioritising national interest**, unlike USAID, which has been described as corrupt and tainted by **woke and charity-like ideology**.³²

25. de Lamarzelle, D. (Forbes), "Quand Trump veut rapatrier Hollywood : décryptage d'une croisade contre le cinéma mondialisé", 6 May 2025, <https://muckrack.com/desiree-de-lamarzelle/articles>

26. Brodherson, M., Wrubel, A., Vickers, J., *How AI could reinvent film and TV production*, McKinsey & Company, 19 Nov. 2025.

27. Baker, D. A., "Is social media addictive? How it keeps you clicking and the harms it can cause", *The Conversation*, 5 March 2025.

28. Koranyi, D., "How Trump's USAID Freeze Threatens Global Democracy", *Time*, 14 Feb. 2025.

29. Feffer, J., "The End of U.S. Soft Power", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 7 March 2025.

30. Nossel, S., "We've Forgotten What 'Soft Power' Is", *Foreign Policy*, 28 Oct. 2025.

31. Mélonio, T., One year after the closing of USAID: "The story isn't over for international solidarity", Agence Française de Développement, 3 Feb. 2026.

32. "Aide au développement : le grand repli sur soi", *Cultures Monde*, France Culture, 24 Feb. 2025.

The dismantlement of USAID and US international radios have raised several questions: **has the Trump administration thrown the weakening American soft power³³ baby with the USAID bath water? Will the vacuum created by these decisions be filled-in by China³⁴ or other donating powers³⁵, international media, other US institutions or philanthropy?³⁶**

In parallel with the USAID freeze, the federal administration announced its decision to **cut funds to American public radios** (Voice of America and Radio Free Europe and Asia services) operating globally and in Eastern Europe since the Cold War. President Trump had to backtrack following a **lawsuit on Radio Free Europe**. He then had to continue the funding of international radios and US Agency General Media (USAGM) supported by a bi-partisan agreement in Congress³⁷ and following other law-suits against his initial decisions.³⁸ In early 2026, the Trump administration and the USAGM CEO appointed by president Trump was still actively working towards a downsizing and re-orientation of USGAM and several radios³⁹ operating under its aegis.

6. MAGA political activism as a new form of soft power

The symbolic power produced by the MAGA movement (and its various streams⁴⁰) beyond the US borders lies in the strength of mimetic politics and **populism communication**, alike previous authoritarian and populists movements in history. Combining **(digital) consumerist culture** with authoritarian posturing, the cultural influence of MAGA is accelerated

by social media and AI-assisted media production targeting **audiences vulnerable to simplistic populist post-truth narratives.**⁴¹

MAGA political activism in Europe, incarnated in large-scale events gathering US and European populist forces such as the 2025 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary, exerts new forms of soft power⁴², as noted by Zsuzsanna Végh. In her view, CPAC plays the role of a **new informal diplomacy** while USAID budgets and programmes have been cut. **In addition, official diplomacy and the US NSS openly supports European populist parties in the culture war against “wokism”.**

The **digital libertarian wing** of the MAGA movement brings along flows of disinformation (on behalf of freedom of speech) through social media networks and channels combined with **fascination for tech innovations.**

In artistic and aesthetic terms, the production of MAGA movements and groups (either in tech, media or politics) is poor. It does not seem to be enhanced by artists with convincing creativity, which makes its production attractive only to audiences with limited artistic literacy.

A recent study on MAGA by the Clingendaele Institute⁴³ includes foresight sections on the potential impact of MAGA in the Netherlands. Each of the scenarios shows the strength of MAGA ideology and networks and their **already existing influence in the Netherlands** pointing at

33. Nossel, S., “We’ve Forgotten What ‘Soft Power’ Is”, *Foreign Policy*, 28 Oct. 2025.

34. Repnikova, M., “The New Soft-Power Imbalance”, *Foreign Affairs*, 20 Nov. 2025

35. Koranyi, D., “How Trump’s USAID Freeze Threatens Global Democracy”, *Time*, 14 Feb. 2025.

36. “The Trump aid gap”, *Financial Times*, 15 Feb. 2025.

37. USA: New funding for USAGM signals sustained bipartisan support for its crucial international journalism, Reporters Without Borders, 10 Feb. 2026.

38. Keys, M., “Congress to continue funding Voice of America, despite Trump’s wishes”, *The Desk*, 13 Jan. 2026.

39. Keys, M., “Voice of America moves forward with bureau, shortwave radio closures”, *The Desk*, 3 Dec. 2025.

40. Klein, L., Houtkamp, C., Wessel, N., van der Laan, T., MAGA in Nederland: Deel 1, Clingendael Institute, 3 Feb. 2026.

41. Klein, L., Houtkamp, C., Wessel, N., van der Laan, T., Toekomstverkenning 2: Tech-soevereinen – tech-libertarisme & anti-institutionalisme, Clingendael Institute, 3 Feb. 2026.

42. Végh, Z., “Zsuzsanna Végh, politiste hongroise : « La droite mondiale se coordonne à une échelle inédite. Cela doit inquiéter tous ceux qui tiennent aux valeurs et aux libertés que nous connaissons »”, *Le Monde*, 29 May 2025.

43. Klein, L., Houtkamp, C., Wessel, N., van der Laan, T., Toekomstverkenning 2: Tech-soevereinen – tech-libertarisme & anti-institutionalisme, Clingendael Institute, 3 Feb. 2026.

the risks associated with the coming to power of MAGA-like forces in Europe. At the same time, the defeat of Viktor Orban in the latest Hungarian elections, despite Trump's direct involvement, have shown that MAGA methods have their limitations when the EU system shows zero tolerance on anti-rights behaviour and policies.

The US example shows that **attacks against cultural rights undermine social and institutional cohesion and put creative industries' independence and sustainability at threat.**⁴⁴ Once creative industries and the arts sector become structurally vulnerable because they fear retaliation and political pressure (as in the case of the film industry), it is very difficult to stop MAGA-like destroying dynamics and illiberal narrative and political aggressions. **Cultural professionals waste a lot of time and resources in lengthy legal battles.**⁴⁵ In the EU, certain member states such as Hungary have already started to pass **restrictive legislation against cultural rights and freedom**, through laws on "foreign agents" echoing both MAGA anti-woke stances and recent Russian authoritarian legislations.⁴⁶

B. Trump 2.0 Game changers for EU soft power and cultural relations

1. Golden Age, perpetual expansion and fake narratives

Our analysis shows that since its coming to power the MAGA movement has run a revolution in the US soft power system, aiming at **expelling all liberal democratic elites** from key influential institutions. Legal and political battles on the dramatic Trump purges are not over and it is not certain that the MAGA leadership will achieve what Jamie Shea, a former NATO official, called a **soft power suicide.**⁴⁷ In the meantime, alternative vehicles of

MAGA soft power are being dispatched distributed and positioned all over the world via libertarian social media platforms: **MAGA populist activism, hate speech and disinformation, conservative audiovisual editing and programming on global digital platforms, territorial expansionism, white national-christian supremacism and wars on educated cultural elites operate at full speed.**

In the short term, Trump's culture wars have without doubt affected the current US government's soft power. It is however too early to state that the deeper American societal power of attraction is definitely in decline.

Wherever it goes, the ongoing MAGA soft power phenomenon raises several questions and challenges to Europeans and EU international cultural relations:

- Will the aid and soft power gaps created by the Trump administration purges **be filled-in by powers sharing European values?**
- How are Europeans monitoring and analysing the soft power impact of MAGA in Europe and among partners in the world? **How will the next EU ICR strategy be connected with an EU overarching strategy to counterbalance threatening MAGA-like influence?**
- How are Europeans anticipating further MAGA-like changes in their own societies and **are they developing alternative soft power and cultural strategies?**
- In the management of the transatlantic relationship, which are the cultural common grounds on which the EU and the US can still collaborate? **Otherwise, what kind of alliances can the EU build with like-minded private and public partners outside the US federal government?**

44. Pittsburgh Arts Council, Trumps' Impact on the Arts: A Running List of Updates, 18 March 2026.

45. "Judge orders Trump admin to restore 1,000 Voice of America jobs and resume broadcasts", *France24*, 18 March 2026.

46. "Czechia preparing Kremlin-style bill to crack down on NGOs, critics say", *Politico*, 19 March 2026.

47. Repnikova, M., "The New Soft-Power Imbalance", *Foreign Affairs*, 20 Nov. 2025

2. What is left for International Cultural Relations?

In times of crises and conflict, international cultural relations are essential.⁴⁸ We are not only seeing increasing conflict and violence, but also a quick and steady **dismantling of spaces of dialogue and diplomacy**. Frequently, when politics cannot bring peace and solve conflicts, culture is the breach in the wall, the only possible space of encounter and peacebuilding. **This is well-known for all those working in highly oppressive and conflicting contexts and there is extensive literature providing evidence.**

If professionally designed and implemented in good faith, ICR still have a role to play in turbulent geopolitics and remain an essential component of soft power and **trust-building**, perhaps becoming more important than ever.

Politics, even more so during crises, focus primarily on **short-term political gains** and visible exposure on social media rather than on **long-term, invisible societal and relational transformations that culture is able to enable**. Continuous cuts in cultural budgets (at local, national and European levels) will in the long run **undermine the capacities of European citizens to engage culturally among themselves and with the world**.

ICR also face the risk of irrelevance if cultural and artistic engagement is not **connected with other strategic thematic policy realms such as sustainable development, health, ecological transformation and digital regulation**. In that regard, the level of ambition and the content of the new EU ICR strategy will have a significant impact on the future of the EU's soft power through cultural relations and cultural diplomacy.

Part 2: EU and European responses: shaping the transatlantic component of the next EU ICR strategy

The self-destructing MAGA method combines several mutually-reinforcing elements analysed in the first part of this brief. When activated altogether, they represent the perfect recipe that the Europeans should avoid if they are serious about maintaining and developing **their collective autonomous attractive influence to compose trust with partners abroad**.

A. EU ICR strategic continuity: values and principles

In 2016, just five years after the launching of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU was a **pioneer in advancing International Cultural Relations**. At a time when few even knew the term, and despite culture being an exclusive competence of member states (art. 6 TFEU), Member States and EU institutions realised the importance of **reinforcing the role of culture in their external action**. The 2016 communication "Towards an EU strategy for International Cultural Relations"⁴⁹ presented the EU as a **promoter of liberal values**: democracy, rule of law, human rights, cultural (including linguistic) diversity, economic and creative globalisation, mutual respect and intercultural dialogue.

Almost ten years later, the 2025 **Cultural Compass for Europe**⁵⁰ relies on culture as a strategic leverage for soft power - which includes promotion of European values - and security against disinformation and

48. Hippler, J. et al., *Culture and Conflict: Challenges for Europe's Foreign Policy*, ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen), 2012.

49. European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, 28 June 2016.

50. European Commission, *Culture Compass for Europe*, Communication from the Commission, 12 Nov. 2025.

propaganda. This reflects a **clear shift towards security narratives** as an answer to the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine and in line with that the **2022 Strategic Compass** - “an ambitious plan of action for strengthening the EU's security and defence policy by 2030”.⁵¹ The 2026-2027 consultation process leading to the drafting of the next EU strategy for international cultural relations, and future budget allocations for this policy domain, will indicate if and how Member states and EU institutions **are still committed to the principles of international cultural relations.**

EU's diplomatic positioning on recent security crises has some impact on the ways it is perceived internationally and culturally. **How these perceptions will be addressed in the new ICR strategy remains to be seen.** Lately, the EU has applied **varying value standards** in its reactions: constantly vocal on Ukraine, more cautious on Venezuela⁵², distant from if not opposed to Trump's war in Iran alongside an Israeli ally that the US hardly can contain⁵³, cautious again on the bypass of the UN system with Trump's Board of Peace. **Silence, or mild statements** have been pronounced with regards to US recent human rights violations, such as ICE's harsh repressions, detentions and killings. Seemingly, the EU has been weak in naming and condemning atrocities and injustices committed by Israel, a traditional ally of the US and the EU, in Gaza and the West Bank, in its response to the Hamas attacks on 7th October 2023. **The long-term cultural implications in foreigners' perceptions of EU foreign and security behaviour will be felt further down the road.**

If, in the past, the EU and the US perceived themselves as guardians of similar values, **this is no longer the case.** The MAGA

movement - in the US and worldwide - declared the **culture war on Europe, denying cultural diversity, human rights, democracy, rule of law, gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights and social justice, a new wartype in which the battlefields are TikTok, Instagram and Youtube propaganda.**

Building on its response to Russian propaganda, the EU should, in its future ICR strategy, also target MAGA disinformation through its newly launched **European Centre for Democratic Resilience**⁵⁴ to address the growing threats represented by far-right and neo-fascist movements in Europe. Democratic counter-narratives can benefit from **public and cultural diplomacy tools and innovations.** International cultural relations programmes can also help foster societal cohesion and overcome gaps between institutions, political elites and citizens. To be effective, they need to be driven by a strong, unbeatable political commitment to **desirable democratic values:** rule of law, human rights, decoloniality, social and climate justice.

B. The EU's identity crisis and the urgency of alternatives: EU International Cultural Relations

The EU integration project has a chance to survive if it develops sustainable ties with like-minded partnerships keen to build a multilateral system in which common rules are respected. **Sticking to liberal values and human rights is not about promoting idealism against authoritarian regimes.** It is the only possible choice for the EU to remain meaningful to its citizens and in the world. **A zero tolerance policy on anti-rights legislation, policies and norms is therefore paramount to avoid slow-burning dynamics destroying the EU**

51. EEAS, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, 2022.

52. Venezuela: Statement by the High Representative on the aftermath of the U.S. intervention in Venezuela, European External Action Service, 4 January 2026.

53. Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on developments in the Middle East, European External Action Service, 1 March 2026.

54. European Commission Directorate-General for Communication, *Stronger measures to protect our democracy and civil society*, News article, 12 Nov. 2025.

democratic fabric. In parallel, active support to cultural and creative organisations, companies and institutions must be developed to **help them prepare and adapt to a permacrisis world**.⁵⁵ Their **resilience** and power of **resistance** will equip them to defend fundamental rights that are now constantly threatened.

Nevertheless, if the EU seeks to maintain its international legitimacy and position itself as a trustworthy ally in an increasingly multipolar and authoritarian world, **idealism must go hand-in-hand with structural self-revision. The EU's colonial history remains one of the most significant obstacles to credibility in the Global South, as it has been acknowledged. EU ICR have perhaps been the first in sketching a different course.** EUNIC's 2022 *Not a Toolkit! Fair Collaboration in Cultural Relations*⁵⁶ marked one of the first systematic institutional efforts to name and **challenge unequal power dynamics** in European cultural exchange, moving toward genuine co-creation with Global South practitioners. Such decolonising efforts can still be found in the Africa-Europe Partnerships for Culture⁵⁷ programme, the 2025 EU Culture Compass⁵⁸, new curation at the House of European History and several cultural heritage restitution initiatives. However, such decolonising attempts remain sector-specific and **largely confined to the cultural domains.**

EU's future credibility will be strengthened if **decolonialising approaches are extended to the harder policy domains** (visas, agriculture, social standards, trade, security) and **tools** (long-term capacity-building and governance-related initiatives) of EU external action. New narratives on **Ukraine's decolonial emancipation from Russia** should be

matched by constantly reaffirmed decolonial positions and methods towards the Global South and in the Middle East.

A similar stance must be taken with regard to **climate action**. Faced with **climate negationism** and the **deliberate dismantling of international environmental commitments** by the Trump administration, the EU must continue to hold firm as the **world's driver of legally binding climate policies**. The EU's credibility as a values-based global actor depends, once again, on the **ambition and consistency of its climate commitments.**

As the old multilateral liberal order is being erased, investments in new forms of **resistance will be needed. The EU is a daughter of the multilateral order and one of its most active - yet not always very creative - voices worldwide.** It has a new responsibility: to imagine and **support the writing of other, more desirable, futures** and narratives than the MAGA returns to delusional golden ages. Futures in which active creativity supports peace, rule of law, social and climate justice.

ICR policies have the strategic potential to **enable the imagination of new futures**, beyond what is immediately and currently on offer. International cultural collaborations can take the shape of inclusive and galvanising collective initiatives open to all citizens in all parts of the world. More robust EU International cultural programmes will be a powerful **antidote to several threats posed by the MAGA doctrine** and disinformation, an efficient tool to re-energise European soft power.

55. Turnbull, N., "Permacrisis: what it means and why it's word of the year for 2022", *The Conversation*, 11 Nov. 2022.

56. Fair Collaboration in Cultural Relations – Not a toolkit!, *EUNIC*, 7 Feb. 2022, <https://eunic.eu/news/publication-fair-collaboration>

57. European Commission, Directorate general International Partnerships, Africa-Europe Partnerships for Culture, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/programming/programmes/africa-europe-partnerships-culture_en

58. European Commission, *Culture Compass for Europe*, Communication from the Commission, 12 Nov. 2025.

C. A US-specific section in the new ICR strategy

Since the EU's Cultural Compass (2025) announced a new ICR strategy and consultations have yet to begin, there is room to include a **dedicated US section in the future document**. This could ensure targeted funding in the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and build on initiatives like the **Transatlantic Rising Stars programme**.⁵⁹

Several options could be explored during the strategy's development:

- First, the EU could explore expanding transatlantic people-to-people initiatives, including **exchanges with American artists, creatives, and tech professionals**. This could involve creative tech competitions, as well as a focus on AI, digital intellectual property (IP), and sustainable income models for creatives.
- Second, a **pioneering value-based and educational partnership with large US-based audiovisual platforms** on cultural and artistic content exchange, production and distribution would explore ways to maintain and **strengthen bridges in the audiovisual industry along shared values and priorities**.
- Third, the strategy could point at the need for a **conflict-related creative and cultural relations programme addressing tensions, disinformation, narratives and cognitive biases** in relation to ongoing geopolitical conflicts affecting the EU and the US,

with international and global implications.

- The strategy could also address the need to support new EU-US cultural and creative alliances fostering world-wide impact on global commons. Supporting such alliances would enhance collective action, team work, and a Cultural Team Europe approach with collective leadership and planet-wide narratives on sustainability, climate and biodiversity crises.⁶⁰

D. Digital sovereignty and tech transformations

The confrontation between the EU and the US in the tech domain was already a topic during Trump's first mandate. In 2018, the Brexit and **Cambridge Analytica scandal**⁶¹ revealed how social networks and private data had been used for manipulating elections, and transformed laws, public awareness and business models, giving birth to the data rights movement. In 2018, the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)⁶² was approved, and Washington perceived it as a **barrier to trade and an attack on the growing tech empires of Silicon Valley**. In 2020, confrontations over GDPR were perceived as a **"top diplomatic issue"**.⁶³ In 2020, the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) considered that the US could not guarantee a sufficient degree of protection to **sensitive data**, and thus invalidated the "Privacy Shield"⁶⁴, not allowing the transfer of private data from the EU to the US.

Tensions over digital regulations were addressed with the launch of the EU-US

59. EEAS, Transatlantic Rising Stars Project, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/united-states-america/transatlantic-rising-stars-project-0_en?s=253

60. culture Solutions, *Composing Trust Brief #6: Culture & climate change: the future of EU international cultural relations*, 26 April 2020, <https://www.culturesolutions.eu/publications/culture-climate-change-the-future-of-eu-international-cultural-relations/>.

61. European Parliament, Resolution of 25 October 2018 on the use of Facebook users' data by Cambridge Analytica and the impact on data protection (2018/2855(RSP)).

62. Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).

63. Vinocur, N., "Why Trump's administration is going after the GDPR", *Politico Europe*, 28 June 2020.

64. Arrêt de la Cour (grande chambre) du 16 juillet 2020 (demande de décision préjudicielle de la High Court (Irlande) - Irlande) – Data Protection Commissioner / Facebook Ireland Limited, Maximilian Schrems (Affaire C-311/18).

Technology Council in 2021, yet they did not disappear.⁶⁵ They are now peaking again. The AI revolution, its irruption in military affairs and the weakening of NATO is fundamentally transforming EU-US digital relations. The EU has also strengthened its regulatory arsenal with the Digital Services Act⁶⁶, the Digital Markets Act⁶⁷, the AI Act⁶⁸ and the Digital Omnibus Proposal.⁶⁹ In reaction, the US has made opposing data sovereignty initiatives an official political position⁷⁰, and has **threatened the EU with tariffs, and accused it of censorship.**⁷¹

Many argue that the EU digital legal framework, while being particularly strong, might be extremely difficult to apply in practice because **European tech sovereignty remains limited.** The EU and its member states - including the military - are, de facto, dependent on infrastructures, softwares and algorithms controlled by US tech companies. Recent⁷² (and not so recent⁷³) data show European countries' links with Palantir, a tech company providing services to the US military that has been accused of complicity in **war crimes and genocide.**⁷⁴ In late February 2026, a controversy arose over a contract between the Pentagon and US AI companies⁷⁵ that would allow the Pentagon to use AI for autonomous weapons and mass surveillance. **Being dependent on US tech companies without having European alternatives raises concerns about EU governments and institutions'**

ability to consistently protect citizens' rights and data.

International regulations on AI such as the 2021 UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence⁷⁶ or the 2026 New Delhi Declaration on AI Impact⁷⁷, endorsed by 91 countries and international organisations, have called for the democratisation of AI access, equitable distribution of benefits, and the risk that AI capabilities remain concentrated in a handful of economies and corporations.

International alliances agreeing on the need for ethical AI governance seem to be emerging, and the EU and its member states should be a leading voice and players in this realm. European rules will have to evolve and open-up to foster investments in the development of **dual-use technologies** treated as global public goods, and not as a privilege concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy tech companies.

Being digitally sovereign has also **direct, positive effects for culture**, allowing to embed a **cultural rights' approach into AI and digital frameworks** that ensures compliance with copyright protections and protects cultural and creative markets but, more importantly, respects and enhances **freedom of creation, creativity and innovation** while democratising access to creative tools.

65. Velliet, M., *Digital Sovereignty: European Policies, American Dilemmas*, Ifri, 31 January 2023.

66. Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) (Text with EEA relevance).

67. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 on contestable and fair markets in the digital sector (Digital Markets Act), European Union, 14 Sept. 2022.

68. European Parliament and Council of the European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act), European Union, 13 June 2024.

69. Digital Omnibus Regulation Proposal, European Commission, 19 Nov. 2025.

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75. Metz, C., "OpenAI Reaches Agreement With Pentagon to Provide A.I. Tools", *The New York Times*, 27 Feb. 2026.

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77. AI Impact Summit Declaration, New Delhi (18–19 February 2026), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 21 Feb. 2026.

Conclusion: Promoting EU' enabling power in its external cultural strategy

Trump 2.0 has intensified a **culture war against democratic values** such as human rights, social welfare, diversity, the independence of justice, which are at the core of the **EU integration project**. Despite its own contradictions, the EU remains a key advocate of a rules-based international order. Because of EU-US security and economic interdependence, the EU has at first remained **cautious in its responses to the attacks and culture wars led by the MAGA movement and the Trump administration**. Distancing reactions have then become increasingly determined on the security (on Groenland, Ukraine), trade and democracy (on Hungary) fronts. In a context of weakening multilateralism, rising inequality, the EU must take a clearer and more assertive stance to protect its cultural and societal model.

It should champion a **citizen-centred alternative to Trump 2.0** and position itself as a **trustworthy global actor through cultural engagement and public diplomacy**. The EU's global standing will depend on how consistently and credibly it sticks to its core values.

Six concrete actions should be undertaken:

1. Name MAGA as a threat, not a partner.

The EU should distinguish between federal policies under MAGA leadership and the plurality of like-minded American actors – cities, universities, independent media,

civil society – that still share EU values and are under attack. The revised EU ICR strategy must say openly that culture war, disinformation and neo-imperial foreign policy are incompatible with the EU's commitments to human rights, cultural diversity and international law.

2. Defend cultural rights and artistic freedom at home as security policy.

Trump's purges show how quickly cultural rights can be dismantled, and how hard legal resistance becomes once illiberal forces capture institutions. The EU and its governments should more firmly declare zero tolerance for anti-rights legislation in member states, protect cultural workers and institutions with European-level guarantees. They should treat attacks against artistic freedom and academic independence as criminal offences and early-warning signs of democratic backsliding.

3. Invest in fair, decolonial cultural relations.

If Europe wants to regain credibility in the Global South, it must go beyond slogans and one-off cultural heritage property restitution ceremonies. Initiatives such as EUNIC's "Fair Collaboration" or Africa-Europe Partnerships for Culture, that claim to put intercultural dialogue, artists' recognition, co-creations and shared governance at the centre, will have to demonstrate they actually walk the talk. The EU must believe in its successes and embrace the space it created for its citizens to represent its voice and interact with the rest of the world, all while responding to long-demanded policy reforms on mobility restrictions and the welcoming of Global South creatives on the EU soil.

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4. Make digital sovereignty a cultural priority.

EU-US tensions over tech regulation will continue because future rules will determine who controls the infrastructures of imagination and creativity. EU standards on GDPR, Digital Markets and Services Acts, the AI and Media Freedom Acts (to name but a few) should be seen as tools protecting cultural rights and freedoms. The EU can better champion its regulatory approach if it boosts investment in open, public, rights-based digital ecosystems that embed plurality and diversity by design.

5. Scale up transatlantic people-to-people alliances, bypassing MAGA.

Instead of trying to appease an endlessly aggressive US administration that sees Europe as a decadent rival, EU leaders should actively expand direct ties with American creative industries, artists, scientists, educators and tech leaders. A

scaled-up diversified “Transatlantic Rising Stars” programme, large-scale residencies, joint creative tech labs and conflict-related cultural projects could build a dense web of relationships that will outlive any single presidency.

6. Accelerate the move from normative to enabling power⁷⁸.

The EU’s strength as a regulatory and normative power must be matched with greater cultural attractiveness. Rather than abandoning norms, it should make them tangible through stronger cultural and creative engagement and cooperation. This requires investing in cross-sector programmes linking culture with innovation and resilience, while ensuring defence efforts do not undermine cultural cooperation. A credible EU cultural strategy should position the Union as an enabling power, at the service of its partners, to widen spaces for freedom, creativity, collaboration and dialogue across borders.



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