



A (Re)newed Case for the UN

Europe and the Future of UN Leadership

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Summary

The transition to a new United Nations (UN) Secretary-General (SG) comes at a challenging moment, both for the organisation and its member states. It raises questions about how the next SG can guide the UN through volatile times and what they should prioritise amid mounting agendas and tightening budgets. It also gives member states an opportunity to reassess what they need from the UN and how they engage with it. Drawing on discussions at a convening of thinkers from across Europe, part of the Guidance and Regional Intelligence for the Transition of UN Leadership project, this brief identifies key trends in Europe's engagement with the UN and lays out how the next SG can set priorities that matter to Europe and use the tools of their office to keep Europe engaged.

The challenge:

- Despite Europe's significant financial contribution, there is a perception that its influence at the UN is declining as global power shifts. Earmarked funding still gives it considerable say over the UN system, but its influence in formal settings is weakened by its own inconsistencies and by limited outreach to other regions.
- Europe's interest in the UN may also be fading. Domestic pressures and competing crises push the organisation down the political agenda, as priorities shift towards security, defence and competitiveness.

Priorities for the next SG, as seen from Europe:

- Among numerous agendas, two criteria for prioritisation emerged: (i) relevance to member states' concerns; (ii) whether the UN can play a distinctive and valuable role.
- For Europe, this points to three areas: (i) peace and security, with the UN contributing to a future peace process and post-war reconstruction in Ukraine; (ii) migration, for which the UN offers a multilateral framework to tackle root causes such as conflict, climate change and global inequality over the long term; (iii) AI governance, where the UN can bring fragmented initiatives together and ensure they complement rather than compete with or duplicate one another.

Recommendations:

- Delivering on these priorities depends not on new mandates or processes – these should be avoided – but on the SG making better use of existing tools, such as their good offices function, their convening power and agenda-setting and their willingness to take political risks. It also depends on adequate financing by member states and on their political support.
- For Europe, the SG should lead with a strategy linked to issues salient to European audiences, act as a bridge-builder between Europe and other regions, and work with Europe's interests at the UN, including demonstrating how sharing power and supporting a more equitable UN could serve both Europe and other regions in the long term.

Introduction

The transition to a new UN Secretary-General comes at a moment of shifting global power dynamics, a fragmenting international order, the UN's liquidity crisis, and the ongoing reform process launched by the incumbent. It raises questions not only about who will lead the organisation, but also how they can steer it through turbulent times and what they should prioritise in doing so. It also presents an opportunity for member states to step in, (re)assessing their need and vision for the UN and how they engage with the organisation. It is against this backdrop that the Guidance and Regional Intelligence for the Transition of UN Leadership project organised a series of regional convenings to identify the challenges facing the next UN Secretary-General from the point of view of each region.

Convened jointly by Cepei (Centro de Pensamiento Estratégico Internacional), KAS (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung) Geneva and IDOS, the European regional meeting was held in Cadenabbia, Italy, on 17–18 August 2026, and brought together 19 international relations scholars, practitioners, (former) government officials, and representatives of think tanks and civil society organisations. Participants combined in-depth UN knowledge and/or senior UN experience with practical insight into domestic policy challenges. Thematically, participants spanned all three pillars of the UN: peace and security, development, and human rights. Geographically, participants came overwhelmingly from donor countries within the EU, representing Western, Northern, and Eastern Europe (according to the UN geoscheme). Frontline states, whether in terms of irregular migration and climate impacts (Southern European states) or security concerns linked to Russia's geopolitical stance and its war against Ukraine (states bordering Russia), were absent or under-represented, potentially affecting the focus of the discussion. Participants' seniority also meant that youth perspectives were largely absent.

Informed by this convening of thinkers from across Europe, this Policy Brief identifies key

trends in the engagement between the UN and the region, and outlines policy priorities and recommendations for the incoming Secretary-General and their office, as seen from Europe.

1. Europe and the UN: declining influence and interest

European member states have historically played a significant role across all three pillars of the UN Charter. The European Union (EU) and its member states remain major funders of the organisation. Together, they provided more than one third of all voluntary contributions and around one fifth of all contributions to UN agencies, funds and programmes in 2025 (EEAS, 2026). Two European member states hold a Security Council veto, and the UN maintains a substantial presence in Europe itself. However, the relationship between the UN and its European member states is shifting. Political priorities in the region are changing, notably with a surging focus on defence (European Council, 2026). At the same time, European funding for the UN has been uneven since 2023; after a noticeable dip in 2024, some European funders and the EU increased their contributions, while others reduced them further (CEB, 2026). This comes as US financial disengagement from the UN has placed additional expectations on them.

The discussion brought to the fore two primary trends in the UN–Europe relationship. First, as the balance of power in the international system shifts, Europe fears that the influence it has exercised over global governance for eight decades is in decline. At the UN, this contributes to a perception of a mismatch between the financial investment Europe channels into the organisation and its ability to exercise influence within it. Second, Europe's interest in the organisation is seen as declining, reflecting a deeper crisis of trust in the UN and a questioning of its relevance to the region, raising the question of whether and how the UN still matters to Europe.

The perceived decline in Europe's influence at the UN needs nuancing. A dominant trend in how

Europe finances the UN is “earmarking”, in which donors define how funds must be spent. This still gives the EU and its member states considerable room to shape the organisation’s work, while bypassing the governing bodies of UN entities and influencing the agenda of individual UN entities bilaterally, undermining multilateral processes and contributing to the fragmentation of the system (Cepei, 2026).

By contrast, in formal UN settings such as the UN General Assembly, Europe lacks the numbers, and its ability to exercise influence is weakened not only by global trends and external forces – such as the increasing assertiveness of the Global South (Baumann et al., 2024) – but also by Europe’s inconsistencies in defending international law, which undermines its credibility with its Global South counterparts, and by how Europe engages with them at the UN. Prioritising and investing considerable diplomatic resources in internal coordination, it arrives at the negotiating table with positions already fixed. This often comes at the expense of outreach to potential partners, and hampers the ability of European governments to build common positions through political dialogue with counterparts.

Europe’s influence at the UN is linked to its own decreasing interest in the organisation. Mounting domestic challenges such as the rising cost of living, irregular migration, and security issues, as well as competing international crises – the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East – are absorbing political energy, tending to push the UN down the agenda. It is also linked to the fact that power within the EU is centralising on the European Commission, which controls the purse strings and is primarily focused on competitiveness, security and defence. The funding and functioning of the UN system are also not a top priority in the EU’s ongoing negotiations over its multiannual financial framework, and some EU actors question the operational role of the UN system in implementing global priorities (Patz & Keijzer, 2026). The result is a decline in political investment in issues outside the Commission’s top priorities, including

in multilateral processes, and a redirection of UN programme funding towards bilateral deals and European implementing agencies.

These trends point to a key challenge for the next SG – steering the UN into a future in which European influence is more limited, while keeping the region engaged. This, in turn, sets the terms of how the SG and their team should engage with Europe. Doing this effectively will mean building a convincing case for the UN’s relevance within the terms (or the “logic”) of the EU’s own competing priorities, rather than taking its support for the UN for granted, and leveraging the functions of the SG and their office to deliver on these priorities. Both approaches will, in turn, demand that the SG and their office communicate far more strategically about the UN’s work. It will also mean engaging in an honest dialogue with Europe about the trade-off between holding on to the status quo (and the influence it can still exercise via funding) and the overall functionality of the multilateral system, which is essential to Europe’s long-term interests.

2. Policy priorities for the incoming Secretary-General

Given its broad mandate, the UN does not suffer from a shortage of topics to work on; rather, the opposite. Tightening budgets that demand a “less with less” approach, criticism that the UN is spread too thin, and shifting member state agendas make prioritisation unavoidable. The SG’s formal power is limited, but the convening and agenda-setting authority of the office, including through Article 99 of the Charter, leave some space to shape priorities. The challenge is to use this space in a way that serves the organisation’s mandate while addressing member states’ interests. From a European perspective, several policy priorities stand out. Each reflects the same underlying logic: it is relevant to European concerns, and it is in an area where there is a distinctive (and valuable) role to be played by the UN.

First, the war in Ukraine offers perhaps the clearest case of the UN's distinctive value for Europe, through its operational capacities (primarily humanitarian delivery), its normative role (such as the Human Rights Monitoring Mission) and its political role (such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative). Although it is unclear when and how the war will end, the UN could engage early with parties and stakeholders on what it could contribute in Ukraine, particularly in relation to key parts of a future peace process, and demining, disarmament, and post-war reconstruction activities. Any UN involvement would require securing agreement from Russia and Ukraine, together with its supporting coalition, on the scope of UN involvement, where the UN's impartiality anchored in the Charter can help. Few other actors can match the UN's track record, expertise and capacity in these areas, and playing such a role would offer a concrete demonstration of the UN's contribution to Europe's own security concerns.

Migration is another area where the UN could make the value it can offer Europe more explicit. The organisation offers a multilateral framework to address the underlying drivers of migration, such as conflict, climate change and global inequality, across countries and over the long term – including through its conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and stabilisation work – in a way that would complement Europe's bilateral approaches. Additionally, the value that the UN can bring to entry, transit and exit countries (and Europe has all three) is what it can also offer as a distinctive service elsewhere, and may be one area where a re-engaged Europe is willing to work more with the UN in the future.

AI governance was another area raised at the convening. Given that the risks associated with AI are inevitably cross-border and the landscape of AI initiatives is highly fragmented, the UN could play a distinctive role in consolidating these initiatives – including the EU AI Act – and making them compatible rather than competing, so that they serve a more regulated AI agenda. Such a role could distinctively benefit Europe. The UN offers

a forum where Europe can build common ground with other states around its rights-based approach and carry it to the global level, and where it can push back against a governance landscape divided into US- and China-led blocs and driven by geopolitical considerations alone. This, however, depends on the UN's ability to navigate the competing interests of major AI players.

3. What should the next SG do? Policy recommendations from Europe

Steering the UN through a changing political and technological landscape and addressing member states' priorities – European ones among them – will depend not on new initiatives but on the SG making better use of the tools and functions already available to their office, and on member states providing adequate financing and their political support.

Drawing on the European perspective, the recommendations below comprise both general guidance on what the SG should – or should not – do once in office, and recommendations targeting the SG's engagement with Europe specifically. Together, they aim to help the SG and their team keep the region engaged in the UN, and to show European member states what the UN can offer them, and what it should expect in return.

Have a vision and know your limits

Navigating a shifting multilateral landscape requires a clear, long-term vision that identifies the UN's purpose and role in a changing international order. The SG should pursue a selective agenda that reflects member states' concerns and is guided by the value the UN can add. Where other actors perform better, the UN should complement rather than compete with them, focusing on what it does best. The UN's main strengths lie in its convening power – it is the only quasi-universal forum for global decision-making – the legitimacy and normative authority this offers, its role as a knowledge-broker, and its humanitarian functions and good offices – assets that no other actor can

replicate at a comparable scale. In their engagement with European member states, the SG needs to remind them of how the UN's authority and functions can help them to meet the challenges they confront today.

Finish unfinished business

The incoming SG should focus on delivering on existing commitments and processes that member states have already invested in, rather than launching new processes, agendas and thematic priorities. This could be paired with retiring mandates that no longer serve a purpose, building on the mandate implementation review conducted under the UN80 Initiative, and even a moratorium on new agendas altogether. The same logic extends to administrative reform. Rather than relaunching it with a new agenda – a recurring tendency among new SGs – existing reform initiatives should be completed and reform itself redefined: understood as necessary and ongoing, but otherwise kept out of the spotlight rather than made a centrepiece of the new mandate. Administrative reform should not define the first term, nor should the SG's political capital be spent defending it as an end in itself.

Cost-saving and efficiency measures already underway within the UN80 Initiative framework should be completed, but understood for what they are – necessary housekeeping that is not a substitute for substantive change and political realignment leading to a better functioning UN. However, delivering the former quickly can lay the groundwork and build political momentum for the latter.

Use your power to address drivers of dysfunction

Substantive change – including addressing systemic dysfunctions within the UN system – cannot be achieved by the SG alone. Duplication and fragmentation are driven, in part, by member states, European ones included, through earmarked funding and through the proliferation of mandates because states cannot agree on priorities. Addressing these issues requires a

change in how member states engage with the UN.

The SG should use the authority and voice of their office, as well as existing mechanisms, to name the diagnosis and address it together with member states. For example, they could make donors' widespread overreliance on earmarking and its impact on the UN more visible and report on how individual donors comply with the Funding Compact. This could make funding practices a reputational issue and incentivise change in funding behaviour.

Take political risks

Given the level of disruption and contestation the UN currently faces, genuinely transforming and adapting the organisation to shifting realities will require more political leadership. This demands greater risk-taking. One way to enable this would be a decision – not necessarily one made public – not to seek a second term. While not enough to escape political dependence on member states completely, this might grant greater flexibility to confront UN dysfunctions – some of which are member-state-driven – without necessarily the constraint of avoiding friction with those same states, especially the more powerful ones. This does not mean going so far as to antagonise member states, whose political backing remains essential. However, it does mean being willing to spend political capital and take risks where it counts to insist not only upon the rights but also the duties of member states towards the UN, as prescribed by the UN Charter.

Leverage the SG's mediation and good offices function

Mediation and good offices stand out as key functions the Secretary-General should make greater use of. Given Europe's concern with peace and security issues and migration – the two key priorities identified above – the SG's engagement in conflict prevention and resolution should be made more deliberate, strategic and, above all, visible, demonstrating the UN's value to Europe and other regions. Delivering on this function will

require spending less time in New York in order to prioritise a much stronger presence in the regions and on regional conflicts. This would entail greater direct engagement with member states in their respective regions. To enable this shift, the Deputy Secretary-General's office could be strengthened into an effective internal management function, freeing the Secretary-General to focus on more consequential and external affairs rather than internal, day-to-day administration.

In Europe, lead with strategy and align global agendas with domestic concerns

The SG's early engagement with Europe should foreground the UN's demonstrated impact and relevance in and for the region, rather than leading with a request for funding – which may be tempting given the funding shortfall at the UN and the concentration of leading donors in Europe. The SG's first substantive engagement with Europe should thus centre on strategic agendas and links between the UN's work and issues already salient to European publics. For example, making the UN's contribution to peace and security – particularly through the examples of Cyprus, Kosovo and Ukraine – visible, could send a strong signal about the UN's relevance to the region. Similarly, the SG can work towards ensuring that the post-2030 development agenda – which will ultimately be set by member states – connects to issues such as the cost of living, housing, migration and climate that are relevant to domestic audiences.

Parliaments represent an underused entry point in this regard, offering a channel to explain the UN's added value directly to representatives and their constituencies.

Broker coalitions between Europe and other regions

Europe has a legitimate interest in shaping global governance and in seeing its views about the UN and its role in a wider consensus. The SG will not be able to disregard this interest if they want to keep Europe engaged, just as they cannot disregard the interests of other members and regions. They will need to work with it. While staying impartial, the SG nevertheless can help Europe pursue its goals in ways that strengthen rather than undermine the UN.

The SG should act as a bridge-builder across regions. By brokering and organising different forms of coalition-building (regional, thematic, or issue-based), the SG can bring together views from all sides and help build a consensus based on genuine dialogue, rather than on a lowest common denominator between positions that were fixed in advance. This means finding compelling ways to keep Europe's needs and interests integrated into the broader global agenda over which other regions will come to have increasing influence. This could include reminding the region about its responsibilities and commitments, and encouraging it to share power and support a more equitable UN rather than resisting the redistribution of influence it is already experiencing. The SG can point out, for example, that backing a greater voice for the Global South and acting on it could win Europe credit with these countries, build new forms of influence that can act as a buffer to the loss of transactional influence Europe once enjoyed in a more Western-dominated past, and grant it a greater role in global governance in the long term.

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This Policy Brief is part of a series prepared under the umbrella of the Guidance and Regional Intelligence for the Transition of UN Leadership project jointly led by CEPEI, Public Interest, UN Foundation and NYU CIC. Each brief brings together the insights of distinct regional perspectives (Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Latin American and the Caribbean) to inform and guide the next UN leadership in the context of a shifting multilateral landscape.

The German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) is institutionally financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), based on a resolution of the German Bundestag, and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) as a member of the Johannes-Rau-Forschungsgemeinschaft (JRF).

Suggested citation:

Novoselova, A. (2026). A (re)newed case for the UN: Europe and the future of UN leadership (IDOS Policy Brief 27/2026). IDOS. <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb27.2026>

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IDOS Policy Brief / German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

ISSN (Print) 2751-4455

ISSN (Online) 2751-4463

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb27.2026>

© German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

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Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper.

