Editorial: The European future and the crucial role of institutions in answering the digital challenges

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The European Union has been a successful story for many decades, despite the crises it has faced over time, becoming in years a pole of attraction for other European countries. In general, crises have generated a sense of deepening integration, and the enlargements from EU6 to EU27 were seen as a natural dynamic of the "(re)integration" of the European continent, strengthening, with each stage, the EU power and relevance in the international order. The synergies between the deepening and the widening mechanisms encouraged to look for a federal future of the EU as an "ever-closer union", a "hard core" of regional and global cooperation, and as a real economic and political power. New opportunities and challenges have emerged in 1990s, in the context of the political transformations in the Central and Eastern Europe. For the countries from this "liberated" part of Europe, the accession to the EU has been identified with their aspirations for freedom, democracy, prosperity and security, a definitive break from the hegemonic tendencies of Russia. In the same logic of European unification, the Union has enlarged from the EU15 to the EU28. The integration of diversity has been achieved based on the community method and on variable geometries, successfully applied to previous enlargements. However, an important transformation of the strategic vision of the future of the EU has occurred. Although maintaining the federalist option, with this wave of enlargement, the federalist future of EU is no longer a widely shared dream and the differentiated integration looks increasingly obvious. Lately various crises and shocks which have hit the EU in the last two decades have shown the limits of the current system. Additional pressures are generated by the prospect of the Union enlargement to the countries of the Eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans, which has become a priority in the foreign policy against the background of the war in Ukraine. Therefore, an even more enlarged, but also a more diverse Union is foreshadowed in a timeframe, which albeit not yet politically assumed, already requires a reconsideration of the EU's strategic agenda.

Over the past decades, the European Union has faced a series of challenges that have reshaped its vision for the future. To address these challenges, the EU has implemented a range of measures aimed at reinforcing its core values. Central to this strategy is a heightened focus on institutional resilience and adaptability, not only at

the European level but also at national and regional scale. Additionally, the integration of digital transformation challenges has become a key element of the new strategic framework.

This evolving strategy reflects the EU's commitment to ensuring its long-term stability and relevance in a rapidly changing global context. By addressing digitalization alongside institutional strengthening, the Union aims to build a robust foundation capable of navigating both immediate and future disruptions. This volume seeks to explore in depth the directions outlined in these strategies and to analyse their potential consequences for the EU's short-term and long-term trajectory, providing valuable insights into the Union's path forward.

The papers presented in this volume are organized around two major thematic axes: (1) Institutions, sectoral developments, and societal transformations and (2) Data, digitalization, and new challenges. While there is an evident overlap in topics between these two sections, the volume is designed with a complementary perspective, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the interconnected dynamics at play. The first theme focuses on the evolution of institutions and the societal and sectoral shifts that have shaped contemporary developments and it highlights how institutional frameworks interact with broader societal changes, emphasizing transformations at regional, national, and supranational levels. The second theme addresses the profound implications of data-driven processes and digitalization, focusing on the new challenges these bring to institutions, economies, and societies. Together, these sections aim to create a dialogue between structural evolutions and the technological disruptions that redefine them, offering a multifaceted view of the ongoing transformations.

The first thematic area aims to examine a wide range of societal aspects currently undergoing significant transformation, with a particular focus on Central and Eastern Europe. This section addresses critical issues such as the emergence of new forms of education, the impact of the war in Ukraine on neighboring countries, and the integration of both consumers and institutions into sustainability frameworks. Additionally, it explores the perceptions shaping creative tourism in Europe, shedding light on the socio-cultural dynamics influencing this sector. Beyond these core topics, the volume also highlights issues that have received limited attention over the past decade. These include the rise of Generation Z and its relationship with digital culture, innovative approaches to measuring health status, and the evolving role of civil society in countries aspiring to EU membership. These subjects are going to become central to discussions about the region's future, as they reflect the interplay between emerging societal trends and the broader geopolitical and institutional landscape. Therefore, the volume provides a forward-looking perspective on the challenges and opportunities shaping the next decade in Europe.

The second thematic area centers on the critical issue of digitalization and its far-reaching impacts. While addressing traditional concerns such as digitalization inequalities, this section also ventures into less-explored, yet increasingly relevant

topics, within regional science. These include the evolving privacy frameworks, a comprehensive overview of EU directives and regulations, and the crucial issue of data security. The volume not only broadens the scope of digitalization research but also strengthens its relevance to regional science. Rather than diluting the regional focus, this approach enriches the analysis, offering unique insights that often escape traditional frameworks. This thematic area underscores the intersection of regional development and digital transformation, highlighting how policies, security concerns, and regulatory mechanisms shape the digital landscape and its regional implications. EURINT perspective ensures a more nuanced and forward-thinking analysis, contributing to the growing body of knowledge at the intersection of digitalization and regional studies