




DIALOGUE AND DEBATE: SYMPOSIUM

The securitization of competition in the European Union

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Abstract

The recent turn to market activism is transforming the politics around the state and capitalism, while significantly restructuring markets. We focus on one important but understudied element in this development: the securitization of market competition in the European Union. We argue that European political actors are strategically using specific narratives to construct competition policies in a new way, one that implicates the geopolitical standing of the EU and its national security. This contrasts with the longstanding view of EU competition policy as existing in a separate sphere, disembedded from politics, where market efficiency is paramount. To empirically capture this change, we undertake a systematic analysis of DG Competition Annual Reports, using a language-analysis schema over the decade from 2013 to 2023. Our findings demonstrate that this securitization strategy has been consistently increasing over time in the EU, evidenced in the rhetorical use of crises, the linking of markets to a larger set of issues and policy goals, the invocation of geopolitical pressures, and the framing of a need for the consolidation of EU power. We note, however, that this policy turn towards securitization of economic policy brings substantial political tensions given the EU's limited democratic accountability.

Keywords: European Union; Competition policy; Geopolitics; Policy narratives

1. Introduction

The recent turn to market activism on the part of many states is transforming the politics around the state and capitalism.¹ The return of visible and politically celebrated industrial policies and the increasing use of geopolitical economic statecraft, such as investment screening and various strategic trade policies, is particularly consequential for the European Union.² The EU was built in its modern form on political bargains based on classic, orthodox understandings of economic competition and neoliberal integration into the global economy, all of which today's market activism is profoundly challenging.

To better understand the political logics at work, we focus on one important but understudied element in the EU's ongoing transformation, what we call the securitization of competition. We argue that European political actors are strategically using specific narratives that construct EU market competition in a new way, one that implicates the geopolitical standing of the EU and its national security. This contrasts with the longstanding view of EU competition policy as best

¹R Juhász, N Lane and D Rodrik, 'The New Economics of Industrial Policy' 16 (2024) Annual Review of Economics 213.

²KR McNamara, 'Transforming Europe? The EU's Industrial Policy and Geopolitical Turn' 31 (2024) Journal of European Public Policy 2371; L Schmitz and T Seidl, 'As Open as Possible, as Autonomous as Necessary: Understanding the Rise of Open Strategic Autonomy in EU Trade Policy' 61 (2023) JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 834.

existing in a separate sphere, disembedded from politics, where market efficiency is achieved through by constraining public subsidies and regulatory favoritism by European states.

We provide a cataloging of some of the ways in which this push to securitization is occurring. In particular, we undertake a systematic analysis of DG Competition Annual Reports using a language-analysis schema over the decade from 2013 to 2023. We build on Or Brook's study of the economic imaginaries of competition at work in the EU to address today's new geopolitical approach to markets.³ Our findings demonstrate how securitization dynamics have been consistently increasing over time in the EU, evidenced in the DG Competition Reports' invocation of crisis and geopolitical pressures to justify the state's increased role in the market, the rhetorical linking of markets to policy goals beyond efficiency, and the assertion of a need to consolidate EU power to overcome the downfalls of policy fragmentation. A broader political consensus around this path forward does not yet exist, and a major reformulation of EU institutional and policy capacities would be necessary for it to be fully realized. Yet the rhetorical and bureaucratic transformation towards a newly securitized EU is on its way.

With this securitization, however, comes a powerful set of political tensions that may prove difficult to navigate successfully given the EU's limited democratic accountability and representation. Securitization can create a sense of threat that lessens public scrutiny of the goals and methods of policy, making this turn potentially problematic for Europe's citizens. This shift is likely to become structural over time, as the logics at work become formally and informally institutionalized and part of the new normal of EU and national politics. Notwithstanding the important institutional and rule-based challenges to this shift,⁴ a set of political logics pushing forward geopolitical competition are emerging in the EU. Whether they ultimately undermine—or strengthen—the EU as a polity remains to be seen.

The essay proceeds as follows. We first briefly overview the traditional political construction of EU markets in terms of orthodox competition dynamics, then turn to how the past five years have seen an accelerating shift towards redefining competition in markets in terms of geostrategic security dynamics. We note a few key examples of new forms of rhetoric and narratives around competition generated by strategic EU actors, highlighting changes in the framing of China as a systemic rival, and then provide a systematic analysis of the language used in DG Competition Annual Reports since 2013, indicating the ways in which this change is occurring. The last section speculates briefly on the political tensions around this new market activism and notes the ways in which the EU's securitization of market competition implicates democratic accountability. The paper then concludes.

2. Market competition as a cornerstone of the EU's political development

Competition policy in the modern EU has been largely, albeit not entirely, modeled on a set of neoliberal ideas, practices and rules around how markets should be structured and work in regards to economic concentration, governance, and public support.⁵ Although important Keynesian and ordoliberal influences have persisted, much of the “hard law” developed as the Single Market deepened relied on more neoliberal principles of market efficiency.⁶ Arguably one of the few truly integrated and European policy arenas, competition policy grew into an epistemological and institutional cornerstone for Europe.⁷ In so doing, the field of competition law grew over time into

³O Brook, ‘In Search of a European Economic Imaginary of Competition: Fifty Years of the Commission’s Annual Reports’ 1 (2022) *European Law Open* 822.

⁴M Dani, ‘Activist Government Redux: Exceptional or Structural?’ 2 (2023) *European Law Open* 1.

⁵A Wigger and H Buch-Hansen, ‘Explaining (Missing) Regulatory Paradigm Shifts: EU Competition Regulation in Times of Economic Crisis’ 19 (2014) *New Political Economy* 113.

⁶Brook, (n 34) 822.

⁷SI Bora and L Schramm, ‘Intergovernmentalism in a Supranational Field: France, Germany, and EU Competition Policy Reform’ 48 (2024) *West European Politics* 1270; L Warloutet, ‘A Flanking European Welfare State: The European

a substantial complex of actors and institutions that have provided a foundation for the modern EU.⁸ While there were notable exceptions along the way, as with the Airbus Consortium or the Common Agricultural Policy, the overall approach for the contemporary Single Market has emphasized enabling the so-called invisible hand of market competition to work, rather than structuring it visibly.

Yet starting in the second half of the 2010s, this neoliberal approach to competition policy has been the object of rethinking on the part of political actors in the EU. An important moment was the “Franco-German Manifesto for a European industrial policy fit for the 21st Century” presented by French Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire and his German counterpart Peter Altmaier on 19 February 2019 in response to the European Commission’s DG Competition’s rejection of the rail merger of the Alstom-Siemens.⁹ The Manifesto proposed a new European industrial strategy and modifications to the longstanding EU regulatory framework. Since then, as Bora and Schramm have documented, “EU competition policy has undergone remarkable changes including merger control, projects of common European interest, and state aid,” with Germany and France decisive in these developments.¹⁰

3. The new securitization of competition in the EU

A key component of these changes around competition policy is a new set of framings emerging into political use by European leaders, one that is much more closely aligned with the classic understanding of geopolitical competition from international relations than the orthodox legal understanding.¹¹ While great power competition is hardly a novel approach for scholars and practitioners of foreign policy across national settings, the EU has historically been understood as a peace project exclusively focusing on human security and normative power, rather than hard military power and balance of power strategies, making these moves a striking departure in the EU’s policy posture.¹²

The linking of market logics and security logics that is occurring now in the EU can be understood in terms of a process of securitization that is bringing Europe into line with more historically common views of economic statecraft.¹³ Securitization is a well-established concept in international relations, first highlighted by Ole Wæver and the Copenhagen School of Security Studies in the early 1990s.¹⁴ It initially described the process by which state actors transform specific issues into matters of security, framing them in ways that demand exceptional measures,

Community’s Social Dimension, from Brandt to Delors (1969–1993)’ 33 (2024) Contemporary European History 23; L Warloutzet, ‘Towards a Fourth Paradigm in European Competition Policy? A Historical Perspective (1957–2023)’ (Social Science Research Network, 23 April 2023) <<https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=4426768>> accessed 15 June 2025.

⁸L Avril, ‘Lobbying and Advocacy: Brussels’ Competition Lawyers as Brokers in European Public Policies’ 54 (2018) Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review 859.

⁹BMW and MEF, ‘A Franco-German Manifesto for a European Industrial Policy Fit for the 21st Century’ <<https://www.bmw.de/Redaktion/DE/Downloads/F/franco-german-manifesto-for-a-european-industrial-policy.pdf>> accessed 27 November 2024; Deutsche Welle, ‘German and French Ministers Issue Manifesto for European Industrial Policy’ (DW.COM, 19 February 2019) <<https://www.dw.com/en/german-and-french-ministers-issue-manifesto-for-european-industrial-policy/a-47591419>> accessed 17 March 2022.

¹⁰Bora and Schramm (n 7).

¹¹R Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press 1981); SE Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Cornell University Press 2018); JJ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W W Norton & Company 2001).

¹²I Manners, ‘Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?’ 40 (2002) Journal of Common Market Studies 235; ME Smith, *Europe’s Foreign and Security Policy: The Institutionalization of Cooperation* (Cambridge University Press 2004).

¹³DA Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (2nd ed, Princeton University Press 2020); S BH Faure, ‘EU Defence Industrial Policy: Towards a New European Military-Industrial Regime’, *EU Industrial Policy Report 2024* (LUISS 2024) <<https://www.luiss.it/cattedreonline/corso/M375/0/LMPAGEV/2021>> accessed 4 January 2023.

¹⁴O Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’ in Ronnie D Lipschutz (ed), *On Security* (Columbia University Press 1995); O Wæver, B Buzan and J De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. (Lynne Rienner Publishers 1998).

often involving military or other direct state interventions.¹⁵ Today, securitization of economic policies, where “policy entrepreneurs have successfully framed economic regulation as essential for national security” is taking place across many different areas of cross-border economic activity through the world, including trade policy, foreign investment screening, and export controls and licensing on sensitive technologies.¹⁶ In this reframing, political actors and bureaucrats lay greater claim to securitized issues, often eclipsing the influence of firms and other corporate actors who play a key role in policy formulation under neoliberal logics. Securitization had previously occurred in the EU across policy arenas such as migration, but the single market and EU trade policies were largely left untouched by such explicit politicization.¹⁷ While economic competition among sovereign states has historically been very much informed by the notion of competing for global markets to accrue and project power in the international system, the EU’s particular paradigmatic version of competition policy was very different, resting almost exclusively on principles of orthodox market competition and presented as apolitical.¹⁸

Today, however, we are seeing a marked shift in the ways in which the economic foundations of the European project are being thought about and politically used by elites. This shift is personified in the trajectory of the former head of DG Competition, Commission Executive Vice President Margrethe Vestager, who from her initial appointment in 2014 had been a visible and effective proponent of using regulatory and enforcement powers to create a level playing field, where free market forces would prevail over corporate power and state aid. Over the last five years of her second term, however, the influence of other views, such as the then internal market Commissioner Thierry Breton’s drive for strategic autonomy, came to challenge the traditional competition norms.¹⁹ The Commission of second-term President Ursula von der Leyen has been newly reconfigured in powerful and definitive ways to elevate this new version of market competition, one tightly intertwined with geopolitical goals across the portfolios of the Commissioners.²⁰ While Vestager’s bold moves against tech companies continued to demonstrate her power to the end of her term, her overall influence as a free market advocate arguably dimmed.

Beyond the specific example of Vestager’s shift while Competition Commissioner, the Commission developed several policy initiatives which signal a significant break in practices around competition in markets. These policies include broad frameworks such as the European Economic Security Strategy (EESS), which explicitly frames economic flows in a context of geopolitical tensions and rapid technological shifts, and specific responses such as the Anti-Coercion Instrument or Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), which are also overtly outward-facing and cast open markets as vulnerable to weaponization.²¹ Taken together, these policies

¹⁵T Balzacq (ed), *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (Routledge 2011).

¹⁶SB Danzman, ‘Securitized Political Economy, Investment Regulation and Business Influence in a Geoeconomic Era’ (2025) *European Journal of International Relations*, forthcoming, 2.

¹⁷S Leonard and C Kaunert, ‘The Securitisation of Migration in the European Union: Frontex and Its Evolving Security Practices’ 48 (2022) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1417; MA Orenstein, ‘Securitisation of EU Policy: How Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Is Changing Europe’ (2025) *Journal of European Public Policy*, forthcoming.

¹⁸A Wigger and H Buch-Hansen, ‘Explaining (Missing) Regulatory Paradigm Shifts: EU Competition Regulation in Times of Economic Crisis’ 19 (2014) *New Political Economy* 113; J Piechucka, LI Sauri-Romero and B Smulders, ‘Industrial Policies, Competition, and Efficiency: The Need for State Aid Control’ 19 (2023) *Journal of Competition Law & Economics* 503.

¹⁹G Faggionato and A White, ‘Vestager Is Back — with Little to Lose’ *POLITICO* (8 December 2023) <<https://www.politico.eu/article/margrethe-vestager-eu-eib-nadia-calvino-loses-top-european-investment-bank-job/>> accessed 1 December 2024.

²⁰The Atlantic Council, ‘What the European Parliament Hearings Are Revealing about the next European Commission’ (*Atlantic Council*, 12 November 2024) <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-the-european-parliament-hearings-are-revealing-about-the-next-european-commission/>> accessed 27 November 2024.

²¹European Commission, ‘European Economic Security Strategy’ <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=JOIN:2023:20:FIN>>; European Commission, ‘Protecting Against Coercion’, <https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/enforcement-and-protection/protecting-against-coercion_en> European Commission; ‘Critical Raw Materials Act’ <https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act_en>.

constitute a marked shift in the Commission's orientation to competition, towards a new securitization through their market activism geared to structural global and domestic markets for strategic autonomy and sovereign control.²²

These policies are all still new and in progress, and we make no claims about the political or economic effectiveness of the broader policies in play. But we do argue that there is a striking change in the underlying rhetoric about competitiveness in the EU's single market that goes across a variety of public statements and official reports. Below, we first offer some brief examples of this change in some key, high-profile European Commission reports, before turning to a systematic empirical evaluation that traces out the changes over time in the language and justifications used in the DG Competition Annual Reports.

4. Rhetoric and narratives of competition

A. Reframing markets

European leaders have long commissioned high-profile, "wise men" reports that function as a focal point and legitimation for political action. Unlike in national settings, where such reports often get lost in the shuffle of everyday politics, the technocratic, insulated nature of the EU has meant these reports can have more impact. Examples include the Delors Report, which set out the path to monetary union, and the "One Market, One Money" report that provided the rationale and justification for the euro.²³

Two key EU reports released in 2024 are efforts to continue this tradition, but this time with a norm-breaking shift: they set out an agenda for the EU to overcome what are painted as existentialist threats to peace and prosperity by doubling down on a new and comprehensive approach to economic competition based in securitized market activism.

Enrico Letta's report title, "More Than a Market," from April 2024 is indicative, and his chapter on security is strikingly different from previous Single Market manifestos in its emphasis on situating the EU's competitiveness in a geostrategic setting.²⁴ Likewise, Mario Draghi's report from fall 2024 has as its central focus coordinated innovation around the digital economy as a foundation for Europe's growth and success, as well as critical to greater EU strategic autonomy and economic security.²⁵ The reports have been a key reframing of the narrative around the EU's economy, as indicated by previously skeptical (then) EVP Vestager's words in a November 2024 speech where she asserted that, "[u]ltimately, what the Letta and Draghi reports tell us is that, in a changing and ever-more challenging world, we will succeed together, or fail individually".²⁶ The reality of EU policies definitively lags these efforts at rhetorical reframing, but when compared to the long history of EU documents around competition, they stand out as indicating a new political moment, and a new set of rhetorical resources for motivated political actors to draw upon.²⁷

²²Schmitz and Seidl (n 2).

²³Committee for the Study of Economic and Monetary Union, 'Report on Economic and Monetary Union in the European Community (Delors Report)' <https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/pages/publication6161_en.pdf>; Michael Emerson (ed), *One Market, One Money: An Evaluation of the Potential Benefits and Costs of Forming an Economic and Monetary Union* (Oxford Univ Press 1992).

²⁴E Letta, 'Much More Than a Market: Speed, Security, Solidarity' <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>>; M Moschella and L Quaglia, 'Much More Than a Report: The Search for Europe's New Political Identity and the Politics of Competitiveness' 63 (2025) *Journal of Common Market Studies* 1.

²⁵M Draghi, 'The Future of European Competitiveness' <https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness%20_%20A%20competitiveness%20strategy%20for%20Europe.pdf>.

²⁶M Vestager, 'Statement by EVP Margrethe Vestager at the Joint European Forum for IPCEI (JEF-IPCEI)' <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_24_6110> accessed 1 December 2024.

²⁷H Buch-Hansen and A Wigger, 'Revisiting 50 Years of Market-Making: The Neoliberal Transformation of European Competition Policy' 17 (2010) *Review of International Political Economy* 20; KR McNamara, *The Currency of Ideas: Monetary Politics in the European Union* (Cornell University Press 1998); Di Carlo and Schmitz (n 2).

B. Reframing of China as a systemic rival

A further key construction of the new narratives of securitization of market competition in the EU is anchored in the redefinition of the EU's relationship with China. A look at the trajectory of official statements on the part of the European Commission reveals a shift from rhetoric emphasizing "cooperation" as in the 2016 "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Elements for a new EU strategy on China."²⁸ This statement of the EU's approach to China describes the goal as to "promote reciprocity, a level playing field and fair competition across all areas of cooperation." The principles of engagement outlined are clear reflections of neoliberal logics. They include reciprocal benefit and adherence to the rules-based international order, with China's role in the global economy one that "can generate benefits for all, provided that the right framework conditions are in place." The term "partnership" is used along with fifty-five mentions of "co-operation/co-operate" in the document's 22 pages.

In contrast, the High Representative's 2019 Strategic Outlook represents a paradigm shift in the EU's posture towards China.²⁹ The first official departure from referring to China as a "strategic partner," it makes official the three-pronged referencing of China as a "cooperation partner, negotiating partner, and systemic rival." The following years have seen a consistent use of this terminology, as in the "Strategic Compass for Security and Defence," adopted after Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a blueprint for the EU, where China is referred to as "a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival."³⁰ The shift from cooperative trading and investment partner in a 'liberal international order' marked by ever-opening borders, specialization, and comparative advantage as the tide that lifts all boats, to a "systemic rival" of zero-sum dynamics and markets embedded within security concerns is, rhetorically at least, stark.

The above list is suggestive of some of the initial, high-profile elements of the broader shift to a new securitization of market competition. Below, we carry out a more robust, systematic empirical evaluation by leveraging a language analysis schema that uses Critical Discourse Analysis to evaluate changes in DG Competition's Annual Reports. Our findings point to how the rhetoric and narratives around competition policy have been changing towards securitization.

5. Securitization in DG competition's annual reports

Rather than view the EU's stance towards competition policy as a set of *ad hoc* responses to increasing geopolitical pressures, our analysis indicates a broad, systematic shift in the construction of competition as a legal and political idea. To better understand the evolution of this framing, we turn to an evaluation of one of the primary policy documents of the EU competition arena: the Directorate-General of Competition's Annual Reports on competition policy. Or Brook has made a persuasive case for the importance of the DG Competition Annual Reports in constructing the changing and competing meanings of competition over time, or the 'economic imaginary' of competition in the EU.³¹ We build on and extend her work to consider the role of securitization, in addition to her focus on ordoliberal, Keynesian, and neoliberal notions of competition.

The Annual Reports catalogue the Directorate's work over the year regarding the development and enforcement of competition policy. They focus the majority of their roughly forty-five pages on specific actions regarding state aid, merger, and antitrust regulatory enforcement. However,

²⁸High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'Elements for a New EU Strategy on China' <<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10594-2016-INIT/en/pdf>> accessed 29 November 2024.

²⁹High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'EU-China – A Strategic Outlook' <<https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>>.

³⁰High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence' <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf>.

³¹Brook (n 3).

their nature as summative reports and orientation to an audience beyond DG Competition makes them important justification tools and requires placing individual cases into a wider logic of action. The reports thus lie at a unique intersection between rhetoric and policy, informing both the rhetorical meta-narrative through which competition is framed at the Directorate and the direct policy the DG carries out. Indeed, the reports themselves are drafted by the DG's bureaucratic staff, approved by the College of Commissioners, and submitted to the European Parliament for discussion, reflecting their position at the confluence of narrative, politics, and administration.

Since the Annual Reports are released every year by the DG and have followed a roughly similar format over the last decade, they offer a compelling unit of analysis to enable a more systematic study of competition discussions. We apply a language-analysis schema to the reports. Building on Or Brook's work with the same body of documents, we leverage Critical Discourse Analysis to code the Annual Reports since 2013. This enables a more contextually-sensitive coding, recognizing the use of language in the report as conditioned and constituted by social contexts and as a social action itself, reproducing and shaping the ideologies that it invokes. Our findings can be found in the Figures that follow our overview of our analytic methods.

Securitization is at its heart, a political process of social construction, where strategic actors reframe societal perceptions. Accordingly, it occurs through several interrelated rhetorical moves, each of which we code and trace in our analysis. Most directly, securitization involves the invocation of a crisis or state of emergency to justify the state's increased role in the market (what we call "Invocation of crisis" in our coding). To initiate such a crisis, political actors must first construct connections between the security concern and the location of policy intervention. As such, when securitization is widespread and systemic, it is characterized by a broad linkage of previously disparate policy areas. Once these issues are linked, the lines between various bureaucratic actors' domains blur, enabling intervention from previously external policy actors, often with greater capacities for intervention (coded here in our analysis as "Functional spillover"). Even if not explicitly security-related, this functional spillover lays the groundwork for securitization by explicitly morphing the understanding of competition from a contained, exclusively market-based concern to a player in a larger network of issues and related policy spheres.

In the EU's specific case, securitization has particularly emphasized the geopolitical and geoeconomic contexts inhabited by the Union (what we code as "External orientation"). As evidenced by the Critical Raw Materials Act and the European Economic Security Strategy, referenced previously, the combination of this externally-facing situation of competition and its linkage to security issues is clear in the framing of supply chains as sources of strategic vulnerability. If the Annual Reports follow a similar trend as these landmark policies, we expect that supply chain resilience and control will factor into the DG's calculations when establishing its aims and motivating its enforcement actions. Other major novel policy initiatives, such as the FDI Screening Regulation, have emphasized similar concerns about financial vulnerabilities. Under a securitized framework, we expect the Annual Reports to similarly frame neoliberal integration of physical and financial supply chains as a potential threat to the EU's security and independence (coded in our analysis under the label "Strategic autonomy").

Finally, the EU's securitization evidenced in the DG Comp reports has placed a marked emphasis on the need for more EU-level capacity-building and action, mirrored in Commissioner's Vestager's speech, referenced above, calling for increased EU cooperation in an increasingly challenging geopolitical world. A sense of urgency is created by the invocation of crisis and by the frequent comparisons between the EU and China or the United States. Given the scale of the more united American and Chinese economies and the pace of action in more coordinated environments, the narrative we find around securitization in the EU involves an emphasis on de-fragmentation, further justifying governmental intervention at the EU-level (coded in our analysis as "Fragmentation"). This emphasis on consolidation of power at the center

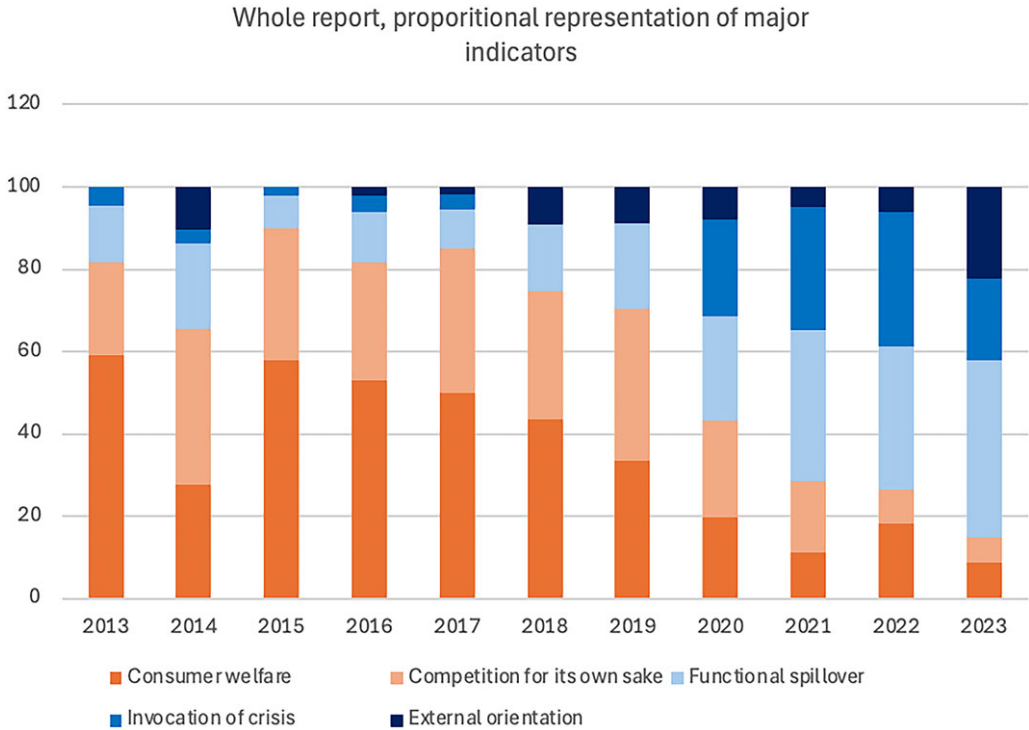


Figure 1. Whole report, proportional representation of major indicators

of the EU polity mirrors many traditional conceptions of state building, which highlight the role of security concerns in governmental centralization and increased activism.

To more fully draw out these changes underway across the EU documents, we compare each of these indicators with a set of more neoliberal ones. First, directly contrasting the idea of functional spillover for competition policy, the neoliberal conception of competition situates it in a contained, purely economic space.³² Under the neoliberal paradigm, with its emphasis on the efficiency of the market, competition and a competitive market represent an end unto itself, with little need for further justification. In this view, pure competition is framed as an inherent positive, without further modification or correction by the DG. Interventions, when they do occur, are frequently justified as necessary to return to this state of pure competition, rather than to achieve any other policy objectives (“Competition for its own sake”). As discussed by Brook and Pühringer et al, when it is elaborated on, competition is framed as beneficial to the consumer.³³ This emphasis on the consumer reflects neoliberalism’s larger occupation with prices, economic efficiency, and mutual gains (“Consumer welfare”). For further information regarding our methods, including how each of the indicators were operationalized, see Appendix A.

At the broadest level, our analysis of the Annual Reports supports our claims about the systemic changes occurring in the EU’s conception of competition. Since 2013, the dominant language in the DG Competition Reports has effectively switched from drawing over 80% from neoliberal terminology to over 80% from a securitized framework instead. Although the pace of change varies by year, Figure 1 highlights how this has been a consistent change, representing the cumulation of almost annual smaller shifts. While clearly a recent phenomenon, this suggests that

³²*Ibid*; Wigger and Buch-Hansen (n 18).

³³Brook (n 3).

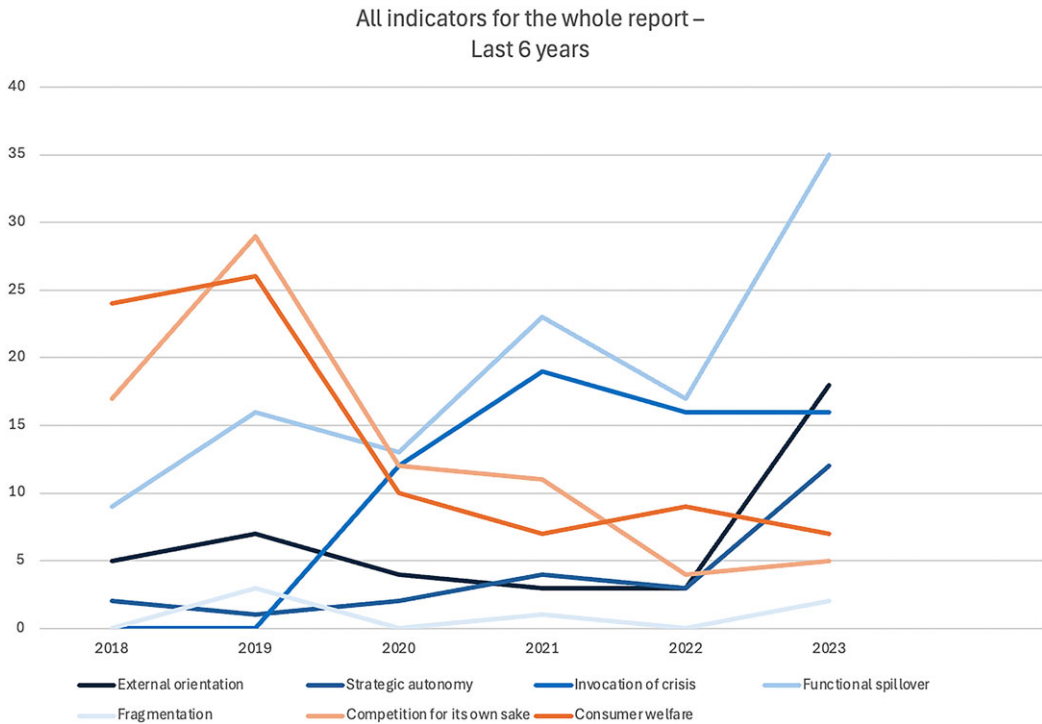


Figure 2. All indicators for the whole report – Last 6 years.

competition's securitization in the EU's official framing was not an abrupt change in the last couple of years, but the product of a more gradual, steady adaptation over the last decade. This lends credence to the larger implications of our story, that this shift is not only a contingency of the current moment, but part of a more founded structural change in the political narrative of economic logics.

Focusing on the last six years, Figure 2 highlights the key years of change and provides a more granular insight into the dynamics driving the EU's recent pivot. Functional spillover between policy domains and issue areas was the DG's leading use of a securitized framing in each Annual Report. We found this unsurprising based on the role of issue linkage in enabling other securitization logics. Notably confirmed by both Figures 1 and 2, 2020 represents an inflection point, after which the DG leveraged the language of securitization more frequently than the language of neoliberalism. As Figure 2 highlights, this shift was initially driven by invocations of crisis, as to be expected with its concurrence with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Figure 2 also demonstrates that this shift was not driven exclusively by references to the public health emergency, but occurred alongside a surge in functional spillover language and was maintained beyond the months immediately following the crisis.

The other notable inflection point occurred in 2023, when there was a sharp rise in externally-oriented geopolitical language and strategic autonomy concerns. This is the same year that the Commission launched the European Economic Security Strategy and that Commission President von der Leyen first outlined the EU's new policy of "de-risking" from China. These developments' reflection in the Annual Reports further suggests the systematic, bureaucracy-wide nature of the securitization phenomenon.

The balance between rhetoric and policy discussion, and the scope under which competition is discussed, varies between sections of the DG's reports. As such, we disaggregated our analysis by

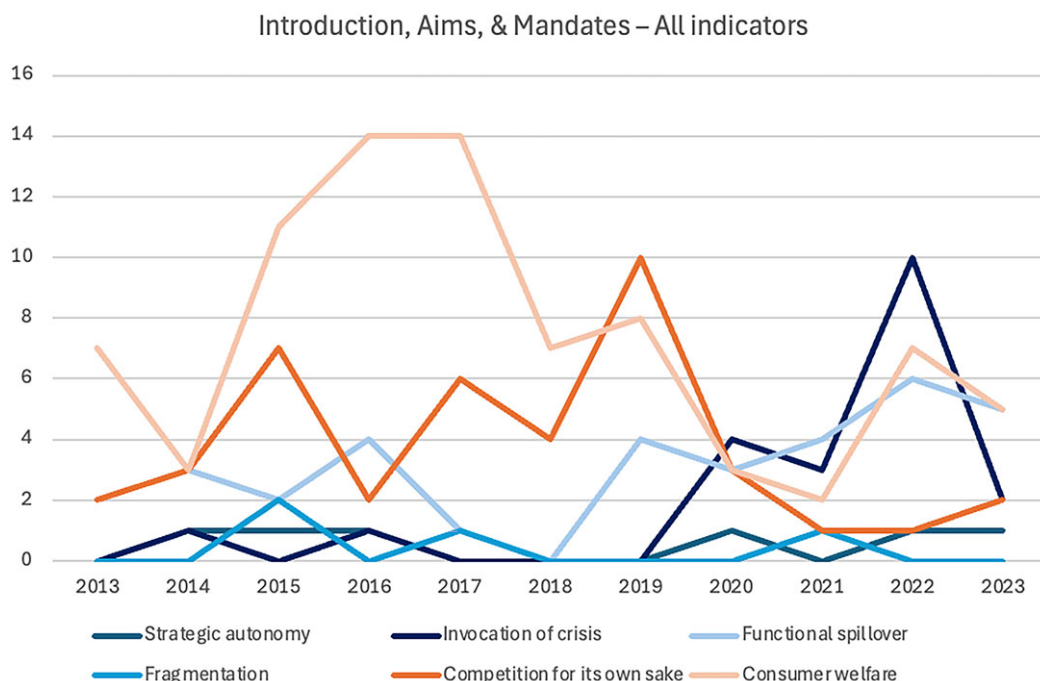


Figure 3. Introduction, Aims, & Mandates – All indicators

section. Figure 3 focuses on the reports' introductions and discussions of the DG's aims and mandates. Accordingly, these are more ideologically-focused sections, which make larger statements on the purpose and ends of competition. Our analysis of these sections further affirms the trends noted in Figures 1 and 2, with 2020 continuing to serve as the transition point from neoliberal-dominated to securitization-dominated framings.

The prevalence of consumer welfare as a justification is noteworthy, and fairly unique to this section. This language peaked from 2015 to 2017. During this window, the reports tended to tie consumer welfare to discussions of the aftermath of the financial crisis. This weakly implies that the EU's responses to previous crises reaffirmed neoliberal values, in a marked distinction from the current reaction.

Turning to a more technical section of the reports, our analysis of state aid discussions in Figure 4 reaffirms the trends discussed in Figure 1, further supporting our findings. To justify the use of state aid, the analysis depicts a dramatic increase in the use of crisis, external geopolitics, strategic autonomy, and the functional spillover effects of competition in markets on political interests of the EU. As state aid had previously been an area long largely curtailed by the EU, these changes are particularly notable as they suggest the new politics at work.

A. DG competition's "progress on the competitiveness of clean energy technologies" annual reports

We complemented our analysis of the Annual Reports with an analysis of a narrower sectoral report released by DG Competition annually since 2020. The EU has pursued a distinctly activist industrial policy in the clean energy technology sector. However, it is not an inherently geopolitical industry, although it has become framed as such more recently. Accordingly, tracing its discussion of competition enabled us to specifically focus our analysis on changes in how competitiveness is understood and measured by DG Comp.

State aid – proportional representation of indicators

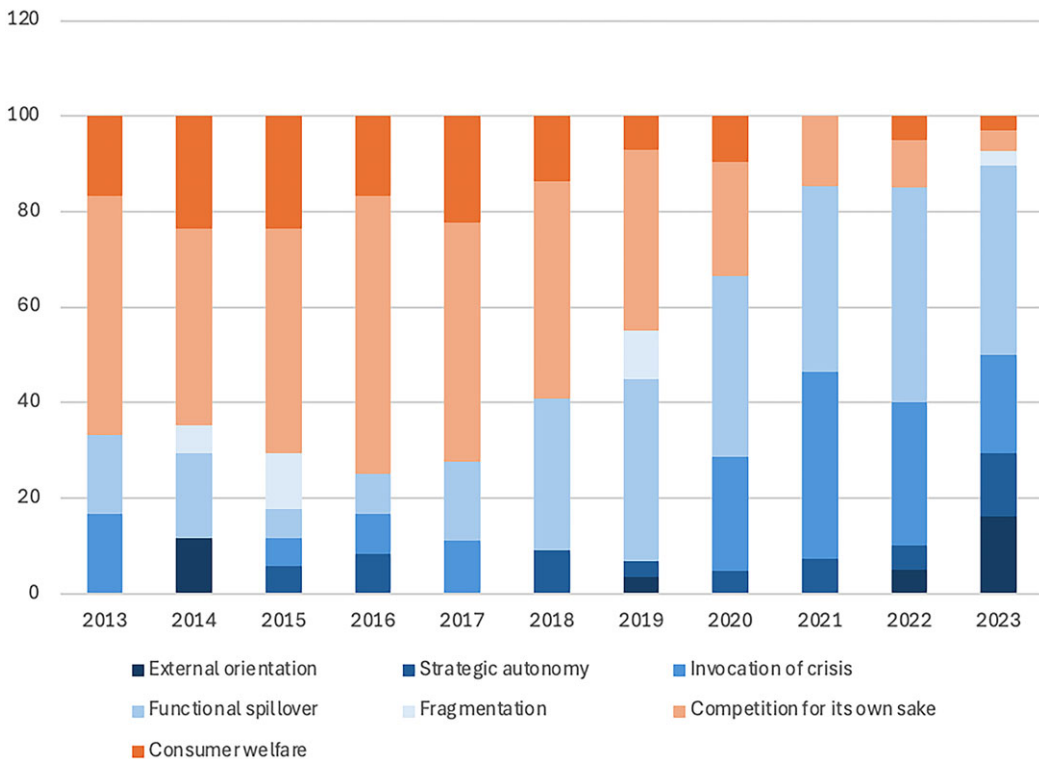


Figure 4. State aid – proportion representation of indicators

We applied broadly our same coding schema from the Annual Reports, but only to the specific measurement of competitiveness progress in this sector. If leveraging a securitized framework, we expect DG Comp would measure the competitiveness of the clean energy technology sector in comparison to external economies or based on its strategic independence, thus situating the EU's economy in a geopolitical context. Conversely, the orthodox economic paradigm calls for measuring competitiveness on either exclusively theoretical economic terms or compared to the industry's past development.

Although these sectoral reports cover a far narrower timeframe than the Annual Reports, they indicate a similarly dramatic shift towards securitization, as both Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate. In 2020, almost 70% of justifications leveraged the economic logics of neoliberalism. Conversely, in 2023, approximately 75% leveraged the logics of securitization. This very striking shift reaffirms our broad argument that competition policy is being reconstructed as securitized.

The framing of the change in these sectoral reports have a different emphasis than the broader Annual reports. In both the introductory overview parts of these reports (Figure 5), and the technical analysis (Figure 6), a shrinking use of consumer-centric metrics to measure competitiveness, and an increased use of external, autonomy-based metrics drove the shift, with functional spillover constituting a negligible portion of the metrics. Based on the temporal difference between these reports, this further supports our argument that more subtle issue linkages laid the groundwork for securitization and while the most recent justification for securitization has predominantly focused more explicitly on external geostrategic concerns.

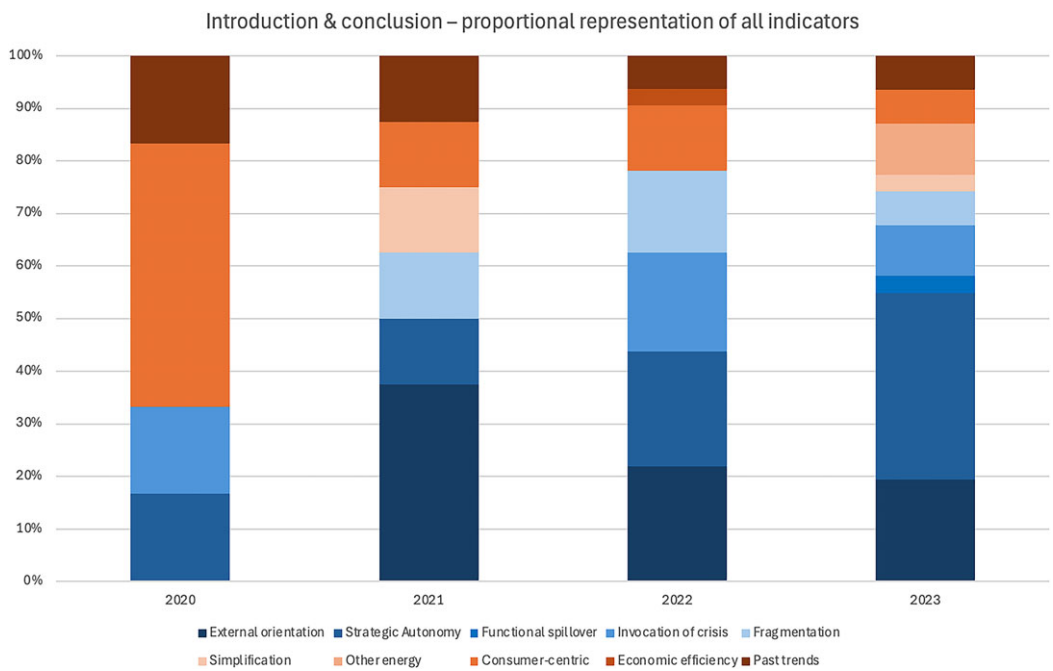


Figure 5. Introduction & conclusion – proportional representation of all indicators

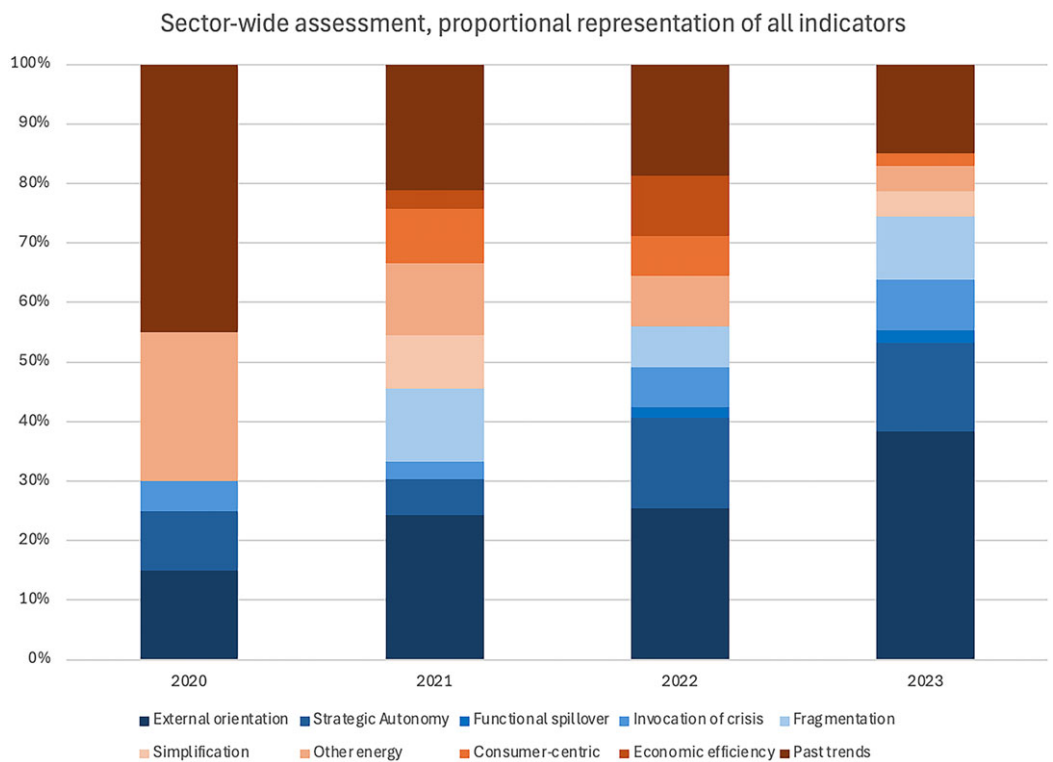


Figure 6. Sector-wide assessment – proportional representation of all indicators

6. Securitization and legitimization in the EU

Our empirical findings around the securitization of market activism in Europe leaves open a final question. Securitization is often viewed as politically problematic, in that policy challenges when turned into potential security threats can be used to stoke public fear and creating space for unaccountable actions by governments. How then can the securitized competition rhetoric be political legitimate in the EU, an increasingly powerful polity but one without the usual bases for political authority?³⁴ While neoliberalism was legitimated by the putative notion that all would benefit from perfectly competitive markets, the explicit use of public powers to actively shape domestic and global markets for securitized, geopolitical ends raises a host of political tensions.

Indeed, there is already much contestation around the new securitization of competition. Key sources of the pushback have appeared in at least two areas. On one hand, resistance is coming from the technocratic career Commission officials who have spent their professional lives within the more orthodox competition regime. For those particularly in what was historically DG Comp and in DG Trade (reconfigured in von der Leyen's second term), the new EU posture constitutes a challenge given the lack of epistemic authority in this new way of structuring markets for political purposes.³⁵ The second major pushback is from political actors in national capitals who are reluctant to see their foreign policy powers curtailed. However, EU leaders have largely agreed to move forward with a common European defence and security policy in the wake of US President Donald Trump's dismantling of the transatlantic alliance and NATO, a rising China, and expansionist aggression on the part of Putin's Russia.³⁶ But the exact shape of that defence capacity, and the role of markets in it, remains uncertain.

A speech by former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josef Borrell responding to the Draghi competition report provides a view into the political challenges to be overcome. While fully embracing its direction and goals, Borrell notes that much more specific work needs to be done to fully achieve a geo-economic EU foreign policy, with an upgraded "institutional framework for coordinating the Common Security and Defence Policy and support for the defence industry" alongside a joint debt and fiscal capacity. He notes that the plans for this new EU do not "fall entirely within the scope of 'industrial policy' — which is the only way the Treaties currently allow the Commission to play a role in defence matters."³⁷ The new perception that the US may constitute an adversary, not an ally, has provided an impetus for the securitization of markets in the EU beyond Borrell's assessment. However, the tensions between the goals of the reports around securitization and the actuality of the legal, institutional, and most importantly, political support for those goals are not easily solved.

Competition policy in its more orthodox, legalistic and neoliberal form had a pre-eminent "epistemic authority" over the past decades of the EU's political development.³⁸ The new dynamics set into play with the securitization of competition policy open up unprecedented political opportunities for actors in Europe. Will coalitions of those who support the new rhetoric and policies of securitization of market competition (and the remilitarization of Europe) coalesce to provide the political impetus for broader change? Alongside EU political elites such as von der Leyen, Letta, and Draghi, recent work on the mainstreaming of 'European sovereignty' as a legitimating narrative pushed forward by French President Emmanuel Macron suggests a way to

³⁴KR McNamara, *The Politics of Everyday Europe: Constructing Authority in the European Union* (Oxford University Press 2015).

³⁵Piechucka et al, (n 18).

³⁶J Matamis, 'EU Defense: This Time Might Be Different • Stimson Center' (*Stimson Center*, 23 October 2024) <<https://www.stimson.org/2024/eu-defense-this-time-might-be-different/>> accessed 25 November 2024.

³⁷J Borrell, 'Op-Ed by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell: The Draghi Report and Europe's Geopolitical Future' (26 September 2024) <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/op-ed-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-draghi-report-and-europes-geopolitical-future_en> accessed 30 November 2024.

³⁸Bora and Schramm (n 76).

orient European political debates towards a geopolitical perspective and provide a political resource for the “rearticulation” of European politics.³⁹ But this is far from certain.

If we place this new moment of EU political development where market competition is being securitized in a longer view, it suggests that market and security logics are being brought together in a sustained way in the EU for the first time since the European Coal and Steel Community of 1951. The specter of a full-blown European military-industrial complex, which is to some degree the logical result of the securitization in competition and market activism described above, may mean that security and market logics previously historically separate are coming together for a new era of European political development. While normative concerns remain, the model of innovation, growth and competitiveness that relies on militarization to achieve its goals, and the notion of militarized nationalism as a glue for politics and a fragmented society, have been a path forward for many other polities in the past, particularly the economic power of the US in the post-war era.⁴⁰ Despite concerns about bringing security and war into our accounts of the EU’s development, these factors may shape Europe’s politics going forward even as they raise many questions about the democratic legitimization of these processes.⁴¹

7. Conclusion

The European Union’s new market activism is being generated by a multitude of long-term, structural changes and is here to stay. In this essay, we argue that one key, but less studied, aspect of this EU activism is a new securitization of market competition. Driven in part by a changing geopolitical landscape, key actors in the EU are promoting a repositioning of the European project in the face of a rising China, an adversarial US in Trump’s second term, and Putin’s expansionist, threatening Russia.⁴²

Our textual analysis of key competition policy documents finds a dramatic replacement of the narrative of efficient market competition as an inherent good. Since 2013, but accelerating after 2020, a new framing in official EU documents instead links competition policy to the need to respond to crises, to structure markets to achieve non-economic policy goals, to external geopolitical pressures, EU strategic autonomy, and to empowering the EU to overcome the downfalls of policy fragmentation. In just over a decade, our findings show, the balance of rhetoric and policy narratives in key DG Competition documents flipped from neoliberal terminology being used over 80% of the time to justify policies, to securitization now taking up over 80% of the rhetorical framing. The second Trump administration’s dismantling of the transatlantic relationship is likely to further reinforce these changes.

More work is needed to trace out the relationship between this official policy frame and the development of actual material policies. Certainly, the changed view of markets is evident in the recent resurgence of European industrial policy and a geopolitical approach to trade and foreign investment. Yet while securitization and militarization of markets has in the past functioned as a legitimizing device for states seeking to increase their policy capacities, the EU faces many obstacles to moving forward in this way. The new construction of competition in terms of security is in tension with the long history of the EU as a peace project, one established specifically to

³⁹J Roch and A Oleart, ‘How “European Sovereignty” Became Mainstream: The Geopoliticisation of the EU’s ‘Sovereign Turn’ by pro-EU Executive Actors’ 46 (2024) *Journal of European Integration* 545.

⁴⁰F Block, ‘Swimming Against the Current: The Rise of a Hidden Developmental State in the United States’ 36 (2008) *Politics & Society* 169; M Mazzucato, *Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public Vs. Private Sector Myths* (Anthem Press 2015); M O’Mara, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (First Edition, Penguin Press 2015).

⁴¹P Genschel and F Schimmelfennig, ‘War, Political Development, and European Integration: A Debate on Kelemen and McNamara’s “State-Building and the European Union”’ 29 (2022) *Journal of European Public Policy* 1867; P Genschel, ‘Bellicist Integration? The War in Ukraine, the European Union and Core State Powers’ 29 (2022) *Journal of European Public Policy* 1885; KR McNamara and RD Kelemen, ‘Seeing Europe like a State’ 29 (2022) *Journal of European Public Policy* 1916.

⁴²Orenstein (n 17).

overcome the violence and bloodshed of war. While it is too early to know how these political tensions will play out, it is critical not to ignore the ways in which securitization is reshaping the EU’s politics in competition policy and beyond.

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Competing interests. None.

Appendix A

The methods for our piece were directly inspired by the work of Or Brook’s work applying Critical Discourse Analysis to DG Competition’s Annual Reports from 1971 to 2020. Brook traces the transformation of competition imaginaries from Keynesian and ordoliberal paradigms to a neoliberal one in both “hard” and “soft” contexts.

Table A1 details the specifics of our language-analysis schema for the DG Competition Annual Reports, and Table A2 does so for the “Progress on the competitiveness of clean energy technologies” Reports. Given the contextually-focused nature of Critical Discourse Analysis, we applied this coding system manually to each report. This enabled us to measure influence

Table A1. Coding schema for the DG competition annual reports

Code		Examples
Securitized	External orientation	Discussions of “global competitiveness.”
		References to the EU’s position on the global stage.
		Direct mention of “geopolitics.”
		Direct non-cooperative mention of or comparison with other countries.
	Strategic autonomy	Discussion of de-risking.
		Concerns about dependencies on third countries.
		“Weaponization of supply chains.”
	Invocation of crisis	Any use of emergencies or crises as justification
		Framing any competition issues as an emergency.
	Functional spillover	Linkage of competition issues to defence, security, or other strategic industrial policies.
Neoliberal	Fragmentation	Discussions of the need for “EU champions” or issues with reaching scale in the EU.
		Criticism of the fragmented market.
		Calls for harmonized action by the Member States.
	Competition for its own sake	Any discussions that is ultimately justified by ‘preventing market distortions’, ‘perfect competition’, or increasing competition.
	Consumer welfare	Any discussion of increased competition improving prices/choice/affordability for consumers.
		Equation of competition with economic efficiency.
		Prioritization of ‘open’ or competitive markets over strategic concerns

Table A2. “Progress on the competitiveness of clean energy technologies” Reports

Code		Examples
Securitized	External orientation	The competitiveness of the EU clean energy industry is based on global market share or comparison of the industry to third countries. This is inherently zero-sum, as an increase in foreign market share decreases the EU’s.
	Strategic autonomy	Concerns with the EU’s trade balance in energy. Competitiveness is tied to decreasing dependencies, Import reliance is tied to competitiveness challenges.
	Invocation of crisis	Same as Table 1.
	Functional spillover	Any discussion of the need for a “whole-of-economy” approach. The connection of the clean energy industry to security concerns and other industrial policies.
	Fragmentation	Same as Table 1.
Neoliberal	Simplification	Discussions of EU or domestic regulatory barriers hampering competition.
	Other energy	The competitiveness of clean energy is measured in relation to fossil fuels.
	Consumer-centric	Competitiveness of clean energy tied to affordability and increased choices for consumers.
	Economic efficiency	Competitiveness of clean energy is tied to traditional economic indicators like industry maturity, cost-competitiveness, and efficiency.
	Past trends	Competitiveness of clean energy is compared to past market shares within the EU.

rather than incidence. We parsed each report and tallied both their explicit invocation of the language of securitization and the implicit contributions from the securitized paradigm. Our manual, influence-based approach also prevented overcounting when a singular word was used more frequently to represent the same influence or repeatedly reference the same situation.

We segregated our coding into three categories for the Annual Reports: (1) introduction, aims, and mandates; (2) state aid; and (3) merger enforcement. This reflected the potential for different understandings of competition in different sections of the reports. However, our results across each section were largely similar, causing us to aggregate our findings to increase the size of the pool of data and the strength of our claims.

We analyzed our results both as raw numbers and proportionally, as represented in the above Figures. Given the greater need of securitization logics to justify themselves, since they cannot rely on the contained, “scientific” approach of market-prioritizing logics, the increase in the total number of justifications was of interest itself, such as in Figures 2 and 3. However, we supplemented this with a proportional analysis to better compare across reports, such as in Figures 1 and 4, 5 and 6.