

THE CHALLENGES OF A POLITICAL UNION

(This document to be further developed and upgraded by Global Citizens and founders of the Earth Union.)

Political systems were designed mainly to govern individual states, yet many of humanity's most dangerous problems now cross borders. The central political challenge is to tackle global challenges beyond the capacity of any single nation or institution, specifically:

1. States must remain legitimate and accountable to their own citizens,
2. Cooperate effectively to manage wars, nuclear weapons, climate risks, technology, migration and other problems that no country can solve alone.

The seventeen sections below summarize the current global position as of September 2026.

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1. The return of major war and interstate conflict

This is the most immediate threat to human life and international stability. UCDP/PRIO data record 65 state-based armed conflicts across 35 countries in 2025 — the highest number since systematic records began in 1946, up from 61 in 2024 and 59 in 2023. Eight were direct interstate conflicts, also the highest number recorded since 1946.

Fatality counts require care. UCDP recorded about 244,600 deaths from organized violence in 2025, of which some 153,600 were battle deaths in state-based conflicts, with the remainder arising from non-state conflict and one-sided violence against civilians. Figures cited in press summaries sometimes conflate these categories, and all such totals are conservative because reporting from active war zones is incomplete. The deeper danger is that conflicts are increasingly interconnected and internationalized. Regional wars draw in outside powers, disrupt energy and trade routes, create refugee flows and raise the probability of confrontation between major states. The post-Cold-War assumption that interstate war was becoming progressively obsolete can no longer be taken for granted. The Global Peace Index 2026 records a twelfth consecutive annual deterioration in global peacefulness and estimates the economic cost of violence at about US\$21.8 trillion in 2025.

Humanity possesses greater productive capacity than any previous civilization — and enough destructive capacity to endanger civilization itself.

2. **Nuclear escalation, the end of arms control and a renewed arms race**

Nine states possess nuclear weapons. SIPRI estimated a global inventory of about 12,187 nuclear warheads in January 2026, of which roughly 9,745 were in military stockpiles, about 4,012 were deployed with missiles and aircraft, and some 2,100–2,200 deployed warheads were kept on high operational alert. Nuclear-armed states continued to modernize their arsenals during 2025.

The legal framework has now largely lapsed. The New START treaty between the United States and Russia expired on 5 February 2026 without a successor, leaving the two largest arsenals without binding verified limits for the first time in more than half a century. Discussion of resumed explosive nuclear testing has also re-entered public debate.

At the same time, estimated global military expenditure rose for the eleventh consecutive year, reaching about US\$2,887 billion in 2025 — a real increase of 2.9% and roughly 2.5% of world GDP. The combination of rising military expenditure, collapsing arms control, new delivery technologies and geopolitical rivalry increase the risk of miscalculation as well as deliberate escalation.

3. **Democratic erosion, authoritarianism and weakening rule of law**

Political legitimacy is under pressure in many regions. V-Dem's Democracy Report 2026 classifies 92 countries as autocracies and 87 as democracies at the end of 2025, with about 74% of the world's population — some 6 billion people — living in autocracies. Freedom House independently recorded 2025 as the twentieth consecutive year of net global decline in political rights and civil liberties, with deterioration in 54 countries and improvement in 35. Country classifications can reasonably be debated because democracy indices require methodological judgment. But several independent datasets point to a broader problem: executive constraints, judicial independence, media freedom, due process and the space available for peaceful opposition have weakened in many societies.

4. **Corruption and state capture**

Corruption is the mechanism through which formal democratic structures can be hollowed out while elections continue. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2025 recorded a global average score of 42 out of 100, the lowest in the decade the current methodology has been applied, and found that more than two-thirds of countries score below 50. Where public office is used for private gain, citizens rationally lose confidence in institutions, tax compliance falls, infrastructure costs rise, and populist movements gain a genuine grievance to exploit. Anti-corruption capacity is therefore not a technical governance detail but a precondition of political legitimacy.

5. **Shrinking civic space, press freedom and transnational repression**

The room for citizens to organize, publish and protest is contracting. CIVICUS reports that only about 7.2% of the world's population lives in countries rated open or narrowed, while roughly 73% live where civic space is repressed or closed. The Committee to Protect Journalists recorded 129 journalists killed in 2025, and Reporters Without Borders assessed global press freedom in 2026 at its lowest level in the 25-year history of its index. Repression has also gone transnational: Freedom House documented 126 incidents of physical transnational repression in 2025, in which governments pursued exiles and diaspora critics across borders. This directly undermines the assumption that leaving a country secures freedom of speech, and it entangles host states in the domestic politics of the states doing the pursuing.

6. **Political polarization, distrust and the collapse of a common information environment**

Democracy requires disagreement about policy, but it also requires enough trust and factual common ground for citizens to accept institutions and election outcomes. That foundation is weakening in many countries. OECD survey data published in Government at a Glance 2025 show that across surveyed member countries only about 39% of people express high or moderately high trust in their national government, while 44% report low or no trust. At the same time, global internet freedom declined for the fifteenth consecutive year in Freedom House's 2025 assessment, which covered 72 countries and found conditions worsening in 27 and

improving in 17. Generative AI, deepfakes, coordinated disinformation, platform incentives and political echo chambers can make falsehood cheaper to produce and harder to correct. The same technology that democratizes access to knowledge can therefore industrialize deception.

7. **Cyber conflict, AI-enabled coercion and autonomous weapons**

Cyber operations now affect critical infrastructure, government systems, financial networks, supply chains and public information. The World Economic Forum's Global Cybersecurity Outlook 2026 found that 94% of surveyed leaders identify AI as the top driver of change in the cyber landscape, 87% see AI-enabled vulnerabilities as the fastest-growing risk, 64% now factor geopolitically motivated attacks into their planning, and only a minority express confidence in their country's cyber capacity — with acute skills gaps in Latin America (65%) and sub-Saharan Africa (63%). A disruptive cyberattack can cross borders in seconds even when attacker, victim and infrastructure sit in different jurisdictions. Military AI adds another layer. Autonomous and AI-assisted weapon systems raise questions about human control over lethal force, accountability for mistakes and the speed at which escalation decisions may be made. The UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/80/57 on lethal autonomous weapons systems on 1 December 2025 by a vote of 164 in favor, 6 against and 7 abstentions — evidence of broad concern, but not yet a binding global settlement.

8. **The erosion of international law and the spread of impunity**

Rules matter only if they are applied to the powerful as well as the weak. In 2025–2026 international judicial institutions came under direct political pressure, including sanctions imposed on International Criminal Court officials — extending in August 2026 to the Court's presidency — while compliance with humanitarian law in several active conflicts was widely documented as inadequate. When accountability mechanisms are selectively obstructed, two things follow: victims lose any prospect of redress, and states inclined to violate the rules conclude that the cost of doing so is low. Rebuilding a credible, evenly applied body of international law is therefore inseparable from preventing the next war.

9. **Economic coercion and the weaponization of interdependence**

Trade, finance, technology and energy are increasingly used as instruments of pressure rather than exchange. The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2026 identifies state-based armed conflict and geoeconomic confrontation among the most pressing near-term global risks, with geoeconomic confrontation named by 18% of respondents. Tariffs, export controls, sanctions, currency access and control of chokepoints in shipping and semiconductors give a small number of states leverage over the livelihoods of populations who have no vote in those states. Managing that asymmetry — rather than pretending interdependence is politically neutral — is a core task of any future political union.

10. **Famine and starvation used as instruments of war**

Hunger is increasingly a political weapon rather than an agricultural accident. **Security Council reporting in 2026 records about 147 million people facing acute food insecurity driven primarily by conflict, with famine conditions confirmed in more than one setting, alongside repeated obstruction of humanitarian access.** Because starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited under international humanitarian law, the persistence of conflict-driven famine is simultaneously a humanitarian emergency and a direct measurement of how weakly that law is now enforced.

11. **State fragility, coups and criminal governance**

In a growing number of territories, the practical question is not whether government is democratic but whether it exists. A belt of coups across the Sahel, protracted state collapse in several countries, and the expansion of armed criminal groups have produced zones where gangs and militias levy taxes, administer justice and control movement. UN reporting indicates roughly 95,000 homicides a year linked to organized crime worldwide. Criminal governance is rarely confined to one country: it moves through trafficking routes, financial systems and migration corridors, and it corrodes neighboring states' institutions from the outside in.

12. **The decline of peacekeeping and the funding crisis of the United Nations**

The instruments available for collective action are contracting precisely as demand rises. SIPRI reports that multilateral peace-operation personnel have fallen to about 78,633 — a decline of roughly 49% since 2016 — amid geopolitical deadlock and arrears in assessed contributions that have forced budget and staffing reductions across the UN system. A weakened UN does not merely mean fewer peacekeepers. It means less monitoring, less mediation, fewer credible neutral reports, and a greater likelihood that disputes are settled by whoever is locally strongest.

13. **Global problems versus predominantly national political authority**

Climate change, pandemics, AI, nuclear weapons, financial contagion, oceans, cyber conflict and migration are transnational by nature. Yet enforceable democratic authority remains overwhelmingly national, while international institutions depend heavily on cooperation among sovereign states.

The United Nations' Pact for the Future, adopted on 22 September 2024, states that the multilateral system is under unprecedented strain and explicitly calls for reform of the Security Council to make it more representative, inclusive, transparent, efficient, effective, democratic and accountable. Intergovernmental negotiations continued through 2026, with a revised co-chair' elements paper issued in June 2026, but no agreement has been reached on membership or the veto. The problem is therefore not simply that the world lacks institutions; it is that existing institutions often lack the authority, representation, speed or consensus needed to deal with problems whose consequences are global.

The central contradiction is simple: the problems are increasingly global, while political accountability and enforceable authority remain primarily national.

14. **Governing AI and the digital commons across borders**

AI governance illustrates the institutional gap particularly clearly. Algorithms, data, cloud infrastructure and digital platforms operate across national boundaries, yet laws and enforcement are fragmented. The UN Global Digital Compact recognizes that no country can capture the benefits or manage the risks of advanced digital technologies alone and calls for international cooperation, human oversight and more inclusive AI governance. Machinery is beginning to appear: the UN's Independent International Scientific Panel on AI released a preliminary report on 1 July 2026, and the first Global Dialogue on AI Governance met in Geneva on 6–7 July 2026. Yet binding rules remain thin, and the European Union deferred parts of its own high-risk AI obligations to 2027–2028. The political challenge is to create rules that protect human rights, competition, privacy, security and innovation without giving either governments or a handful of private corporations unchecked power over the digital infrastructure on which societies increasingly depend.

15. **Failure of climate and environmental diplomacy**

Climate negotiation is now one of the clearest tests of whether states can act on shared long-term interest. COP30 in Brazil closed in November 2025 without agreement on a roadmap for transitioning away from fossil fuels, despite support from a large group of countries, illustrating how consensus procedures allow a minority to block collective action. Environmental competition is also becoming territorial: water-related conflict events have risen sharply in recent years, and the Arctic's newly accessible routes and resources have drawn competing military and commercial claims. Climate diplomacy is thus not a separate technical file; it is becoming a central arena of international politics.

16. **Political exclusion of women and young people**

Representative institutions do not yet represent humanity. The Inter-Parliamentary Union reported that women held 27.5% of parliamentary seats worldwide as of 1 January 2026, with gains slowing markedly, while young people under 40 remain a small minority of legislators in most countries even where they are a majority of the population. Exclusion of this kind has measurable consequences: it narrows the range of issues that reach the agenda, weakens the perceived legitimacy of decisions among those excluded, and pushes political energy into movements outside formal institutions.

17. Mass displacement, migration and social cohesion

Conflict, persecution, economic disparity and environmental pressures continue to move very large numbers of people. UNHCR reports that 117.8 million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2025 — down from 123.2 million a year earlier, largely because of large-scale returns to Syria — including 41.6 million refugees and other people in need of international protection, of whom about 27 million falls under UNHCR's mandate, and roughly 68.6 million people displaced within their own countries by conflict or violence. More than one person in every 70 on Earth was forcibly displaced. Migration creates competing legitimate concerns: the human rights and safety of refugees and migrants, the sovereign responsibility of states to manage borders, the need of ageing economies for workers, pressure on housing and public services, and the ability of receiving societies to sustain social cohesion. Durable policy has to recognize all of these concerns rather than reducing migration to either a purely humanitarian or purely security question.

CONCLUSION:

No realistic path to global cooperation can ignore national sovereignty, democratic consent or cultural diversity. But no nation, however powerful, can independently control nuclear escalation, climate change, pandemics, cyber risks, AI governance or global financial shocks.

The defining political task of this century is therefore to build institutions that make cooperation more democratic, representative and enforceable while keeping decision-making as close to citizens as practical.

The objective is not uniformity; it is the capacity of humanity to act together when the problem itself is global. This is why The Earth Union treats Political Union as the last of its three stages rather than the first. Shared conviction about the equal dignity of every person, and dense economic interdependence governed by fair rules, are what make political union imaginable without coercion. The evidence assembled above indicates how much preparatory work the Spiritual and Economic Unions still have to do.