

# The risk of Incremental Expansion of Competences

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The risk of **Incremental Expansion of Competences**, or “competence creep,” is one of the most significant concerns for EU critics. This refers to the gradual increase of the EU’s authority into areas that were not originally agreed upon by member states. Here are some examples where this has occurred, along with anticipated arguments from proponents and counter-arguments from critics:

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## 1. Environmental Policy

- **Example:**

- The EU initially had limited authority in environmental matters, but through successive treaties and legislative actions, it now plays a dominant role in setting binding environmental standards (e.g., renewable energy targets, carbon trading systems, and emissions limits for vehicles).

- **Proponent Argument:**

- The environment is a transnational issue requiring coordinated solutions. Without EU-wide policies, individual countries may fail to meet global climate goals or create competitive imbalances by enforcing different standards.

- **Counter-Argument:**

- While environmental challenges are transnational, competence creep has led to a one-size-fits-all approach that ignores national circumstances. Member states are better positioned to tailor policies to their unique economic structures and energy mixes. For instance, reliance on nuclear energy in France differs starkly from coal-reliant countries like Poland, requiring flexibility rather

than centralized directives.

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## 2. Fiscal Policy

- **Example:**

- The Stability and Growth Pact, initially intended to prevent fiscal irresponsibility within the eurozone, has evolved into deeper fiscal oversight through mechanisms like the European Semester and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which tie funding to compliance with EU-defined reforms.

- **Proponent Argument:**

- Fiscal oversight is necessary to ensure stability within the eurozone. Shared financial mechanisms, like the Recovery Fund, prevent financial crises from spilling over into other member states.

- **Counter-Argument:**

- This encroachment undermines national sovereignty in budgetary matters, a core aspect of self-governance. It also shifts financial risks onto taxpayers in other member states, creating moral hazard. National governments are more accountable to their citizens for fiscal decisions than remote EU institutions.
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## 3. Migration and Asylum Policy

- **Example:**

- Initial EU competence in migration was limited to coordinating cross-border crime and visas. Over time, this has expanded to include binding quotas for redistributing asylum seekers and centralized rules on migration.
  
  - **Proponent Argument:**
    - A coordinated EU-wide migration policy is essential to address crises like the 2015 refugee influx. Without common rules, some countries face disproportionate burdens, while others may shirk their responsibilities.
  
  - **Counter-Argument:**
    - Binding quotas imposed by the EU disregard the democratic will of member states. Migration policy is deeply intertwined with national identity, culture, and security, making it inappropriate for centralization. Voluntary cooperation, rather than coercion, should guide responses to migration crises.
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## 4. Digital Regulation

- **Example:**
  - The EU has progressively expanded its role in digital markets, including regulations like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Digital Markets Act, which impose rules on global tech companies and member states.
  
- **Proponent Argument:**
  - The digital economy transcends national borders, necessitating unified rules to protect consumers and ensure fair competition across the EU.

- **Counter-Argument:**

- While some harmonization may be beneficial, the EU's approach often imposes rigid frameworks that stifle innovation and competitiveness, particularly for smaller companies. Member states should retain flexibility to design regulations that support their local digital economies.
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## 5. Health Policy

- **Example:**

- Health policy was traditionally a national competence, but the COVID-19 pandemic saw the EU take on new roles, such as centralizing vaccine procurement and coordinating health crisis responses.

- **Proponent Argument:**

- The pandemic demonstrated that collective action saves lives. Centralized procurement avoided competition between member states and ensured equitable vaccine distribution.

- **Counter-Argument:**

- While coordination in emergencies may be justified, the EU's increased role in health policy risks undermining national healthcare systems' autonomy. Future crises could see greater centralization, leaving member states unable to respond swiftly to their populations' needs.
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# **Anticipated Proponent Arguments and Counter-Arguments**

**Proponent: Incremental expansion ensures stability and fairness.**

- **Counter-Argument:**

- Stability and fairness can be achieved through voluntary cooperation rather than top-down centralization. Centralized systems are often slow, bureaucratic, and disconnected from local realities, which may lead to inefficiencies and public backlash.

**Proponent: The EU only takes action where member states cannot.**

- **Counter-Argument:**

- While this principle (subsidiarity) is enshrined in EU law, in practice, the EU has often overstepped. Competence creep happens because initial agreements are used as precedents for further interventions. For example, shared fiscal rules have paved the way for joint borrowing, despite the lack of unanimous public consent for such measures.

**Proponent: Common policies prevent fragmentation.**

- **Counter-Argument:**

- Diversity among member states is a strength, not a weakness. Forcing uniformity undermines the ability of countries to experiment with innovative solutions tailored to their unique challenges. Fragmentation can be addressed through cooperation without eroding sovereignty.

## **Proponent: Centralized policies strengthen the EU's global influence.**

- **Counter-Argument:**

- While unity may enhance influence, it should not come at the cost of member states' independence. A more decentralized EU would still be a strong global actor while preserving national decision-making.

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## **Conclusion**

The expansion of EU competences often begins with seemingly minor, pragmatic measures that are later expanded. Critics argue that this undermines the principle of subsidiarity and erodes national sovereignty. To counter proponent arguments, critics emphasize the importance of preserving national flexibility, respecting democratic accountability, and advocating for voluntary cooperation as an alternative to centralized control. These points highlight that incremental expansion, while presented as practical, carries significant risks to the balance of power between the EU and its member states.

# How important is the goal of European strategic autonomy to your country's foreign and defence policy?

- Important
- Somewhat important
- Not really important
- Contested

