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### Citation

Regilme, S. S. (2025). The EU needs to research its own oligarchic capture. *Euobserver*.

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## Opinion

# The EU needs to research its own oligarchic capture

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Rule of Law EU Political Opinion

BY SALVADOR SANTINO REGILME, LEIDEN, 4 JUNE 2025, 12:40:01

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Qatargate was not a blip. It was a warning. The European Union now faces a stark question: will it continue to claim **democratic legitimacy** while ignoring how its own policies, institutions, and public discourses are being warped by the **power of the super-rich**?

**Oligarchic capture** is not just corruption by another name. It is a structural, systemic condition where **extreme wealth translates into political power** — often legally, almost always quietly.

Europe's **billionaires** do not simply accumulate wealth—they help shape the very rules, narratives, and institutions that govern the European project. From **tax codes to agricultural subsidies**, from **philanthropic networks to media empires**, oligarchs are shaping the future of Europe—and perhaps few in Brussels dare to name it.

In my **recent article in the Journal of Common Market Studies**, I outline a research agenda on what I term the **“oligarchic constitutional order”**—a mode of governance in which laws, institutions, and norms are substantially shaped by and aligned with the interests of the superrich. This is not a distant risk; it is fast becoming a defining feature of our era.

Consider the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**: **The New York Times has exposed how vast EU subsidies flow to political insiders** and billionaire landowners.

Perhaps with fortuitous timing, I submitted a **European Research Council** proposal two years after the publication of the exposé, designed to investigate these dynamics through a comparative, transnational, and multidisciplinary approach grounded in empirical analysis and theories of democratic governance and oligarchic politics.

The proposal was ultimately not funded — likely for a range of valid evaluative reasons.

Still, the experience raises a broader concern: how often are research projects that scrutinise powerful interests within EU institutions deemed too politically sensitive or too risky to support?

This is not to suggest deliberate censorship, but it does point to the need for a more open and pluralistic research funding culture — one that welcomes, rather than sidelines, critical scrutiny of the EU’s own structures and contradictions.

The **EU’s research frameworks profess objectivity**, but when certain structural questions, such as **elite capture** and the distributional consequences of integration, remain persistently underfunded or avoided, neutrality becomes selective.

This is perhaps not necessarily due to overt censorship but likely reflects deeper systemic preferences for **politically safe, methodologically orthodox projects**. The apparent emphasis on consensus, policy usability, and institutional compatibility often sidelines proposals that probe uncomfortable truths about power.

In doing so, the funding system may inadvertently discourage intellectual risk-taking and marginalise scholarship that challenges prevailing hierarchies. This is not only an epistemic failure; it is a political one, for the knowledge the EU supports ultimately shapes the kind of Europe it imagines — and legitimises.

We urgently need a bold research agenda that tackles what Brussels has systematically ignored: **follow the money**, expose the networks of power that trace back to the superrich, and confront the mechanics of power.

### Four asks

This work must go beyond surface-level critique to unmask how **oligarchs increasingly script EU policy** and public life across four interconnected arenas — each revealing the scale and urgency of a transformation hiding in plain sight.

1. **Legal Systems**: How are regulatory decisions shaped by lobbying from the super-rich? Who gets appointed to powerful positions because of personal or financial connections?
2. **Political Economy**: Which billionaires and elite actors control monopolies in strategic sectors — energy, land, telecommunications, media? How do they distort supply chains and suppress competition?
3. **Public Sphere**: Who owns and influence powerful media conglomerates and social media tech companies that shape public opinion? What happens when oligarch-funded initiatives and programs in universities, museums, or think tanks produce knowledge tailored to elite interests?
4. **Human Rights**: How do oligarchs weaponise normative discourses, narratives, and principles to undermine claims by and perspectives from marginalised communities, whether racialised, gendered, disabled, or economically disenfranchised? And how are these communities resisting?

This cannot be a job for academia alone.

**Investigative journalism has already done much of the heavy lifting** — often at great personal and financial risk — exposing tax evasion, cronyism, and the capture of public funds by oligarchic networks. But the fight for democratic transparency requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral effort.

The **EU** must actively support collaborations between scholars, independent media institutions, civil society organisations, and public-interest think tanks. Each plays a distinct but interlinked role: scholars generate conceptual and empirical insight; journalists uncover hidden dealings and communicate them to the public; civil society mobilises resistance for emancipatory politics; and think tanks shape discourse and policy impact in the corridors of power.

These alliances need stable funding, political protection, and institutional autonomy to resist elite backlash. A credible, multisectoral, multidisciplinary research agenda on oligarchic capture must empower these actors, not marginalise them, if the **EU** is serious about defending its democratic foundations.

A research agenda on oligarchic capture is not just about fairness or transparency. It is about the survival of the European project.

If the **EU** continues to shield elite interests while preaching democratic values such as accountability, transparency, and human rights, its credibility will rot from within.

It is profoundly hypocritical to denounce authoritarianism in Hungary or champion liberal democracy in Ukraine, while quietly outsourcing core aspects of governance to billionaires in Europe’s own political centres.

Europe faces a defining question: will knowledge be mobilised in the public interest, or in service of concentrated wealth?

A necessary first step is to support research that is willing to ask difficult questions. This includes investigating how **EU agricultural subsidies** may disproportionately benefit large landowners, how regulatory agencies could be influenced into passivity by organised private interests, and how media consolidation might be shaping the boundaries of public discourse.

It also entails examining whether corporate philanthropy enables **elite influence** under the guise of civic engagement, and how networks of power may facilitate the appointment of business figures to influential **EU** policy roles.

At the same time, such inquiry should explore the growing reliance of academic institutions and civil society organisations on funding from wealthy donors, and how this might affect their autonomy.

Ultimately, confronting these dynamics requires a clear-eyed analysis of the structural imbalances that can leave civil society fragmented and constrained in its capacity to challenge entrenched power.

And above all, it means building institutional protection — reliable publicly funded research initiatives, editorial independence, academic freedom, and political backing — for those who investigate these power asymmetries. Only then can the **EU** begin to reclaim its credibility as a democratic project — one grounded not in elite privilege, but in public accountability, transparency, and governance that serves all.

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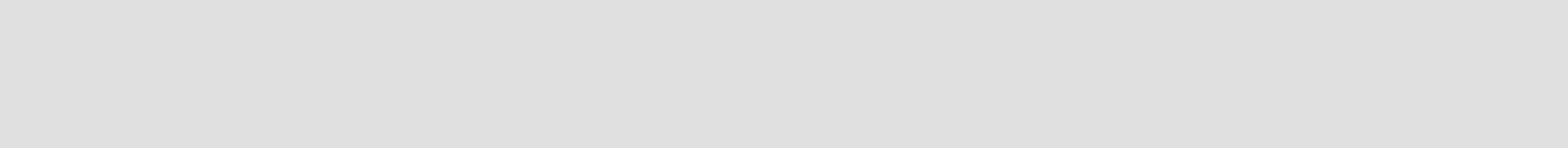
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