



The 2028–34 Multi-Annual Financial Framework: Three scenarios on the potential future of EU financing for global multilateralism

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KEY MESSAGES

- The funding and functioning of the UN system have been, at best, a secondary topic of the ongoing negotiations of the EU's multiannual framework budget.** This lack of prioritisation risks undermining the EU's strategic approach to UN support, which under the current MFF has included a wide range of partnership agreements. It also risks undermining the EU's secured position as a top-3 UN system donor and a centrepiece of Team Europe's overall UN system funding at a time when the system is under considerable stress.
- EU actors openly question the role of the UN system in implementing global priorities.** Current policy debates on Global Gateway and draft negotiation positions on the funding 'channels' of the Global Europe Instrument prioritise European implementing agencies, development finance institutions and companies. This choice deprioritises other channels, including multilateral agencies and the UN system in particular.
- The MFF negotiations show a disconnect between the EU's support to global multilateralism with the UN at its core, and its strategic long-term funding proposals.** Negotiators would be advised to consider how EU funding can strengthen the UN system's normative and operational backbone structures for its global work in peace, policy and providing multilateral aid at a time when other global players are withdrawing support.

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INTRODUCTION

This ETTG policy brief analyses the state of play of EU funding to and cooperation with the United Nations system, before considering future possibilities and challenges in relation to the ongoing negotiations of the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF, 2028–34), notably the Global Europe Instrument. Although neither the MFF nor the Global Europe Instrument Regulation are expected to include concrete provisions on EU funding to the UN system, they frame the political priorities and define legal boundaries and criteria through which the EU will shape its programming and select its implementation partners. Through these parameters, the question is whether the new MFF will operationalise and ensure the Union's strategic defence of multilateralism and partnership with the UN, alone and through Team

Europe, or if the new rules instead result in a de-facto reduction of the EU's political and financial support to the UN system.

The analysis and recommendations in this policy brief are primarily directed at (1) EU policy-makers and parliamentarians involved in MFF negotiations; (2) UN system resource mobilisers working on a longer time horizon; and (3) EU27 governments as UN member states and donors. All three groups, with key inputs from civil society and independent experts, are currently reflecting on the future funding of global governance across many policy areas from peace and development, to humanitarian affairs and human rights, from global health and cross-border migration to trade and many other policy areas with global importance beyond EU borders.

1. THE EU BETWEEN STRATEGIC AND TRANSACTIONAL PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UN SYSTEM

'The European Council reaffirms the Union's steadfast commitment to effective multilateralism and to the rules-based international order with the United Nations at its core [...] The [EU] will remain a predictable, reliable and credible partner [...].' (European Council, 2026a)

Politically as well as financially, the EU and its member states are strong supporters of the UN. At the EU level, the European Commission and External Action Service contribute politically to leveraging the Union's collective voice by federating and representing its 27 member states in political negotiations throughout different UN forums, even when themes such as the wars in Iran, Gaza and Ukraine have exposed a lack of unity within the EU itself. Despite political differences, more than one third of direct governmental funding to the UN system comes from Team Europe budgets (EU27 + EU). The EU's collective financing

has helped to stabilise global multilateralism in times of targeted attacks, of shifting geopolitical alliances and of substantive global cuts in global ODA (-23% compared to 2025). As the European Commission President expressed it to EU ambassadors earlier in 2026:

'Our support to the UN and its Charter is an essential part of who we are. Together with Member States, we make the single largest financial contribution to the UN system – year after year. And you all know why. In a more conflictual world like ours, we need a rules-based global governance.' (Von der Leyen, 2026)

In 2023, around 15% of the total ODA managed by the multilateral system was implemented by the EU institutions, principally the European Commission and European Investment Bank (OECD, 2025). A considerable portion of the European Union's current MFF (2021–2027) that is dedicated to external action is implemented by UN organisations and other multilateral organisations. In 2024, the total amount of funding from the EU to UN organisations—almost exclusively in the form of earmarked, non-core contributions—amounted to €3.9 billion. The EU reports that between 2013 and 2024, funds from the MFF that were committed to UN agencies, funds and programmes amounted to over €33 billion, with the largest recipients being WFP (18%), UNICEF (14%), UNDP (13%) and UNHCR (10%) (EEAS, 2025). In several UN entities, the EU has become among the top contributors. Ranked among all governmental donors, the EU was the third largest



The EU benefits from the UN's global reach, operational capacity and political legitimacy across development, humanitarian and peace affairs, while EU funding complements EU member states' financing of backbone functions of the multilateral system.



funder of the UN system in 2024, after the USA and Germany (\$4.8 billion), and well ahead of China (\$2.5 billion) or the next largest EU member state contributors (in order of size: France (\$1.5 billion), Italy (\$1.1 billion), Netherlands (\$1 billion), Sweden (\$1 billion)).¹ Cooperation with the UN system thus represents a key component of EU external action and a centrepiece of Team Europe funding to the UN system. The EU benefits from the UN's global reach, operational capacity and political legitimacy across development, humanitarian and peace affairs, while EU funding complements EU member states' financing of backbone functions of the multilateral system.

Although the EU mainly provides earmarked, non-core contributions, this is by choice and not by legal necessity or limitations linked to its Financial Regulation. The EU provides core programme funding to UNRWA² (via DG NEAR), the UN's Palestine Refugee agency, and has committed to continuously providing core un-earmarked funding to OHCHR, the UN's human rights office (via DG INTPA).³ The EU also provides softly earmarked funding to the UN's Peacebuilding Fund (via FPI)⁴ and has made multi-year commitments to the UN's Joint SDG Fund,⁵ which demonstrates different possibilities to use EU funds to support backbone functions and finance core UN policy work.

The EU's strong financial position for its support to the UN has solidified under the current MFF, including the EU's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine. However, as the negotiations for the 2028–34 MFF are underway, and notwithstanding the EU's long-term political commitments, there are question marks as to its continued commitment to funding the UN system at a time when the UN faces fundamental challenges. These questions arise as the EU is reconsidering its priorities and approaches in these negotiations and considers a stronger shift to 'European preference', whilst also questioning the operational role of the UN in implementing EU priorities. There is tendency to see the UN in a more transactional approach, much less as a core institutional feature of global multilateralism. Moreover, in the same aforementioned speech to the EU Ambassadors, the Commission President argued that the UN needs reform, and that *'when traditional formats reach a standstill, we need to look for creative ways of addressing*

the most serious crises of our times', while emphasising that 'every new initiative should aim to complement the UN—not compete or replace it' (Von der Leyen, 2026).

Our key argument is not that detailed programming—and concretely the amount of EU funding to the UN under the next budget—will be defined through MFF headline figures and the Global Europe Instrument. However, especially the latter will frame the political environment for how the EU can translate its strategic defence of multilateralism through its contributions under the next MFF, either alone or in a Team Europe approach. It also will define the different 'channels' (or actors) through which the EU's external assistance will be implemented. In this context, current EU policy discussions and ongoing trends are emphasising the delivery through European actors, be they banks, implementing agencies or companies. We thus observe a disconnect between high-level talk supporting the UN (see the aforementioned Council Conclusions) and current policy commitments, which shapes the likelihood of some scenarios over others.

In the following three sections of this policy brief, we provide a detailed analysis of the state of EU funding to the UN system; the views of different actors in the ongoing MFF negotiations (notably on the Global Europe Instrument), including the views of UN system entities on the future of EU funding, and three potential scenarios for where MFF negotiations may land in terms of the EU's future support to and cooperation with the UN system.

1. The EU is considered as a governmental donor because it is, largely for historical reasons, a full member of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee and reports its ODA spending to the OECD on that basis. Figures in € are from EU reports, figures in (US) \$ are from UN sources.
 2. https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/document/download/23dc49be-d364-4fe0-8d55-e93e2362620d_en.
 3. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-geneva/75th-anniversary-declaration-human-rights_en.
 4. <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/Peacebuilding-Partners-European-Union>.
 5. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3801.

2. EU FUNDING FOR THE UN SYSTEM: WHO PAYS, WHO RECEIVES AND WHAT SHAPES DYNAMICS?

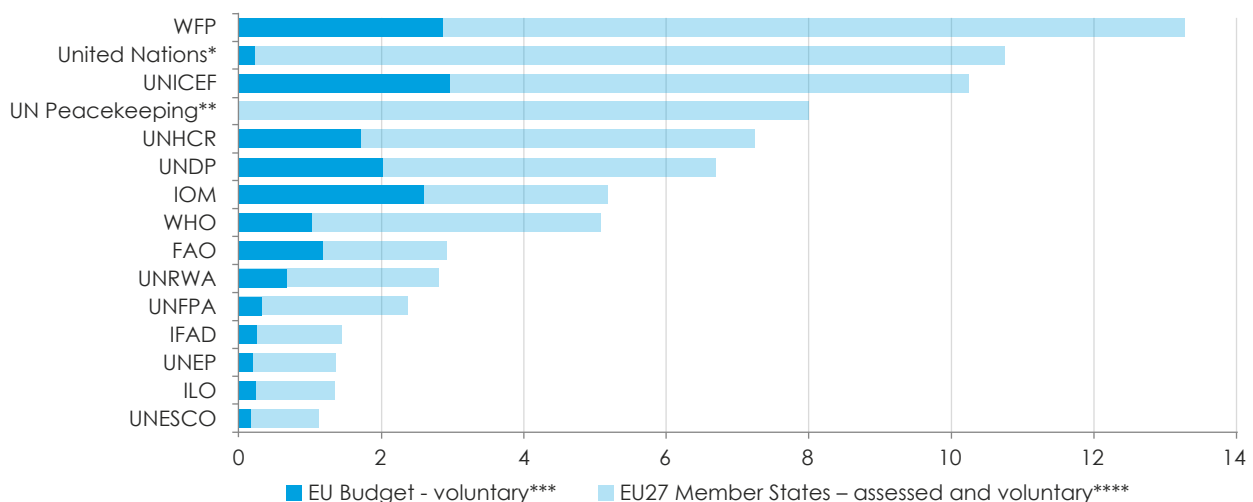
EU funding to the UN system is both significant and significantly fragmented. This reflects the variety of functions and domains in which the UN is active, many of which are considered relevant in the EU's foreign policy portfolio, but also the EU's preference for providing earmarked contributions. EU support presently comes through a variety of funding instruments and reaches a large number of UN entities, adding to the funding that the EU27 member states provide through their regular membership contributions ('assessed funding'), flexible and earmarked voluntary contributions directly to UN entities, and pooled funding instruments at the global or country level.

For 2024, the EU reported contributions worth €3.9 billion to the UN system, or around USD 4.1 billion. The UN reports a total of \$3.6 billion for 2024.⁶ Unlike the member states, the EU does not pay assessed contributions (i.e., legally binding core funding) for UN system regular budgets or contribute to peacekeeping operations (UN-DPO). However, the EU's—mostly strictly earmarked—voluntary contributions make up a significant share of the Team Europe contributions to a range of UN entities (see EU share of Team Europe to the top 15 UN entities in Figure 1 below).

“EU support presently comes through a variety of funding instruments and reaches a large number of UN entities.”

Figure 1. Team Europe funding to the UN system (2020–2024): Top 15 UN entities

Source: UN Chief Executives Board (CEB); EU budget vs. EU27 member states USD billions, cumulative; Top-15 UN entities by Team Europe total



Explanations: * Includes UN Secretariat work financed from the UN regular budget and related voluntary funds, including for the UN's human rights office (OHCHR) or peace-related work outside of peacekeeping missions ** Relates to peacekeeping mission almost exclusively financed from assessed contributions *** Voluntary includes unearmarked, softly earmarked (e.g., pooled) and tightly earmarked funding **** Assessed funding relates to legally binding membership fees for UN entities and agencies with assessed budgets.

6. <https://unsceb.org/fs-revenue-non-government-donor>. Differences in figures between UN and EU reporting may relate to accounting (standards) differences, reporting timelines, registration of commitments vs. registration of disbursements, and exchange rate differences. Unless indicated otherwise, reported figures are nominal. UN-DPO is UN peacekeeping in UNSCEB data.

Within the European Commission, different Directorates-General (DGs) cooperate with UN agencies. DG INTPA (partnerships and development) has provided most of the funding, followed by DG ECHO (humanitarian aid) and DG NEAR (neighbourhood policy; from 2025 divided into DG ENEST and DG MENA). For UN entities, the EU funding mix indicates different portfolio mixes within UN entities, from humanitarian and post-conflict mandates to more policy- and development-oriented functions (see Figure 2, based on EU FTS data⁷).

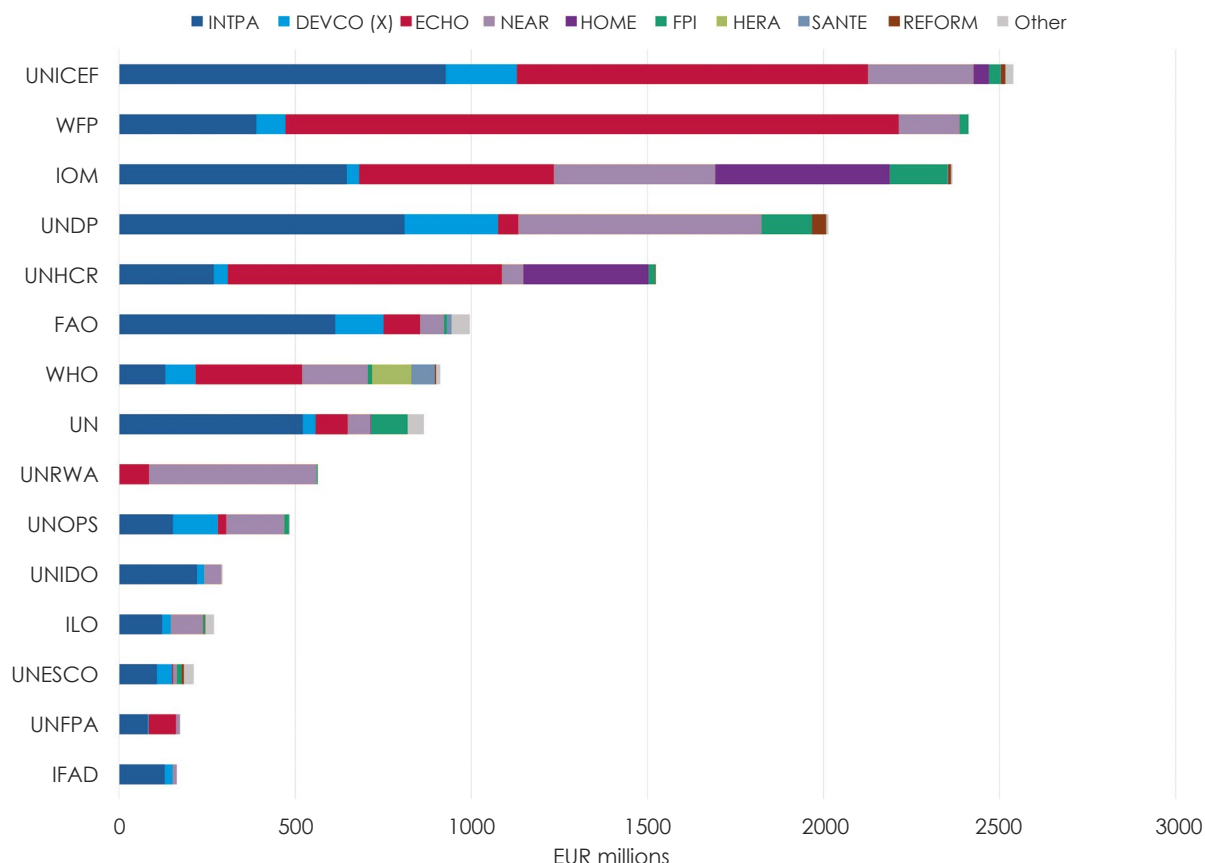
In migration governance, DG Home has provided significant amounts to IOM and UNHCR. DG NEAR's

financial contributions to UN entities, now provided by ENEST and MENA, largely reflects the role that the UN plays in providing (pre-)accession assistance but also policy priorities relating to Northern Africa and Western Asia.⁸

An evaluation of the EU's funding to the UN system in the previous MFF (2014–20) showed that since the mid-2010s the EU's funding had evolved into an increasingly strategic partnership, although strategic interactions were much more pronounced at headquarter level than at country level. It recommended to 'continue strengthening EU cooperation with the UN' with an increased 'strategic focus' (European Commission, 2023).

Figure 2: EU Contributions to UN entities by DG (2020–2024)

Source: European Commission FTS; Beneficiaries' contracted amount (annual), 5-year total; 9 largest DGs or EU agency shown, others combined as "Other".



Explanations: DG DEVCO was renamed DG INTPA in 2021, so DEVCO data relates to 2020. The UN system includes several dozen UN entities, with the top 15 reported here. However, EU funding for smaller UN entities can represent significant shares, even if absolute amounts are relatively small.

7. Note that EU FTS data (<https://ec.europa.eu/budget/financial-transparency-system/help.html>) can lead to double counting of contributions for multi-partner projects. This affects overall figures but not (necessarily) relative shares of EU Commission DGs.

8. A detailed assessment would require project-level analysis in the EU's FTS data, which is outside the scope of this paper.

3. THE STATE OF MFF NEGOTIATIONS AND THEIR POTENTIAL IMPACT ON EU FUNDING FOR THE UN

When the European Commission unveiled its package of regulations for the next MFF in July 2025, including the draft regulation for the future Global Europe Instrument, the UN was in its deepest financial crisis in decades. With the EU budget at the core of UN system funding, the question was whether the headline figures, the policy framing and the technical details of the new MFF would, or at least could, change the scale, scope and focus of the EU's funding to the UN system.

The authors' conversations with member state officials in Brussels and at the capital level gave the impression that the UN was at best a secondary consideration in the negotiations, with EU officials starting to question the role of the UN system as an implementer while highlighting its normative role. In a joint public hearing of four EU Commissioners on the Global Europe Instrument on 28 January 2026 with the EP's foreign affairs and development committees,⁹ the UN was hardly mentioned. When the Netherlands proposed in the Council's MFF negotiations to allow for voluntary EU core funding to the UN, a policy goal agreed as part of the UN Funding compact,¹⁰ there was push back from the EU's institutions.

In the European Parliament's interim resolution on the MFF, and the (draft) report on the Global Europe Instrument, one can observe that the European Parliament seems relatively more willing to reassert or strengthen the role of the UN in the negotiations. For the Global Europe Instrument, these indications include the proposal to insert language in the preamble that the actions funded under the instrument should be guided by the principles and objectives set out in the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and should contribute to achieving the SDGs. Another example is the explicit addition in article 4 that the United Nations system is at the core of

multilateralism and the rules-based global order. The Council has made a similar proposal for article 4 in its partial general approach (Council, 2026). Most importantly, the common specific objectives for geographic cooperation with all regions, which the EP proposes to insert into the Regulation, would include 'promoting effective multilateralism and strategic partnership' with reference to several UN agencies, with other key elements of the UN system mentioned elsewhere. Finally, the proposal to set a minimum amount for humanitarian aid and the global programme (seeking to promote global public goods) in practice also affects the funding of UN agencies involved in this (EP, 2026).

Having started earlier than the EP with preparing its position, the Council adopted its "partial general approach" on the Global Europe Instrument on the 16th of June. Its references to the UN most prominently included its proposed amendment to clarify the instrument's objectives section by stating that the United Nations are at the core of the effective multilateralism that the instrument promotes. It also proposes to add a new first general principle that the EU will promote the values that inspired its creation, including through action in multilateral fora, particularly the United Nations. The Council's position however does not significantly alter the UN ambitions for EU funding, notably by keeping the preference for European actors in implementation under indirect management (Art. 23), the main pathway through which the UN currently receives EU funding. Beyond these main references, further UN-



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9. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20260127IPR32655/global-europe-commission-to-present-funding-instrument-for-eu-external-action>.
10. <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/funding-compact-documents>.



related suggested amendments by the Council include references to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); likely a response to the Strait of Hormuz crisis, though with little operational relevance. There are also a few updated references building on statements such as the EU's evergreen at the 2025 UN Forum on Financing for Development, reiterating its '(...) steadfast commitment to effective multilateralism and to the rules-based international order with the United Nations at its core' (European Council, 2025: 3).

The upcoming trilogues will show in which direction the future of EU funding for and partnership with the UN will be enabled or prevented through the MFF and this regulation. Ongoing policy orientations and debates place the emphasis on European member states developing their own implementing capacity and agencies, either by setting up agencies for financial and technical cooperation or by making available their public sector expertise. In the UN Brussels Office submission to the Commission's public consultation on MFF funding for External Action (October 2025), the UN signalled that the explicit preference for Team Europe actors as primary partners for programmatic work not implemented by the Commission itself ('indirect management') would undermine or complicate collaboration with the UN. Working-level concepts such as European preference, strategic procurement or the more bluntly formulated 'buy European' moreover express the Union's political priority to strengthen the role of European actors in implementing the EU's considerable ODA budget. While largely reflecting visibility concerns over non-European actors involved in implementing European projects, notably China, these discussions affect the UN too.

The stronger emphasis on a more assertive European approach suggests that there may rather be a stronger focus on promoting EU interests through the future funding of UN organisations. While this suggests an even more rigorous earmarking of EU funding, there are no legal requirements by which the EU must provide tightly earmarked and geopolitically framed funding. The aforementioned examples of EU financial contributions to entities such as OHCHR or UNRWA and to pooled funding instruments such as the Peacebuilding Fund or the UN's SDG Fund indicate that the EU Financial Regulations do not prevent contributions that are more flexible and core in character when there is political

will at the EU level. These policy considerations are becoming increasingly pronounced today, as can be seen from past and ongoing discussions on Team Europe and Global Gateway.

All this matters because one of the long-term realities of EU external action is that the EU budget framework informs its policy directions rather than the other way around. In view of the current policy debates, and given the absence of a recent authoritative EU policy vision on global development including the role of the UN development system, the ongoing negotiations on the next MFF have an important policy signalling function. Hence, the provisions of the proposed Global Europe Instrument have a key role in determining both the political and financial prioritisation for the next seven years of EU external action funding, including the choice of how to finance the UN development system—both as an end in itself, and as a means to promoting the EU's priorities.



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4. THREE MFF LANDING SCENARIOS AND THE FUTURE OF EU FUNDING TO THE UN SYSTEM

Developing scenarios for the future of EU funding flows to the UN system is contingent on a series of key assumptions.

The **first assumption** is that the overall MFF envelope for external action and the Global Europe Instrument will shape the overall sums that the UN can receive from the EU, and that the current share of UN funding among all EU external funding may be an upper bound.

The **second assumption** is that the degree of ringfencing of funding under the Global Europe Instrument—e.g., minimum amounts for humanitarian aid—affects the funding of UN entities and the ability to ensure focus on global policy priorities.

The **third assumption** is that the level of geographic earmarking of funding will shape to what extent the EU will prefer to contribute to regionalised than to globally distributed UN work.

The **fourth assumption** is that the degree of framing of the UN, UN multilateral goals and mandates, or the prioritisation of European actors (e.g., EU member state development

agencies) or local actors (e.g., national humanitarian NGOs) will affect the likelihood that UN agencies can access EU funding or can be selected as project or programme partners.

The **fifth assumption** is that only a strategic approach to strengthening the backbone structures of global multilateralism will reinforce multilateralism with the UN at its centre, and that a projectised, highly earmarked EU funding of UN work tends to burden those backbones rather than strengthening them.

These five assumptions can be translated into **three different scenarios**, reflecting on how the current state of negotiations (EU Commission proposal, EP and Council draft positions) would affect the future of the UN system and of EU-UN “cooperation.”

Overall, the most likely scenario given the state of discussions is the second one, with a risk of certain regulatory decisions on procurement or the prioritisation of European implementing partners risking an unwanted slip towards Scenario 1.

Ideally, MFF negotiations would be guided by a strategic policy vision that informs funding choices towards Scenario 3, but this requires bold decisions, including ideas on how to ensure EU funding for backbone functions and policies of the UN as the core of global multilateralism. The conditions for both at present do not seem to be in place, but the upcoming trilogues provide room to ensure they are not further undermined.

Figure 3: Three MFF landing scenarios

- 1 **‘EUROPE FIRST, UN SECOND’**, leading to a significant reduction of funding to the UN system from the EU budget, with member states’ UN funding growing in importance as the consequence for a future ‘Team Europe’ approach.
- 2 **‘STATUS QUO WITH STRONGER EU SELF-INTEREST’**, leading to a visible reduction in EU funding to the UN system, likely combined with stronger political conditionalities (‘earmarking’) for EU interests. The latter may also include that UN entities will have to implement projects together with European actors.
- 3 **‘STRATEGIC EU MULTILATERALISM WITH THE UN AT ITS CORE’**, leading to a shift in EU budget funding to more predictable strategic priorities in maintaining and reforming the UN system. As part of a shared commitment to the UN system, this support could be provided in a calibrated whole-of-EU and ‘Team Europe’ configuration.

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Note: A first version of this policy brief served as a basis for an ETTG Roundtable discussion that was organised in Brussels on 2 June 2026. Some main points from the discussion, which was held under the Chatham House Rule, are included in this policy brief.

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