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From Factories to Ideas: The New Map of Global Power

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Globalisation is not ending – It is entering a new phase driven by ideas and trust

Globalisation is not collapsing. It is transforming.

Brussels, 19 March 2026 - [New research](#) shows that the world economy is shifting away from a system built on factories and physical goods toward one increasingly driven by intangible assets such as data, services, intellectual property, and knowledge-based collaboration. This transition is quietly reshaping how countries connect, compete, and cooperate.

Unlike traditional trade in goods, these new forms of economic exchange are largely weightless, highly scalable, and less constrained by physical distance. As a result, geography is becoming less decisive in shaping global integration. Instead, political and institutional factors are taking centre stage.

In this emerging intangible economy, distance is no longer primarily geographic but geopolitical. Cross-border collaboration now depends more on political trust, security alignment, and institutional compatibility than on physical proximity. Countries that share similar regulatory standards, governance systems, and strategic interests are integrating more deeply, even when they are geographically far apart.

“Globalisation isn’t retreating; it’s becoming less about geography and more about trust, institutions, and ideas”, said Erik van der Marel, Chief Economist at ECIPE, author of the study.

This shift is also reorganising economic power. Firms and investors are increasingly concentrating their activities within what can be described as “idea blocs,” which are groups of countries linked by strong institutions, shared norms,

and trusted frameworks for managing intangible assets. These blocs are beginning to shape new patterns of global cooperation and competition that cut across traditional geographic boundaries.

The findings suggest that existing models of globalisation, focused on supply chains and production networks, are no longer sufficient to explain how the world economy operates today. Understanding globalisation now requires a new framework centered on intangible flows, institutional trust, and geopolitical alignment.

As governments and businesses navigate a more uncertain international environment, recognising this transformation will be critical for shaping future economic strategy and international cooperation.

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