



#DividedWeFall

Winning the War Before the War

A Blueprint for Europe

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PUBLISHER

Fundacja im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego
ul. Oleandrów 6, 00-629 Warszawa
www.pulaski.pl

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Contents

Introduction / 5

DEFENCE ADVOCACY CAUSE

Towards a Better Distribution of Responsibilities – The Europeanization of NATO / 11

Implement Defence Pledges Now / 16

Europeanize Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank / 19

Develop European Defence Capabilities / 21

More equal "Burden Sharing" on the global stage / 25

FOREIGN POLICY ADVOCACY CAUSE

Assuring Ukrainian Victory Over Russia / 29

Europe's Global Ambitions / 33

Acknowledge That Time Is Not an Ally / 35

Ensure Sustainability of the Ukrainian War Effort / 38

Define and Use European Soft (and Hard) Power / 44

ENERGY ADVOCACY CAUSE

Designing for Disruption: Resilience First in Europe's Energy Strategy / 49

Resilience at the Core / 54

Design to Withstand / 55

Align to Endure / 60

Shared Objectives for Europe / 62

DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE ADVOCACY CAUSE

The Information Front: Protecting Minds, Preserving Democracy / 65

Fortifying the Democratic Home Front / 70

Building Collective Resilience / 74

Applying Strategic Pressure to Russia / 76

Introduction



Prof. Katarzyna Pisarska
Chair of the Warsaw Security Forum

Dear Friends,

For twelve years, the Warsaw Security Forum has brought together like-minded members of the transatlantic community. From the start, our mission has been clear: to close ranks among those who recognize the threat posed by imperial Russia to the free world and to our way of life. Over the past decade, wsf has built not only a platform for dialogue but also a spirit of trust and cooperation that extends far beyond the event itself. It is my greatest professional and personal pride to have led this initiative and to witness discussions turn into action – breaking barriers, proving that nothing is impossible, and showing that so-called “red lines” exist only in our minds.

Today, however, we face the most severe test of our generation. The immense efforts of Ukraine, our European allies, and the United States can still be undone if we fail to define – with clarity – what we stand for. That is why the 2025 wsf Report, *Winning the War Before the War: A Blueprint for Europe*, calls for a shift in mindset. This is not only about responding to a conflict already raging on our continent, it is about securing victory before the next

escalation begins – ensuring that deterrence, unity, and resilience leave no room for aggression to succeed.

The umbrella message of wsf 2025 says it plainly: **Divided We Fall**. The past three and a half years have inspired unity, but diverging views on the war’s outcome have led to policies that arrive too late or achieve too little. More decisiveness is essential. Without it, rising living costs, democratic crises, and war fatigue will fracture our cohesion, and the worst scenarios – predicted to materialize within just two years – may become reality. We must move beyond safe hedging and adopt a winning strategy, or future generations will not forgive us for letting peace slip away from our grasp.

As Russia’s war of aggression continues, this report examines the consequences that Europe and the transatlantic alliance will face if they fail to provide Ukraine the support it requires to succeed, and to strengthen their own resilience in the process. With the United States recalibrating its global role, Europe must be ready to shoulder greater responsibility for its own security. *Winning the War Before the War* argues that Western democracies can still

achieve a geopolitical victory that is cheaper, attainable, and fully within reach – but only if we act decisively and with the right mindset. Structured around foreign policy, defence, and energy security, the report offers roadmaps for decision-makers, outlining strategic goals, milestones, and the political and institutional hurdles ahead. The overarching message is clear: Europe cannot afford hesitation. Unity is no longer just a value – it is a condition for survival.

Defining Europe

This report speaks extensively about Europe and transatlantic affairs, so it is essential to clarify what “Europe” means within this context. Here, it does not refer solely to the European Union. The EU is a vital pillar of security and must welcome Ukraine as a future member, but it cannot – and should not – fully replace the role of the nation state in matters of defence and deterrence in the foreseeable future. Likewise, “Europe” here is not limited to the European pillar of NATO either, though strengthening that pillar remains critical. Instead, it includes a wider circle of nations with

a shared understanding of the threats that we collectively face, even if they are not a part of either structure.

Think of this “Europe” as a convoy at sea: the EU and NATO are the largest, best-armed vessels, but smaller allied ships travel alongside them; and all are steering toward the same safe harbour. The European Political Community (EPC) is the closest existing framework that reflects this broader idea – not as a single flagship, but as a consultation fleet; one that was never intended to sail in perfect formation. Disagreements and different speeds are natural, just as they always have been during the European integration journey.

What must be avoided is the emergence of two opposing fleets headed in different directions, undermining the mission entirely. Temporary resistance from small groups with short-term agendas will happen, but it should not cloud the broader course. A strong coalition of frontrunners can guide the rest, ensuring that Europe – in its widest, most inclusive sense – remains united in its destination, even if not every vessel sails at the same pace.

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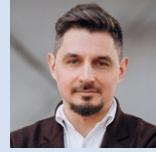
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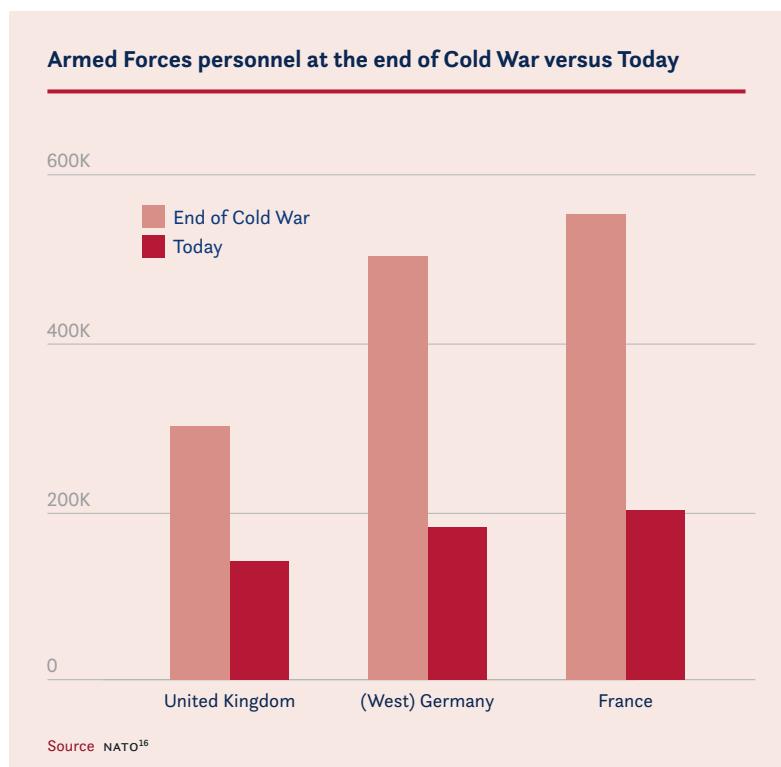
DEFENCE ADVOCACY CAUSE

Towards a Better Distribution of Responsibilities – The Europeanization of NATO

Context

For 75 years, NATO has remained the world's most enduring military alliance and the primary guarantor of security for the transatlantic region. NATO's mission, as famously summarised by its first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, was to "keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down." More than seven decades later, the first two of these objectives remain more relevant than ever.

After the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO faced the challenge of redefining its purpose. As the risk of direct military aggression in Europe appeared increasingly remote, the focus shifted to new threats: terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, instability beyond Alliance borders, and the resulting migration flows. This changed sharply in 2014 following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its subsequent operations in eastern Ukraine. NATO responded by pledging to raise defence spending, deploy a permanent rotational presence on its eastern flank, and improve readiness across the NATO Force Structure.



Shortages of weapons and inadequate domestic production capacity have exposed the depth of Europe's dependency on U.S. assets

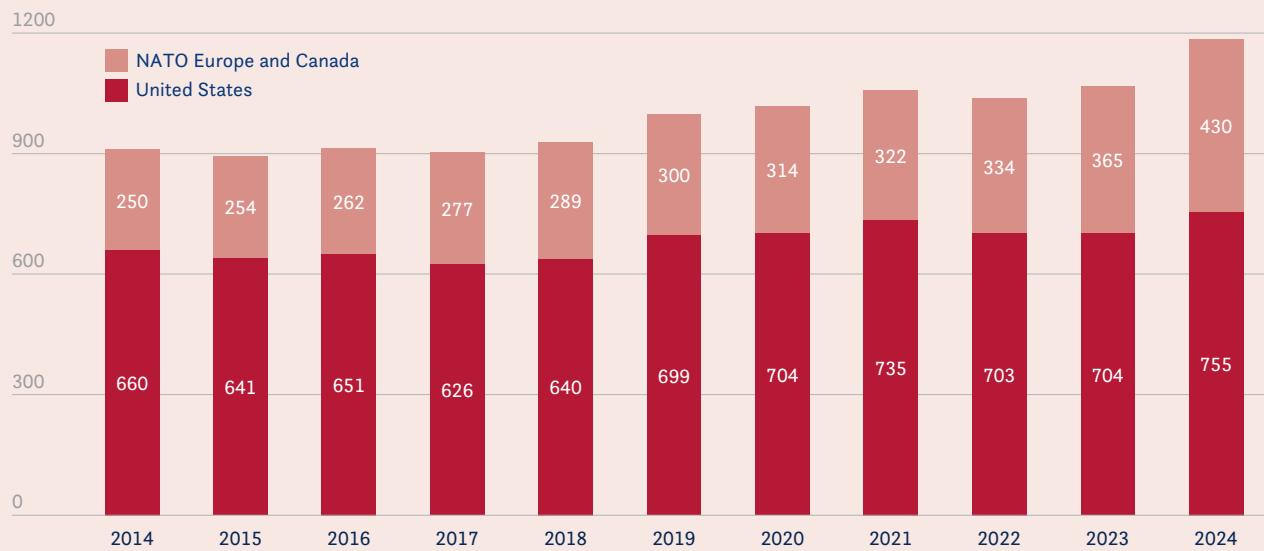
The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 forced another, seismic adaptation. At the Madrid Summit, Allies adopted a new strategic concept that **named Russia as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area,”** thus refocusing NATO’s core mission on deterrence and defence. In effect, the Alliance has returned to its foundational role.¹

Equally pressing today is Ismay’s injunction to “keep the Americans in.” The United States remains NATO’s main pillar, with unmatched armed forces, sustained high defence spending, and unique capabilities essential on the

modern battlefield. In contrast, decades of underinvestment have left many European Allies with diminished military potential, limited capabilities, and fragile industrial bases – a weakness laid bare by the war in Ukraine. **Shortages of weapons and inadequate domestic production capacity have exposed the depth of Europe’s dependency on U.S. assets, a risk heightened by shifting American strategic priorities.** With the Trump administration in Washington, demonstrating Europe’s value as an equal partner – capable of carrying its share of both regional and global security burdens – will be essential to keeping the transatlantic link strong.

The Transatlantic spending gap: The U.S. consistently outspends the rest

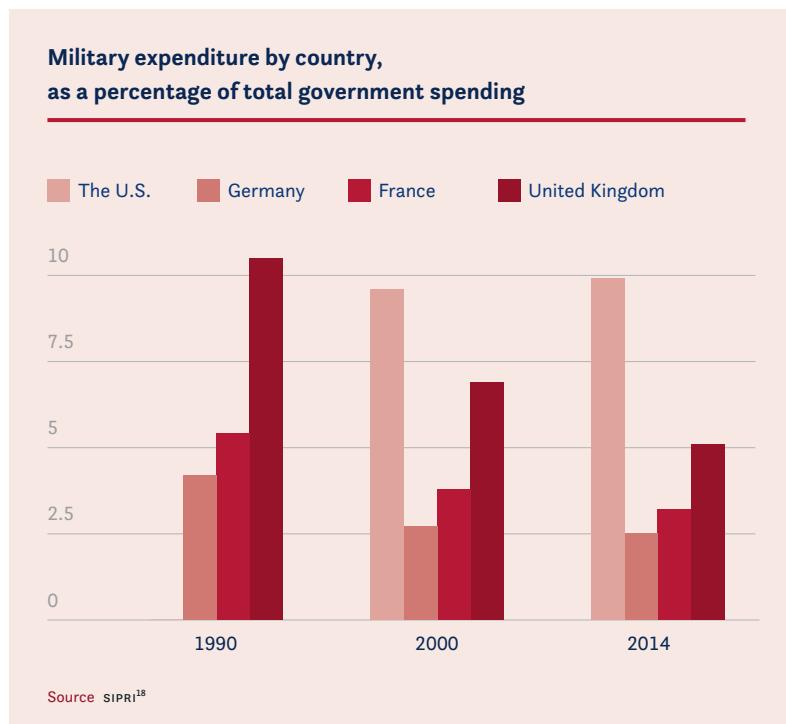
Defence expenditure (billion US dollars, based on 2015 prices and exchange rates)



Source: NATO¹⁷

Problem

Europe's defence posture remains deeply dependent on the United States, making it difficult to envisage any large-scale military operation without U.S. involvement.



Washington maintains roughly 84,000 troops in Europe, provides strategic enablers, and underwrites NATO's nuclear deterrent. Its dominance is reflected in the Alliance's structures: the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) has always been an American, a tradition that began with Dwight D. Eisenhower, who would later go on to be a U.S. president. Today, U.S. personnel still occupy key posts across NATO Headquarters and Allied commands.

Donald Trump's return to the White House soon confirmed that little had changed since his first term. In 2024, before the outcome of the U.S. election was known, European security debates stalled amid political deadlock, national elections, and a reluctance to act. Many capitals hoped a pro-transatlantic president would keep the American security umbrella intact, allowing them to defer difficult decisions. Such hesitation did not go unnoticed in Washington.²

Among Republicans, and increasingly among Democrats, European passivity reinforced a long-standing grievance: **Europe overspends on welfare, underinvests in defence, and expects the United States to carry the burden. Criticism of free-riding grew louder, and even the value of the NATO alliance was openly questioned.**³ Months of backchannel diplomacy and significant European spending pledges were needed to ease tensions and preserve a basic level of cohesion – but the strategic cost of delay was high.

Now that U.S. resources are stretched by other global theatres, Europe must – in close coordination with Washington – assume greater responsibility for its own security. This means building capabilities that could replace U.S. forces if redeployed elsewhere, and positioning European NATO members as a genuinely equal partner to the United States when it comes to meeting global challenges.



Actions Required to Attain the Goal

Implement Defence Pledges Now

The unequivocal starting point for any discussion about strengthening the European pillar of NATO and the Europeanization of defence on the Continent is the rapid delivery of concrete defence spending commitments. The issue of unequal contributions to collective defence between the United States and European Allies has been one of the most persistent on the transatlantic agenda.

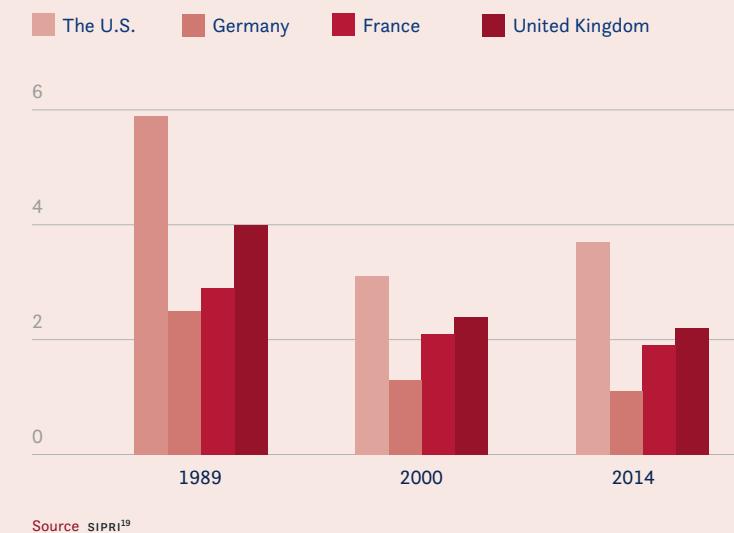
Closing the Transatlantic Burden-Sharing Gap

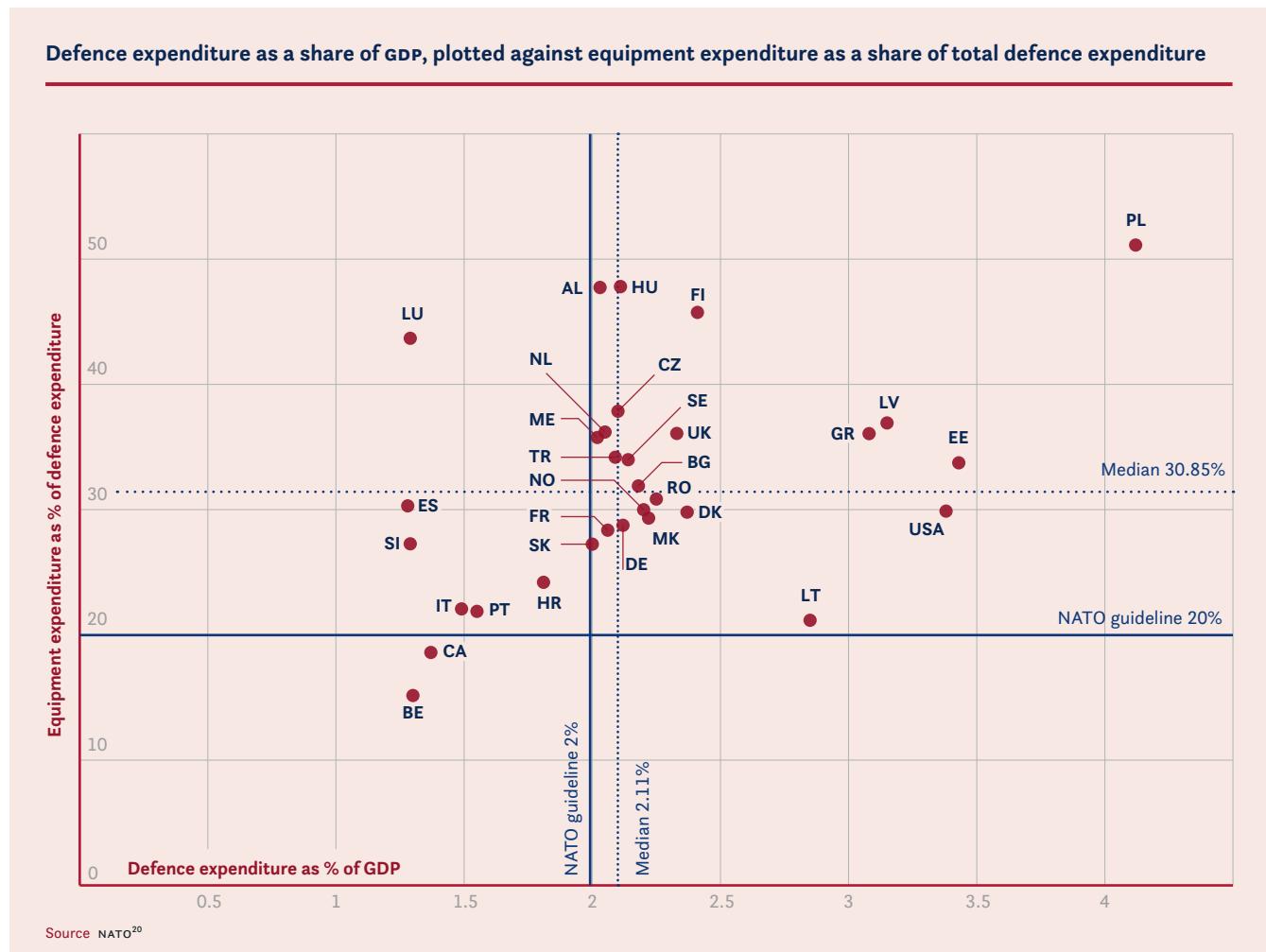
Even during the Cold War, it was clear that European countries could not stop a Soviet invasion without significant U.S. support. In the late Cold War period, the USSR had about 200 divisions on its western front, ready to bear down at any moment on scarcely 100 from European NATO members, which were reinforced by another 30 U.S. and Canadian divisions.⁴ Successive U.S. administrations urged European Allies to make greater efforts, appeals that were not always heeded by European societies.

This imbalance persisted after the Cold War. **While the U.S. maintained high military spending due to successive wars beyond the transatlantic region, European countries reaped the peace dividend, reducing military budgets in favour of social spending.** Initiatives such as NATO's "smart defence" or the EU's "pooling and sharing" served only to mask the widening disparity in capabilities.

Frustation grew in Washington, especially after the Obama administration's "Pacific Pivot" signalled that U.S. forces and resources would increasingly focus on the Indo-Pacific, with the U.S. no longer able to conduct two large, parallel wars simultaneously.⁵ The negative trend in Europe was only partially reversed by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Under the Newport Defence Pledge, all NATO countries committed to halt defence cuts and gradually raise spending to 2% of GDP.

Military expenditure by country as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP)





Progress was nevertheless slow, even under the first Trump administration, which forcefully demanded implementation and went as far as to hint that Article 5 obligations could be tied to spending levels.⁶ The rift in defence spending was highlighted by the American Heritage Foundation which estimates that the gap between the 2% benchmark and actual European spending since 2014 totals around USD 800 billion.⁷ Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022 prompted renewed urgency, leading to a pledge of 3.5% of GDP for defence (plus 1.5% for other security aspects). However, the ten-year implementation timeline is dangerously slow. Intelligence assessments

warn Russia could prepare for war with NATO within as little as a year after the conclusion of the conflict in Ukraine.⁸ Further, the NATO Secretary General has raised the possibility of coordinated provocations against the Alliance alongside a Chinese move on Taiwan – potentially drawing U.S. forces away from Europe altogether.⁹

Therefore, Allies that have yet to reach the 2% target must face increased pressure to meet it by 2026. A “coalition of the willing” should commit to meeting the Hague goals within three to five years, with efforts to further shorten that period at future NATO summits.

Spending Smart: Coordinated Investment and Specialisation

Reaching spending targets is only one part of the challenge; the additional funds must be used efficiently as well. Here, the EU can play a crucial role. The *White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030* offers “an ambitious defence package providing financial levers to EU Member States to drive an investment surge in defence capabilities.”¹⁰ It introduces mechanisms like the **SAFE** programme to support financing for procurement and industry development, and identifies priority areas such as integrated air and missile defence and drone/anti-drone systems.

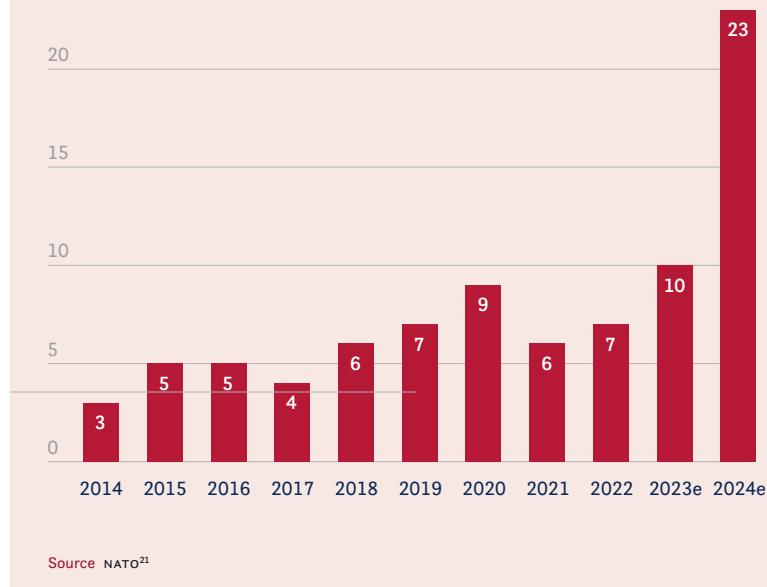
However, these measures lack coordination mechanisms to ensure maximum impact. **European Allies should align investment and procurement plans to complement each other’s capabilities rather than duplicating them.** This would allow states to specialise in specific domains, supplementing one another while directing national resources toward their areas of expertise.

For example, Poland could focus on enhancing its land forces, including technologies like zssw-30 turret systems or self-propelled howitzers, while France could prioritise long-range strike capabilities such as SCALP-EG missiles. This approach would ensure that limited resources are channelled into complementary, high-value capabilities – thus accelerating research and development.

While some nations would lead in certain areas, joint projects should remain a priority, benefiting from the diverse expertise of all European

Allies and ensuring stable, collective access to key military technologies. With respect to long-strike capabilities, it is worth mentioning the **ELSA** initiative, launched in July 2024 by France, Germany, Italy, and Poland, with Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands joining later, aiming to jointly develop a European long-range strike missile. In this way, Europe’s increased defence spending would not only close the gap with the U.S. but also produce a more coherent, interoperable, and strategically capable force posture. In this context it is apt to mention one such project already under way – the **ELSA** initiative enacted by France, Germany, Italy and Poland in July 2024 to jointly develop a European long-range strike missile.

Number of NATO members which meet the 2% of GDP spending target



Europeanize Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank

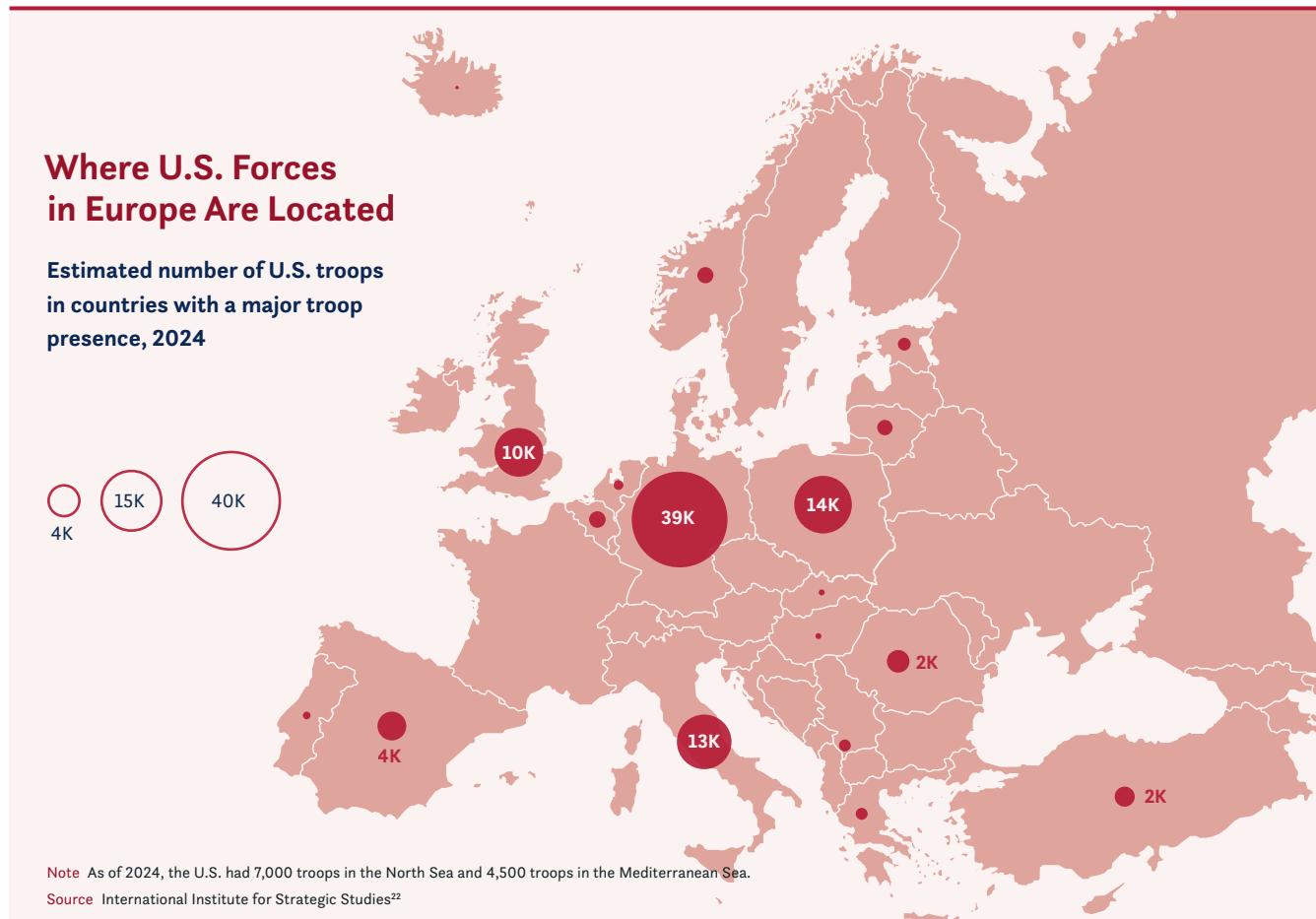
The second pillar of increasing Europe's responsibility for its own defence in the near term is strengthening the European military footprint on NATO's Eastern Flank, particularly in the event of a U.S. decision to reduce its presence in Europe. The new U.S. administration has launched a Global Posture Review to reassess the rationale for American military deployments worldwide. In Europe, the U.S. currently stations approximately 39,000 troops and one air squadron in Germany, 13,000 troops and two squadrons in Italy, 10,000 troops and four squadrons in the United Kingdom, 14,000 troops in Poland, and 5,000 in Romania, with six U.S. Navy destroyers based in Rota, Spain.

The most vulnerable to potential drawdowns are the rotational forces deployed to the Eastern Flank since 2014. These include the U.S. Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) headquartered in Poland, the Brigade Combat Team

in Romania, and forward-deployed divisional and corps-level elements in both countries. In a more pessimistic scenario, Washington could also withdraw some BCTs and air squadrons from Germany, Italy, and the UK.¹¹

A weakened defensive posture on the Eastern Flank would send the wrong signal to Russia, which, under favourable conditions, might seek to test NATO's Article 5 credibility – for example, in the Baltic States. The U.S. ABCT in Poland plays not only a symbolic and training role but also a tactical one, serving as a potential reserve for Baltic forces and Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) battlegroups.¹² If withdrawn, it should be replaced by a European formation with comparable capabilities; for instance, the Franco-German Brigade (headquartered in Müllheim), supported logistically by Poland. A similar approach should apply to any U.S. reduction in Romania, a key hub for Allied operations in the Black Sea region.





Another critical dimension is the American dominance in NATO structures and institutions in Europe. **Should U.S. strategy shift and troop numbers be reduced, European Allies could struggle to sustain NATO's command and operational architecture.** This risk calls for advance planning to transfer responsibilities to European personnel. New training programmes should prepare both military and civilian staff to fill NATO positions, ensuring continuity and stability. Such preparation must be undertaken in close cooperation with the U.S., to ensure that American expertise and institutional knowledge are effectively transferred rather than lost in the process.

In the context of an intensifying threat from the east, an increased involvement of European personnel in NATO structures, especially from frontline Eastern Flank states, would signal European readiness to shoulder greater responsibility for the continent's security. Furthermore, it would also send a powerful message to Moscow that Europe will not yield to its imperial ambitions. On the other hand however, Europe should strive to maintain the highest possible level of American involvement on the continent. The pinnacle of this should be the continuation of the nearly 75 year long tradition of selecting and supporting a strong US candidate for the position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

Develop European Defence Capabilities

Strategic Enablers

From a European perspective, operational and strategic enablers provided by the United States are even more critical than U.S. combat units. These include aerial refuelling, heavy airlift, advanced command capabilities, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets.

The U.S. operates a fleet of over 300 aerial refuelling aircraft; these are an essential force multiplier in modern warfare, enabling extended range, survivability, and operational tempo for combat aircraft. The importance of these assets was underscored during Israel's 2025 operation against Iran, which was supported by 30 U.S. tankers. By contrast, only a handful of European countries (France, the UK, Italy,

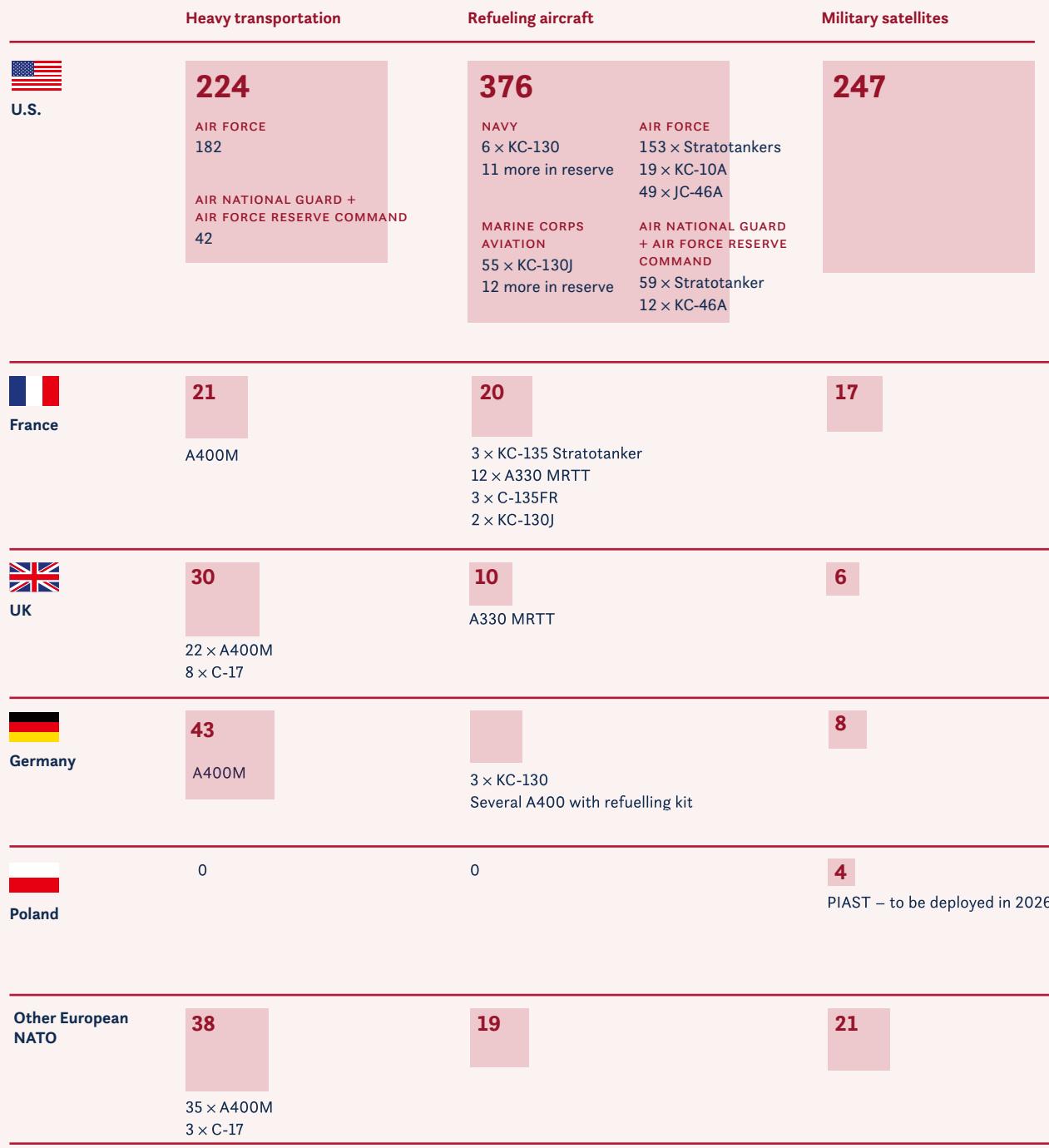
Germany, Netherlands, and Turkey) possess such capabilities, with a combined total of around 19 aircraft.

The gap is somewhat narrower in heavy airlift. The U.S. Air Mobility Command fields over 50 C-5M Super Galaxies and approximately 220 C-17 Globemaster IIIs, while Europe has only 11 C-17s and just over 100 lighter Airbus A400M Atlas aircraft.¹³ **Given the high cost and limited economies of scale for small armed forces, Europe should expand these capabilities through joint procurement**, building on successful collaborative models like the Multinational Multi-Role Tanker Transport Fleet (eight countries, 12 Airbus A330 MRTTs) and the Heavy Airlift Wing (12 countries, three jointly operated C-17s based in Pápa).

The war in Ukraine has also demonstrated the indispensable role of modern targeting systems based on imaging satellites and secure communications. Without such capabilities, Ukraine was unable to fully utilise long-range precision strike systems. Here too, Europe lags behind the U.S. Smaller states cannot realistically develop such systems independently, so EU countries should expand collective space programmes such as Galileo, Copernicus (aiming for a constellation of nearly 20 Sentinel satellites by 2030), and the upcoming IRIS – ensuring these assets are designed for use in NATO operations as well. In this context, France and Germany have recently launched the joint development of a new satellite-based anti-missile early warning system, JEWEL, which will also include ground radars deployed across Europe.¹⁴



Strategic Enablers Fielded by chosen NATO Countries





Air and Missile Defence

Europe's air and missile defence architecture remains limited, particularly against longer-range threats. Defence against medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles currently depends entirely on U.S. assets deployed under the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) which includes six Aegis-equipped destroyers in Rota, Spain, and Aegis Ashore sites in both Romania and Poland.

NATO's ballistic missile defence posture was largely designed for threats from the Middle East and does not provide European NATO members with land-based capabilities to intercept anything beyond short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) from Russia. Yet Russia has already demonstrated its willingness to use intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) with conventional warheads against Ukraine.¹⁵

To address this, European Allies should jointly acquire advanced systems such as the U.S. THAAD or Israel's Arrow-3, as proposed in Germany's European Sky Shield Initiative. For medium-range defence, production of the Franco-Italian SAMP/T systems and Aster-30 interceptors – the only viable non-U.S. alternative to Patriot – must be scaled up, particularly to sustain Ukrainian defences should U.S. supplies be disrupted by crises in the Taiwan Strait or Middle East. The accelerated deployment of the SAMP/T NG and ASTER B1 NT variants would enhance Europe's capacity to counter advanced missile threats.

Europe should also consider forming a joint, deployable air defence unit equipped with both European and U.S. systems. This force could be rapidly deployed to hotspots; for example, to reinforce the Baltic States during a crisis or to shield Allied forces in Ukraine during a post-war stabilisation mission.

Deterrence

The U.S. remains the ultimate guarantor of nuclear deterrence in Europe. The UK's nuclear forces are tied closely to U.S. systems, while France's independent deterrent is governed by a distinct national doctrine. France, however, possesses a credible nuclear deterrent based on two complementary components: the oceanic (SSBNs with M51 missiles) and the airborne (Rafale with ASMP-A), both subject to constant modernization. France and the UK have also recently opted for increased coordination, while President Macron has proposed to European partners the launch of a strategic dialogue on deterrence.

However, Europe can significantly strengthen its conventional deterrence posture through the development of advanced precision-strike capabilities. When combined with effective targeting systems, modern ballistic and cruise missiles can provide deterrence by threatening the destruction of leadership, command hubs, and critical infrastructure in a hostile state. South Korea offers a relevant model, building a diverse set of conventional strike options across

land, air, and naval platforms to counter a nuclear-armed neighbour.

To this end, selected European countries, such as Germany and Poland, should consider acquiring land-based Tomahawk missiles and expanding stocks of JASSM and SCALP/Storm Shadow missiles. Submarine-launched cruise and ballistic missiles should also be prioritised. A coordinating mechanism similar to NATO's Nuclear Planning Group could be established to ensure coherent planning, capability integration, and a unified deterrence posture.

Investments should also be made in research and development for next-generation strike technologies, including advanced rocket propulsion, guidance systems, and AI-assisted target acquisition. Long-range drone systems should form part of this mix, offering a cost-effective complement to traditional missiles. The drones used in Russia's strike campaigns against Ukraine – where systems like the Shahed and Geran have been employed to saturate defences and create openings for higher-value assets – have proven their potential to enhance and diversify strike operations.



Photo: Mike Mareen, stock.adobe.com

More equal “Burden Sharing” on the global stage

While securing its own neighbourhood remains the immediate priority, Europe must also prepare to take a more active role in managing crises beyond its borders in the long-term – and in close coordination with its American ally. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored how deeply Europe depends on global supply chains and how instability in other regions can directly affect European security and prosperity.

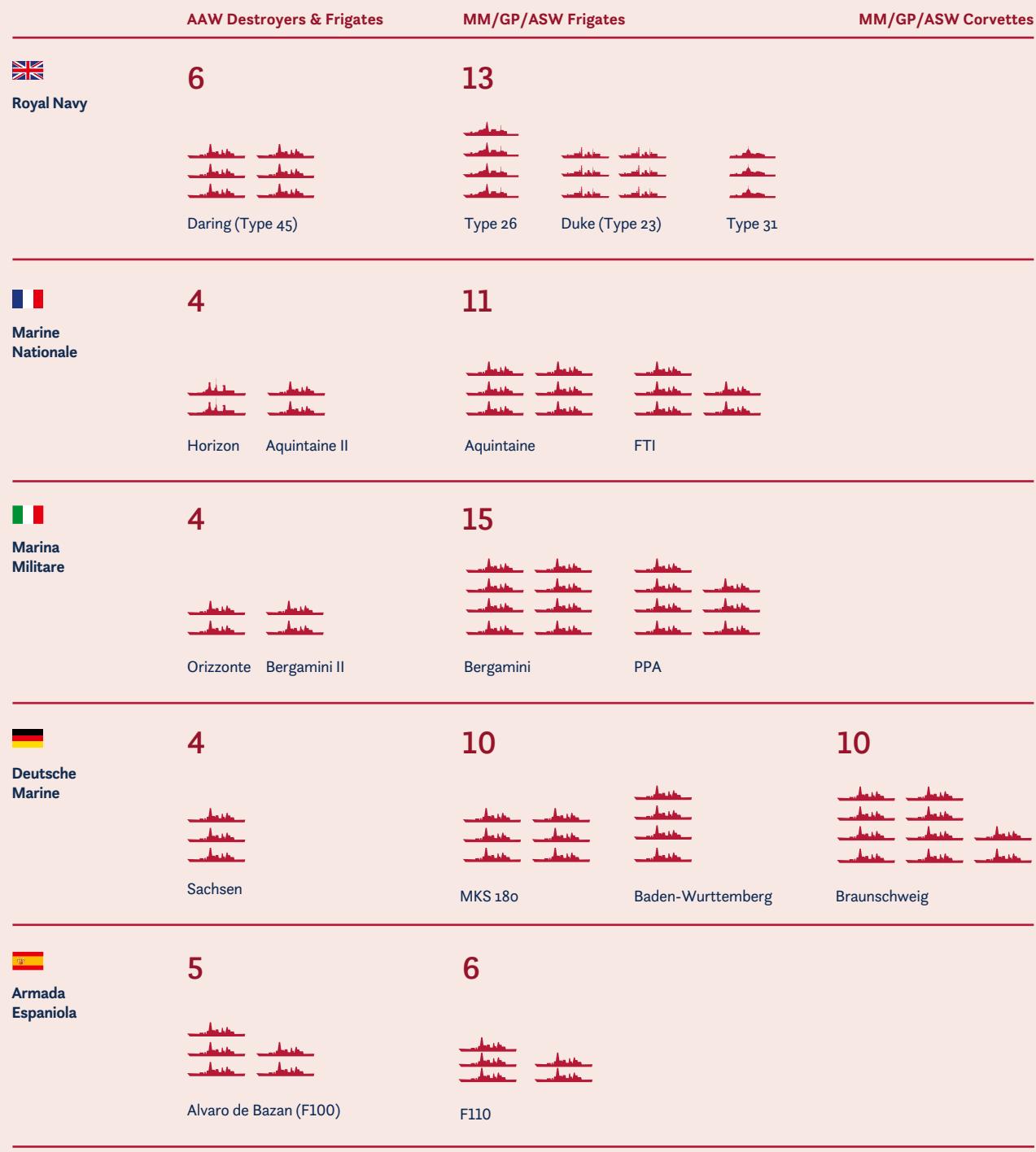
European countries already possess substantial power projection capabilities: at least three large aircraft carriers, several smaller carriers and landing helicopter docks, and a significant number of destroyers and frigates capable of sustained operations far from European shores. **These assets can and should contribute to stability in strategically vital regions such as the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East** – both to safeguard European economic and security interests and to demonstrate to

Washington that Europe is a global security provider, not merely a consumer.

In the shorter term, the creation of a permanent EU naval group should be considered, potentially leveraging NATO’s Standing Maritime Groups under the NATO-EU cooperation framework to serve EU-specific security objectives. The need for such a force is already apparent. For example, Houthi rebel activity in Yemen has endangered shipping through the Gulf of Aden, threatening one of the world’s most important maritime choke points and disrupting strategic trade flows.

Europe must be able to project power globally to protect its strategic interests and prevent crises from spiralling into direct threats to the continent’s stability. Without such capabilities, Europe risks facing further disruptions similar to those in the Gulf of Aden – with potentially severe economic and security consequences.

The major surface combatants of the most powerful European Navies in 2030



Roadmap for Attaining the Goal

| SHORT TERM | MEDIUM TERM | LONG TERM |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach 2% defence spending; form coalition for 3.5% + 1.5% Hague goals within 3–5 years. Coordinate procurement and R&D. Develop contingency plans to replace u.s. forces with European equivalents. Establish a permanent EU naval group for rapid crisis deployment. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deploy a European brigade to replace u.s. ABCT and field a joint air defence unit. Ready expanded enabler fleet and integrate satellites into NATO operations. Develop long-range precision strike under a European Deterrence Planning Group. Launch joint training programmes to prepare European personnel to fill NATO command and staff positions currently dominated by us personnel | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build a fully European Eastern Flank posture able to deter/defeat Russia without U.S. ground reinforcements. Achieve full independence in enablers: refuelling, lift, ISR, secure comms. Field an advanced, diversified European conventional deterrent complementing NATO's nuclear umbrella. Establish Europe as an equal global security provider alongside the U.S. |

OBSTACLES AND LIMITATIONS

Lack of Enforcement Mechanisms

There are no concrete tools to compel European member states to meet defence pledges. Even after the invasion of Ukraine, some NATO members still lag behind in spending, showing that targets without enforceable measures behind them are destined to remain amorphous.

Coalition of the Willing Risks

Some Allies may lead the way in higher spending, but this risks creating divisions between those carrying greater responsibility and those relying on collective security, echoing U.S. resentment of European “freeloading.”

Industrial Protectionism

While specialisation could improve efficiency, national interests in protecting domestic defence industries, seen as vital for jobs and economies, often outweigh the benefits of coordinated procurement.

Strategic Enabler Gaps

Expanding capabilities like heavy airlift and aerial refuelling requires not only equipment but also skilled personnel and infrastructure, which European Allies currently lack.

Challenges in Europeanisation of NATO Structures

Although U.S. know-how can be transferred, Europe must rapidly expand its own personnel base to absorb it. This remains a challenge because states already struggle to maintain sufficient military staff for national duties.

FOREIGN POLICY ADVOCACY CAUSE

Assuring Ukrainian Victory Over Russia

Context

In early 2025, a great shockwave passed through Europe; President Trump opened direct communication channels with Moscow, bypassing both Brussels and Kyiv in the process. This unilateral outreach raised alarm bells in European capitals – not only for what was said, but for what it signified: Washington no longer saw Europe as a necessary co-pilot on the path towards shaping the continent's future. Moreover, it brought to the fore the uncomfortable yet undeniable truth that, without a clear strategic vision for Ukraine, Europe had scarcely anything to offer at the diplomatic table. Legitimate questions have followed: What does Europe truly bring to the table? Who is authorized to speak for it? And what, ultimately, is Europe's endgame in this conflict?

For far too long, European leaders indulged in the misguided belief that they could outsource the final stages of the war's resolution to the United States. However, the strategic objectives of a country located an ocean away – 7,500 kilometers from the front line – will not always align with those of the nations closest to the conflict. **The assumption that Washington would step in to finish what began in Europe was a strategic illusion.** In stark contrast to the early days of the conflict, such a viewpoint is a rarity in today's climate.

As the world becomes ever more chaotic and unstable, new flashpoints – especially in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific – increasingly distract the United States. Consequently, the American strategic focus inevitably drifts toward other regions as they prioritise their own interests. This is to be expected, and it means that a concrete and sustained involvement on Europe's Eastern flank is unlikely. At a time when global attention is divided and Western resources are stretched thin, Russia is presented with a window of opportunity to intensify its hostile actions or expand its influence abroad. The return of President Trump to the White House leaves no room for misinterpretation: the initiative and the responsibility must come from Europe. **The transatlantic link thrives when Europe leads the way with credible action, and withers while it waits.**

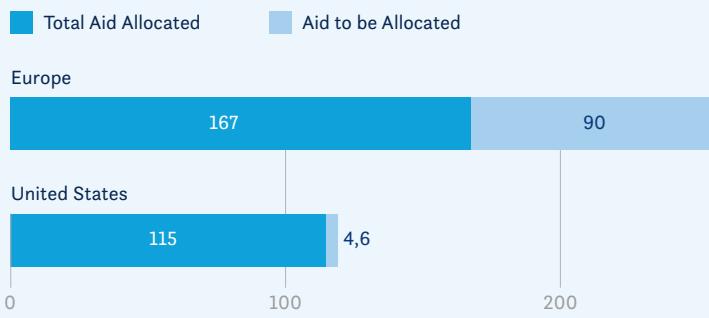


Notwithstanding, the United States – even under President Trump’s leadership – has shown greater readiness to welcome a determined and capable Europe than many Europeans often assume. For example, between March and August 2025, European diplomatic initiatives, which culminated in a successful Hague Summit and structured consultations ahead of Trump’s meeting with Putin in Alaska, slowed down unilateral moves from Washington and created space for joint transatlantic strategy. **As such, taking clear steps and presenting**

a united European posture serves a dual purpose: it strengthens the continent’s security directly and bolsters the Union’s image in the U.S., thus incentivising continued engagement from Washington. To sustain this, Europe must move beyond the legislative inertia precipitated by conflicting visions and leadership crises, and work instead toward a cohesive endgame for the continent’s future. It therefore falls on Europe to not only bring the current conflict to a close, but also to deter, and if necessary defend against, further Russian aggression.

EU versus U.S. Government Spending on Ukraine

Measured in Billions of Euros from January 24, 2022 to June 30, 2025



Source: The Kiel Institute for the World Economy²⁶

Europe must take strategic ownership of the Ukraine file in order to **close the gap left by the United States, and create the conditions for continued U.S. engagement.** This requires clear communication of what Europe needs in terms of capabilities and shared objectives, as well as an end to vague appeals for American involvement. **The U.S. will never be more committed to Europe than Europe itself.** Washington, including Trump-aligned voices, welcomes a stronger European role. Europe generates both outcomes and leverage when it acts first and defines the agenda on sanctions, military aid, and strategic planning. The U.S. remains a global superpower, but Europe must become the credible driver of transatlantic strategy.

Problem

Europe's position on Ukraine remains deeply inconsistent. On the one hand, the Union is unwilling to escalate militarily and risk confronting Russia; while on the other, it refuses to negotiate with Russia.

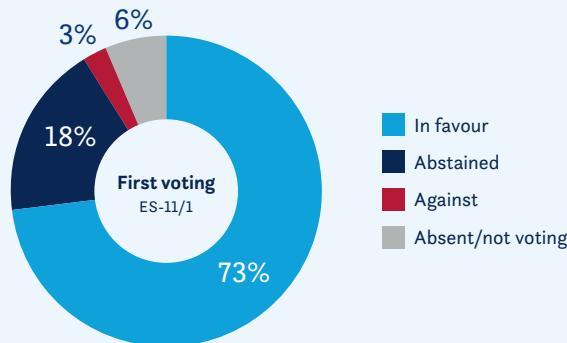
There are good reasons for this. It makes little sense to broker a deal with a country that has violated virtually all agreements it has ever signed, attacked a sovereign neighbour without justification, and has not at all tempered its initial demands from 2021 – despite the fact that its “special military operation” has yet to call itself a success. However, the pressure put on Russia is likewise ineffective at producing the kind of success that Europe wishes to see.

This is a direct consequence of the failure of European leaders to **articulate a concrete and unified vision for a stable security order on the continent – and for Ukraine's role within it**. In the absence of such clarity, Europe will

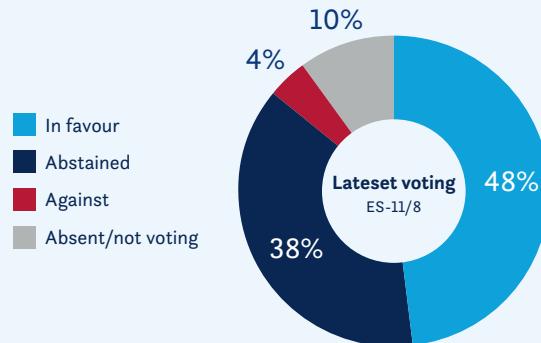
remain in a strategic vacuum, and any truce reached would be fragile and vulnerable to renewed aggression.

This disjointed posture has eroded Europe's credibility not only in Washington, but globally as well. In the UN, voting patterns are shifting. A growing number of countries in the Global South abstain or vote against clear resolutions condemning Russian aggression. While much of this trend could be dismissed as merely the result of Russian propaganda and influence-peddling, it is also a reflection of Europe's failure to clearly and coherently articulate its endgame for Ukraine – and to put their plans into motion. The contrast is stark: in many parts of the world, Russia is no longer perceived to be the aggressor; meanwhile, Europe is branded a warmonger for blocking attempts at peace without presenting viable alternatives. Russia's narrative of “legitimate security concerns” is hardly persuasive, but it gains traction nonetheless because **Europe fails to present a unified counter-narrative**.

UN General Assembly
Votes on Russia's
Invasion of Ukraine



Source: UN²⁷



Europe's Global Ambitions

A Europe that cannot respond to a major war on its own doorstep exposes itself as indecisive and weak, thus instantly undermining its credibility in the eyes of partners, adversaries, and even amongst its own citizens. The foundations of a more balanced transatlantic relationship are being laid; but **if Europe is to be taken seriously, it must first take itself seriously**. That means **defining the future of Ukraine proactively rather than reactively**, with resounding strategic clarity – and the political will to act. Europe has grown over-reliant on the carrot, and must now demonstrate its willingness to use the stick.

Europe's global ambitions – namely, de-risking of its economies, and pioneering climate diplomacy – will never bear fruit if it does not resolve the conflict that most directly threatens its own security architecture. **Without a unified**

and actionable vision for Ukraine, Europe risks losing its broader strategic relevance in both its own neighbourhood and on the global stage, as well as its influence abroad. Allied countries, on the other hand, would cease to regard Europe as a reliable partner, and gradually scale down strategic consultations, intelligence sharing, and mutual investments. Conversely, a Ukrainian victory that translates into a secure, integrated, and **sovereign Ukrainian state within Europe, would serve as a warning to all those who would brazenly break international law in pursuit of geopolitical ambitions**. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will not be ambiguous: **sooner or later, there will be a winner**. As such, Europe needs to ask itself whether it intends to be on the winning side – and act accordingly – or whether it prefers to be left behind, struggling to manage the consequences of its own indecision.

Government Support to Ukraine, by Quarter Billion Euro



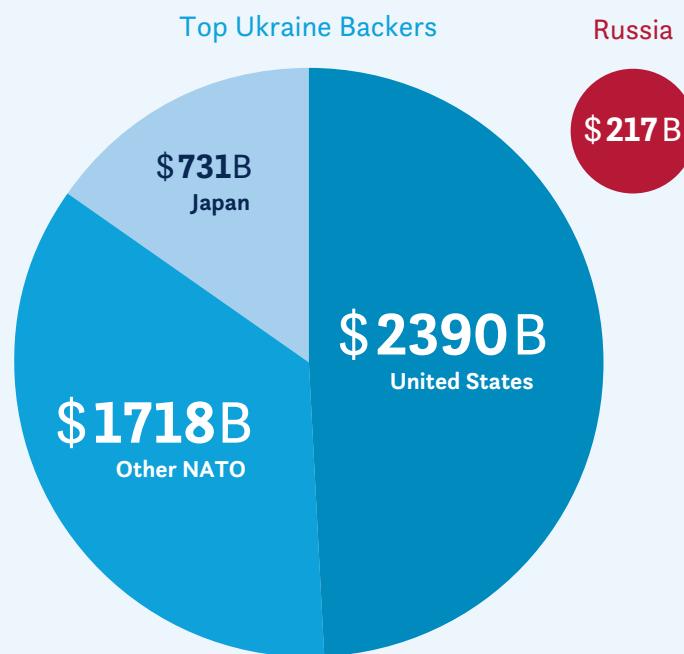
Source: The Kiel Institute for the World Economy²⁸

There is also a generational dimension to consider. Ukraine's fate will shape how young Europeans perceive the meaning of European unity, values, and strength. If this generation watches Europe fail to defend a democratic neighbour despite enormous rhetorical commitment, it will erode trust in EU institutions, in transatlantic security, and in the very project of collective European responsibility. Conversely, success in Ukraine could revive confidence in the European idea. **The failure to act on the eve of war – to hesitate, in the face of an emboldened evil – is a crucial historical mistake that future generations of Europeans will never forgive.** As Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was judged for failing to stop the march towards another devastating war on the continent, so too will Europe be judged today: for failing to safeguard its global relevance, for failing to ensure peace by helping Ukraine win the war, and for failing to dissuade adversaries from the belief that making war against Europe was still possible. The stakes go beyond the battlefield. The credibility of Europe's normative power, its claim to be a world leader on democracy, human rights, and international law all hinge on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. A Europe that allows a sovereign country to be carved up, frozen in a grey zone, or quietly sacrificed for "stability" will lose not just influence, but its moral standing in a world that was already in decline.

Finally, if Europe does not act decisively now, it will be forced to act later – and under far less favourable conditions. If successful, Russia will not stop in Ukraine. Kyiv's fall will require Europe to manage the uncertainty, and the risk, of a direct military conflict on EU soil against an empowered, emboldened, rebuilt, and vastly more experienced Russian armed forces. Within such a scenario, Europe will most likely face even greater challenges, compounded by economic distress, renewed migration pressure, fading unity, and market ruptures.

Manufacturing Output: Ukraine's Key Backers vs. Russia

Value added, 2020



Other NATO countries includes: Canada, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom

Source: csis²⁹

While Ukraine has struggled greatly in this conflict, to say it holds a weak hand is far from the truth. In reality, Ukrainians have demonstrated remarkable strength, resilience, and ingenuity – despite often ill-timed allied support. And yet, **even a strong hand can still lose if played without a clear strategy or unified support.** **Ukraine continues to face a real risk of defeat,** and Europe cannot afford the gamble. As the war enters its next decisive phase, the task before Europe and its allies is not simply to keep Ukrainians in the fight, but to ensure that they win it.

Actions Required to Attain the Goal

Acknowledge That Time Is Not an Ally

Europe must make key decisions about Ukraine **before** it is fully ready to do so – not after. Delay only renders future commitments more difficult to fulfil. Time alone has not weakened the Russian state's resolve to continue the war; on the contrary, it has allowed Russia to adapt to a full-fledged wartime economy. Indeed, time is only an enemy for Ukraine, as it works tirelessly around-the-clock to degrade Ukraine's strategic position, and drain its finite manpower and economic resources. **Delaying political and military commitments to Ukraine worsens its strategic position as time continues its unrelenting march, while Russia taps ever deeper into its superior resource reserves.**

Russia Struggles, but Adapts

Over the last three and a half years, Ukraine has suffered immense human and material losses. **A war of attrition naturally favors the side with greater manpower reserves, a deeper resources base, and fewer democratic constraints.** Despite failing its initial blitz

campaign, Russia has made great strides to transform its economy into a war machine that in many ways mimics the 20th century militarized Soviet empire. It has adapted to sanctions, shifted production priorities, and learned to mobilize under pressure – all while keeping a large part of its population politically disengaged, and muzzling key opposition members.

By contrast, Ukraine endures existential pressure on a daily basis. The current reality is bleak, and the facts don't lie: its economy runs on external assistance, and the civilian population is continuously shrinking. Meanwhile, its soldiers fight in rotations between two fronts: Russians to the East, and exhaustion everywhere else. The nation itself fares no better, as its cities, energy infrastructure, and industrial base are threatened by constant bombardment. **While Ukrainian resilience has been nothing short of heroic, resilience alone is not a winning strategy;** it needs to be paired with action from those who claim to share its fate. Above all, this means Europe needs to step up to the plate.



Russia has a long and well-documented tradition of turning protracted and indecisive wars into eventual victories, often by freezing the frontlines or creating facts on the ground. **The illusion that time will eventually weaken Russia into submission ignores the historical record.** In 1812, it traded space for time to break Napoleon's army. During World War II, it absorbed unprecedented losses but rebuilt its military-industrial base east of the Urals, buying time with lives – and turning the tide with blood. After a series of conflicts in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine in 2014, the initial shock was followed by international condemnation, which quickly devolved into indifference before fizzling out of the public consciousness altogether, and now exists as a *fait accompli*.

Today, Russia continues to ramp up its attacks against Ukrainian infrastructure, depleting precious air defence munitions, and probing the West's limits. **Russia's diplomatic posture remains unchanged: maximalist, unrepentant, and emboldened by Western indecisiveness** The strategic patience on display stands in stark contrast to the war fatigue experienced by those Western societies where economic anxieties reign supreme. The strategic drift of the past must not be repeated; Europe has the power to draw a line in the sand, and the tools to ensure it is never crossed again.

Closing Window for European Decisiveness

European focus is shifting inwards in response to inflation, rising energy costs, and domestic political instability. Opportunistic leaders, sensing unaddressed social issues and rising emotions, scrutinize the cost of supporting Ukraine – and question its value. At the end of this decade, it is likely that extreme-right parties, which generally hold more favourable views towards Moscow, will gain influence within the government. Indeed, **segments of the population, desensitized to a war that no longer dominates headlines, are more susceptible to simplified narratives**; specifically ones that blur the line between aggressor and victim, and present peace at any cost as a viable option. This shift in mood is visible not only in UN voting trends – it is seeping into Western democracies as well. The longer Europe fails to define and defend its strategic endgame in Ukraine, the more space it leaves for Russian disinformation and geopolitical relativism to take root.

Sanctions against Russia are having an effect, but are not enough. The Russian economy is under increasing strain, its **accessible foreign currency reserves have been heavily depleted**, its growth projections are deteriorating, and systemic sectors like energy and aviation are increasingly dependent on shadow markets. **Sanctions alone cannot be expected to produce victory.** They must be intensified, coordinated, and linked to a broader political strategy that clearly dictates how Russia must behave before it can see relief, and what it stands to lose if it does not.

One of the key dangers now is complacency. The war has become a “new normal” for many in Europe. But normalization is a trap, and **it is precisely the space in which authoritarian regimes thrive: a fog of low expectations, lowered standards, and blurred timelines.** It leads to policy drift, and ends in strategic failure. If Europe cannot act now, it will soon find itself forced to – and from a weaker position.

Russia's Industrial Production Index (as a % of Jan 2022)



Ensure Sustainability of the Ukrainian War Effort

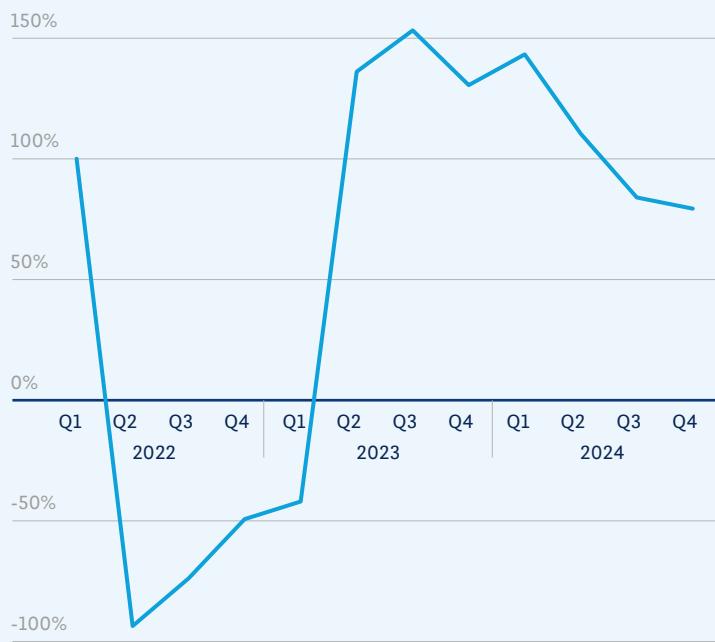
Seize Russia's Frozen State Assets for Ukraine

After more than three years of war, the case for seizing Russian state assets is more than just a legal or financial question, but a strategic imperative. Over \$300 billion in Russian central bank reserves remain immobilized in Western jurisdictions. **These funds could, and should, be redirected in support of Ukraine's defence and long-term reconstruction.** Keeping these assets frozen without consequence is a signal of weakness, not of wariness. Using them decisively would turn a symbol of Russian aggression into a tool of European resolve.

The arguments against seizure often rest on fears of legal uncertainty or market instability. But these fears are overstated, and increasingly out of sync with today's strategic environment. The legal pathways exist, including under doctrines of countermeasures in international law, which allow for non-forcible responses to breaches of international obligations. Precedents include post-World War II reparations and the use of Iraqi funds following the First Gulf War. The European legal conversation is no longer about "if," but about "how." Delay only weakens the credibility of the sanctions regime.

Moreover, the assertion that the seizure of these assets would undermine investor confidence misinterprets the nature of modern political risk. **Markets do not reward weakness; they reward predictability and direction.** Being overly cautious about legal details makes little sense and weakens Europe's position while it faces aggression from a country that continuously disregards international law. Using frozen Russian funds transparently, through EU- or G7-sanctioned mechanisms tied to legally defined ends such as Ukraine's reconstruction, **would reinforce, rather than erode, rule-of-law credibility.** It would send a clear message that international norms matter and that violators face structural consequences.

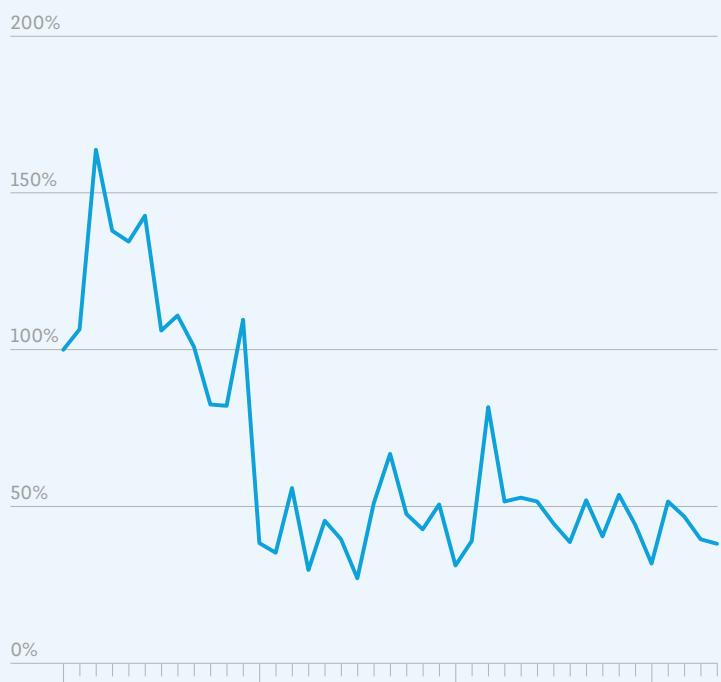
Russia's Quarterly GDP Growth (YoY, as a % of Q1 2022)



Crucially, this action would have global ripple effects that could produce positive outcomes for Europe in the diplomatic sphere. It would send a message not only to Moscow, but to Beijing, Tehran, and others who are watching closely. It would demonstrate that economic tools are useful for both deterrence and enforcement. **Economic warfare is a tool; and like all tools, if it is never used, it does not exist – and adversaries have no reason to fear it.** Seizing assets now would familiarize Europe's adversaries with fear again, and send a clear signal that Europe is willing to bear economic risk in the service of justice and strategic gain. To show such courage is increasingly rare and therefore valuable, especially when concepts such as de-risking and European hard power are discussed.

Seizing these assets would also allow Europe to shift the public narrative. Rather than asking taxpayers to indefinitely underwrite support for Ukraine, leaders could campaign on the message that Russian money ought to be used to pay for the consequences of Russian war crimes. Such a policy stance would be economically sound and politically popular at the same time – a textbook win-win.

Russia's Balance of Trade (as a % of Jan 2022)



Source TRADING ECONOMICS³³

Accelerate the Sanctions Regime

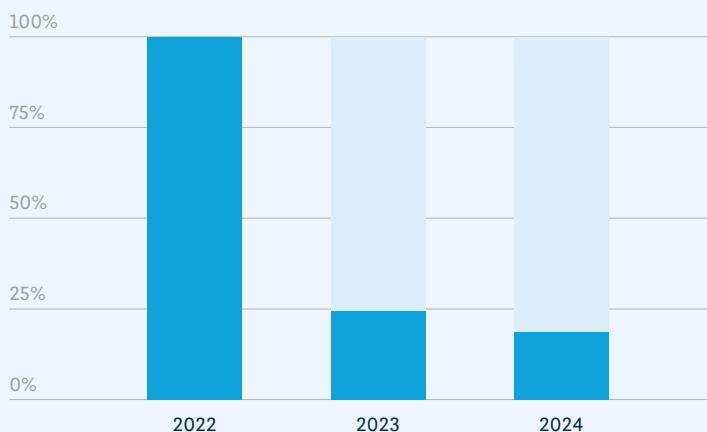
Europe's sanctions regime against Russia has been one of the most comprehensive in modern history. It has been steadily damaging the Russian economy, exhausting its reserves, and pushing it toward deeper structural troubles, as evidenced by reports from Kremlin officials.³⁴ However, in the midst of a war of attrition, comprehensiveness is not the same as effectiveness. **The sanctions architecture is not failing, but it is lagging.** Enforcement is uneven, and loopholes tenaciously persist. What is worse, the political appetite for tightening the pressure has weakened in many capitals.

Yet it is equally important to recognize why sanctions have not had the decisive impact many expected. By historical record, they rarely succeed in the short term; authoritarian regimes can absorb pain and shift costs onto their populations while pursuing their strategic ambitions.³⁵ In Russia's case, oil and gas revenues have been rerouted through alternative markets, most notably India and China, which have increased imports of Russian crude, often refining and re-exporting it back to Europe

through indirect channels.³⁶ Moscow has also relied on parallel trade networks across Central Asia, Turkey, and the Gulf, diluting the intended effect of Western restrictions. The EU has so far failed to close these loopholes, largely because introducing **secondary sanctions** – measures that would target third countries or companies enabling circumvention – would inevitably affect some of Europe's largest trading partners and domestic industries. This reluctance has left Moscow with lifelines that have softened the blow and prolonged its capacity to finance aggression.

Hence, sanctions enforcement must be stepped up dramatically. Russian companies and oligarchs have learned to filter through the gaps in the system by rerouting trade through third countries, using shadow fleets, and masking ownership through proxies. The EU must expand secondary sanctions and target enablers, particularly in Central Asia, Turkey, India, China and parts of the Gulf. **Above all, increased pressure must be applied on EU-based firms suspected of sanctions evasion.** A loophole in one member state undermines the credibility of the entire regime.

EU Imports from Russia (as a % of 2022 Levels)



Source: TRADING ECONOMICS³⁷

Secondly, the EU must act independently of the United States where necessary. Coordination with Washington remains important, but European sanctions policy cannot be a hostage to political gridlock in Congress, nor to shifting American priorities. Europe has its own tools, its own leverage, and its own reasons to act. **Europe must firmly resist any calls for lifting sanctions, or for partial normalization of relations with Russia before Ukraine's sovereignty and security are guaranteed above and beyond the standard set by the Budapest Memorandum of 1994.** Any sign of wavering sends dangerous signals not only to Moscow, but also to Washington, thus making continued U.S. support more difficult to justify to American voters.

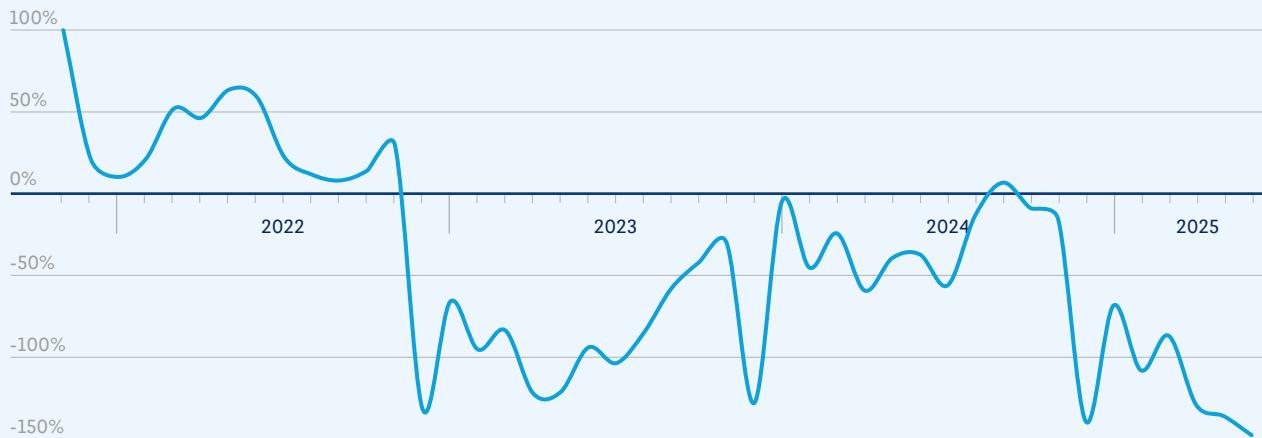
In parallel, sanctions must become more dynamic. Packages that merely react to battlefield developments are insufficient, they must instead proactively shape Russia's strategic calculus. For example, the deployment of foreign fighters from North Korea, or the escalation of attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure, should automatically trigger a predefined tightening of

sanctions. **Conditionality must become built-in, not improvised.**

Furthermore, sanctions should be linked more directly to the narrative of justice. The public discourse around sanctions is often couched in technical language such as tariffs, SWIFT access, and trade flows. But the moral clarity must not be lost amongst the jargon. **Sanctions are not just economic tools, they are a response to mass violence, war crimes, and the illegal use of force.** Europe must do everything it can to frame sanctions in human terms, especially as public support erodes under the weight of economic fatigue.

Lastly, sanctions must be structured for endurance. Russia's economy has adapted to survive, but not thrive. As such, it will continue to find ways to endure as long as the West's pressure remains static. **Sanctions policy must evolve into a long-term containment strategy**, with built-in review cycles, tightening clauses, and integrated coordination with defence and foreign policy measures.

Russia's Government Budget (as a % of Nov 2021 Budget)



Reward and Harness the Power of Ukrainian Experience

As NATO scales up its ambition, which includes a return to larger land formations and higher readiness levels, many member states are confronting the same question: where will the personnel come from? Military planners have rightly concluded that larger land forces are essential to deterrence. While funding remains an omnipresent challenge, meeting the required targets requires societal resolve as well. With **demographic constraints, labour shortages across key sectors, and a low baseline willingness to serve, generating the manpower needed will be a strategic challenge** in its own right.

It is in this arena that Ukraine's experience becomes both relevant and indispensable. First, Europe cannot ignore the political and symbolic impact that the post-war treatment of Ukrainian veterans will have across the continent. If

societies observe that those who fought in Europe's most brutal war in generations are neglected or sidelined, public appetite to serve – or to support higher defence spending – might significantly decline. Second, Ukraine brings a pool of experienced, highly trained individuals with firsthand knowledge of engaging with Russian forces in modern war conditions. Such knowledge is a strategic asset that should be leveraged.

At the moment of a ceasefire, Ukraine's economy will not be able to fully reintegrate the manpower returning from the front. Some veterans will launch businesses or find a place in the private sector, but most will need structured pathways to gainful employment. Europe must see this as an opportunity, and not a burden, as it serves a direct security interest. **Frontline countries, in particular, would benefit from integrating Ukrainian combat experience into their own training cycles, defence planning, and force development.**



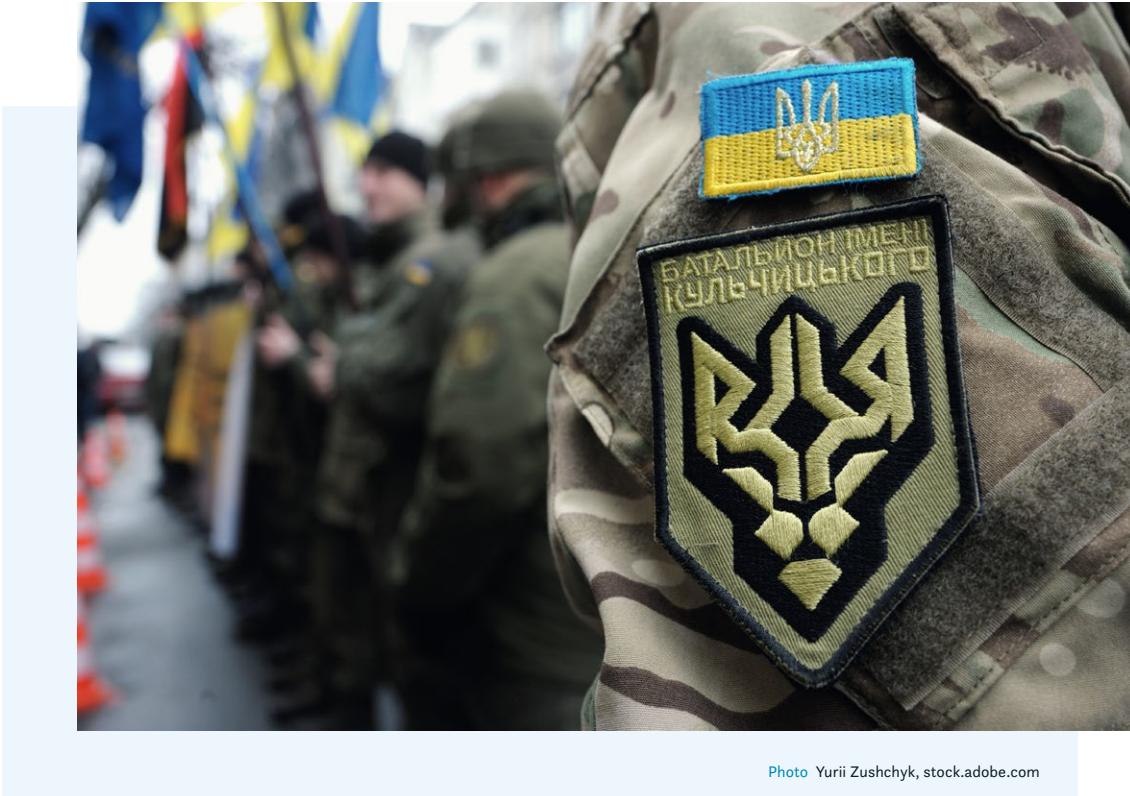


Photo Yurii Zushchyk, stock.adobe.com

Ukraine's veterans will bring operational insight on drone warfare, electronic disruption, decentralized command, and the kinds of attritional tactics Europe is now trying to prepare for.

Treating Ukraine's fighters with dignity and providing them with a new sense of purpose when they return from war is more than a moral obligation, it is a key strategic differentiator. Russia will face the same reintegration challenge, but it is far less likely to manage it constructively. If such an undertaking were to be managed poorly, there is an undue risk of creating social unrest and fomenting disenchantment with the system; if managed well, veterans could become a pillar of Europe's collective resilience and deterrence strategy.

But the contribution does not stop with people. **Ukraine has also become a live laboratory for defence innovation.** From loitering munitions and mobile repair systems to agile manufacturing and battlefield-ready software, Ukraine is already producing what many European systems are still struggling to adapt to. That innovation should be scaled, not sidelined. Europe needs to treat Ukraine not just as a recipient of security, but as a co-creator of it. Closer industrial integration that will include joint ventures, shared R&D, and cross-border production should be a strategic priority. The Danish model of early investment in Ukrainian defence production provides a strong starting point. A forward-looking European defence industry will not be complete without Ukraine at its core.

Define and Use European Soft (and Hard) Power

Make Enlargement a Geopolitical Tool

Europe must articulate a **clear long-term end-game for Ukraine's security architecture**, explicitly defining Ukraine's path toward EU and then eventually NATO membership. **The EU cannot make claims of geopolitical awakening while relying on enlargement frameworks designed for peacetime.** The Copenhagen criteria, while foundational, were never designed for countries fighting existential wars under continuous attack. A reformed enlargement policy must reflect current realities, starting with Ukraine but also extending to Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkans. The EU must recognize that enlargement is about both internal convergence, and external defence.

Crucially, the EU's offer is more than an economic one. To Russia, the EU has always represented a direct threat – not because it promises tanks, but because it promises an alternative vision for society. **The normative challenge posed by European integration is systemic, and the Kremlin treats it accordingly.** Even if Russia's current territorial ambitions were frozen, the mere presence of a European path for Eastern Europe and the Balkans would be seen in Moscow as an intolerable intrusion. That is why the EU's **eastern policy** cannot be limited to enlargement as a bureaucratic process; it **must also be rooted in strategic clarity and deterrence.**

Enlargement must be reframed as a declaration that joining the EU means aligning with its foreign and security policy. This also means Brussels must acknowledge the strategic costs of admitting countries on the front lines. The EU's "absorption capacity" cannot only be measured by economic or administrative readiness, it must also include the willingness to share security responsibility. **Ukraine's membership would not dilute the EU; it would test whether the**

Union is willing to become what it claims to be – a geopolitical actor.

Historical precedent for potential obstacles already exists. When Cyprus joined in 2004, it did so despite territorial disputes and partial lack of control over its own territory. **Ukraine and Moldova must not be penalized for conditions created by a foreign occupier.** A rigid interpretation of full territorial integrity before accession would reward Moscow's aggression and reinforce a dangerous precedent. Borders may remain contested de facto, but Europe must not allow that to block de jure political alignment. The EU must present a visible, irreversible roadmap. That includes defined institutional benchmarks, legal guarantees, and financial backing. The process must become measurable and political, not abstract or symbolic. Enlargement credibility is at stake not just in Kyiv, but in Brussels and Berlin as well.

Internally, the EU must also confront its structural deficiencies. **Veto power over foreign policy and enlargement must not allow a handful of states to hold Europe hostage.** Mechanisms such as conditionality tied to the EU budget, creative legal tools like enhanced cooperation, and activation of passerelle clauses must be placed on the table and used if needed. Strategic clarity must not be derailed by tactical opportunism of individual member states

Finally, enlargement is no longer just about the process as it is a posture. It affirms that Europe expands rather than retreats when it is under threat. It reinforces the principle of the inviolability of borders even if political settlements temporarily freeze the conflict. It ensures that any negotiations with Russia do not fracture transatlantic solidarity. And it keeps the door closed to premature disarmament or forced neutrality for Central and Eastern Europe.

Replace the U.S. as Russia's Strategic Nemesis

For years, Russia's ultimate red line was Ukraine's NATO membership, yet despite promises of an "irreversible bridge" to the alliance, Kyiv's accession now seems distant. Moscow's invasion, however, has backfired: it pushed Finland and Sweden into NATO, thus extending the Alliance's border by over 1,000 km, and shifting pressure onto the EU to accelerate enlargement and arm Ukraine. European powers, despite slow decision-making, have begun to close the gap left by a more hesitant United States. This is a shift that the Kremlin has noticed. Having caused the West to quietly shelve NATO membership for Ukraine without concessions, **Moscow now brands the EU as "no less of a threat" than NATO**, signalling that Brussels has become its new strategic nemesis.³⁹

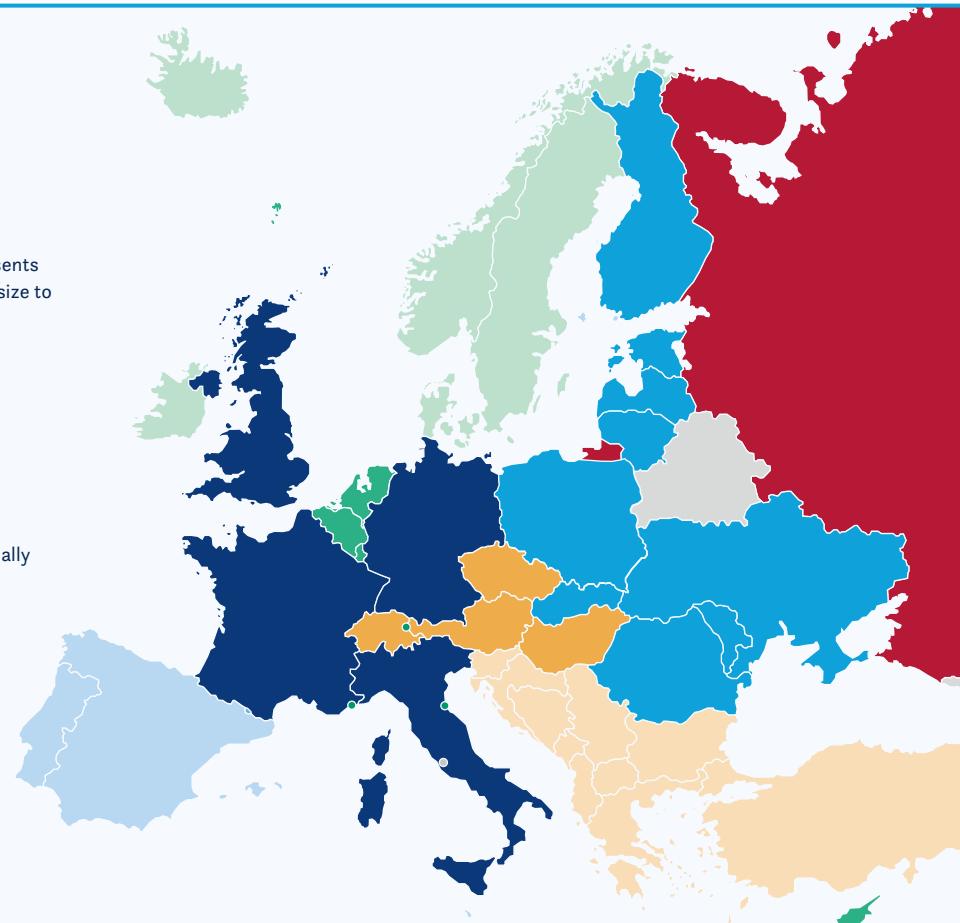
This change unnerves Russia because a stronger, more self-reliant Europe also strengthens the transatlantic alliance – something Washington, including President Trump, has welcomed. The NATO summit in The Hague showed Europe addressing decades of underinvestment in defence, winning rare bipartisan approval in the U.S. and frustrating Kremlin hopes for a transatlantic split. **The war was never truly about NATO troops on Russia's borders, but about Moscow's ambition to dominate Europe's political order.** By arming Ukraine, expanding eastward, and standing firm, the EU is emerging as the main obstacle to that ambition, proving that unity and resolve are exactly what Russia fears most. The EU must also develop a long-term Russia strategy beyond the war that avoids a return to the naïve cooperation of the pre-2022 era.

Russia vs European Nominal GDP 2025

Each colored group of countries represents a combined economy roughly equal in size to Russia's (\$2.2 trillion).



Countries marked in navy blue individually have a GDP greater than Russia's.



Find and Implement Bridge Solutions to Help the Ukrainian War Effort

Europe cannot afford to wait for permission, a ceasefire, or political consensus before it acts. If the situation in Ukraine deteriorates, it must be **ready to deploy rapid reaction forces** as a pre-planned and credible option rather than as a last resort. Waiting for formalities while Russia escalates would hand over the initiative to Moscow and allow it to dictate the tempo of the war. Europe must either be prepared to use its power or start preparing now, because hesitation in the face of an emboldened Kremlin is the surest path to defeat.

As Russia is pushed into a tighter strategic corner, its behaviour will grow more reckless. This is not a moment to retreat but to endure, deny Russia any strategic gains, and force it to turn

inward. That requires **contingency plans ready for scenarios ranging from intensified strikes on civilian infrastructure** to sabotage inside EU territory. Conversely, a fragmented or hesitant response would give Moscow the breathing room it desperately needs. Unity and readiness are the best deterrence.

Part of that readiness is better, faster, and more reliable communication with Ukraine in both political and operational spheres. Europe should consider establishing an **air corridor to Lviv**, stationing air defence systems to protect specific western cities, and **enforcing no-fly zones** over gradually expanding limited areas far from the current front lines. These measures would give Ukrainian civilians real shelter at home, reducing the risk of another wave of refugees into the EU.



Roadmap for Attaining the Goal

| SHORT TERM | MEDIUM TERM | LONG TERM |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seize Russian assets. • Harden sanctions. • Publish wartime EU accession roadmap with benchmarks and guarantees, decoupled from territorial control. • Reframe war narrative from burden-sharing to justice. • Launch engagement plan for Ukrainian veterans. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalize European leadership with EU–NATO coordination nodes for Ukraine and EU-led logistics/mission support. • Use enlargement as a geopolitical tool, linking defence readiness and security alignment to accession. • Codify economic warfare in EU CFSP; create a permanent hybrid sanctions coordination unit. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anchor Ukraine in Europe and complete Ukraine's EU accession by 2030, launch NATO roadmap. • Develop a long-term Russia strategy: economic containment, disinformation deterrence, no return to pre-2022 normalcy. • From the outset of the accession process, candidate countries should be included in EU defence coordination, civil protection, and industrial planning, with the aim of building greater coherence across the Union. |

OBSTACLES AND LIMITATIONS

Russia openly considers the EU as its primary strategic adversary. This is both a sign of Europe's growing impact and a guarantee that Moscow will target EU enlargement, reconstruction, and integration efforts with sabotage, disinformation, cyberattacks, and military pressure. At the same time, it will continue its efforts to weaken Europe's diplomatic posture by driving wedges between member states through its enduring divide-and-conquer tactics. **Europeans must be prepared to withstand and respond to any escalation this strategy may provoke.**

Lack of unity and political instability within Europe, compounded by the abuse of veto power by certain member states, enabling a small minority to block collective action on sanctions, enlargement, and security measures.

Risk of sudden conflicts in other parts of the world, especially in the Middle East or Indo-Pacific, creating global distraction and tempting Russia to escalate sooner than expected, while Western resources and attention are diverted.

Reluctance to use economic warfare tools such as tougher sanctions, taxation of hostile-state-linked companies, or restricting market access due to fear of economic costs, legal disputes, or political backlash.

Designing for Disruption: Resilience First in Europe's Energy Strategy

Context

Europe has spent years treating energy policy as a technical exercise – one driven by climate targets, price signals, and regulatory fine-tuning. Underpinning those efforts lies a quiet truth: energy is all about security. The transition to cleaner systems is often framed as an environmental necessity or industrial opportunity. However, it is rarely seen for what it is becoming: a struggle to protect the foundations of sovereignty in a world shaped by conflict, coercion, and competition.

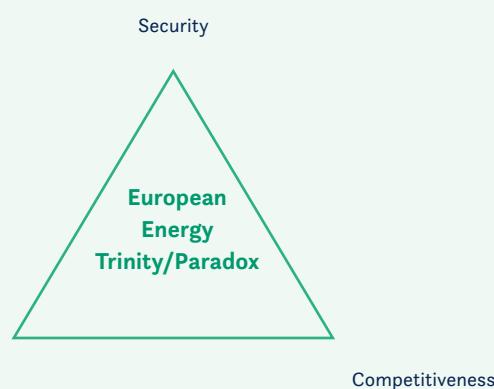
This is the real context for Europe's energy choices today. Since the war in Ukraine began, it has become clear that control over energy infrastructure, supply chains, and system stability is no longer just an economic matter but a strategic imperative. If a nation's energy system can be disrupted, so too can its politics, its economy, and its freedom of action. The European Union did not plan its energy future with this in mind. Now, it has no choice.

This is much more than a technical problem. **Europe today faces an energy paradox: it must become more secure, more competitive, and more sustainable – all at the same time.** However, each goal affects the others, and attaining each requires different tools, timelines, and trade-offs. What is more, the system is being rebuilt while under pressure from rising threats and deepening fragmentation. This is policy challenge and a strategic test rolled into one.

Rising to this challenge requires a return to **first principles thinking**. This means setting aside assumptions and starting from the core question: what must an energy system do in order to keep a society functioning when it is under pressure? It is about defining the essential requirements for security and adaptability, then building solutions that meet them directly, not just by habit or convention.

From that foundation, several core principles emerge that should guide how Europe thinks about energy under pressure:

The Energy Trilemma



Core Energy Principles



Resilience must be treated as a deliberate objective

It does not emerge automatically from efficiency or innovation. It must be designed, funded, and maintained



No energy technology is neutral

Every choice embeds political alignments, supply dependencies, and security risks



Time is a strategic variable

A system that performs well on paper in 2050 but remains vulnerable in 2025 is a liability



Geography matters

An EU-wide solution that works in the Benelux but fails in the Baltics or Balkans is not a solution at all

Put simply, resilience is the product of system integrity, threat variability, and adaptability. At its core, **resilience is the product of security and time**. A resilient energy system must not only absorb market shocks and withstand sabotage, cyberattacks, climate extremes, or geopolitical coercion, but must do so reliably

over time. That means designing both physical and institutional capacity to absorb pressure without collapse. It also means recognising that true resilience cannot be achieved by one nation alone. In Europe's case, it depends on coordination between countries which often disagree on core principles.

Problem

As the EU is on a path to decarbonise, it has to answer the fundamental question of how to deliver on this objective without compromising its sovereignty. A solar farm reliant on Chinese imports, an LNG terminal vulnerable to sabotage, or a data centre that strains the local grid may look like progress – but they are not signs of resilience unless embedded in a secure, adaptable system.

The EU has thus far been preoccupied with delivering on the market reform of the energy system, without paying equal attention to protecting the vital assets of the system. Sabotage, cyberattacks, climate shocks, and supply chain disruptions have revealed how vulnerable even the most technically advanced systems can be. As such, the EU must retrofit its critical energy infrastructure to enable better monitoring, control and deterrence. First and foremost, however, EU countries need to change the way they think about energy governance, investment planning and foresight.

Furthermore, Europe must take steps to strategically align its energy policy with its industrial

and security policies. So far, the EU seeks to gain access to critical raw minerals to boost its cleantech sector by signing trade agreements with third countries. However, this will not make the EU more autonomous or independent. Instead, it will only shift strategic dependencies and vulnerabilities from energy-related issues to questions regarding access to critical raw materials and manufacturing capabilities. The ability to manufacture strategic technologies, secure critical materials, and maintain industrial competitiveness depends on energy systems that are affordable, reliable, and sovereign. Yet many of Europe's industrial plans remain energy-blind, just as many of its energy targets are industry-blind.

In energy policy, Europe cannot afford to confuse motion with direction

The EU can not ignore the need for energy and industrial policies alignment. Without affordable, predictable, and clean energy, the EU cannot realise the ambitions of reigniting its industrial potential. It must ensure that its energy transition is affordable enough to anchor strategic industry. It must guarantee that industrial policy does not increase exposure to insecure supply chains or to foreign coercion. And it must ensure that security priorities are fully integrated into how both energy and industry initiatives are conceptualized.

In energy policy, Europe cannot afford to confuse motion with direction. Its adversaries are not waiting for 2050. Strategic energy planning must begin with today's risks, today's infrastructure, and today's constraints. The transition is no longer a matter of policy optimization, it is a matter of survival. Energy strategy thus becomes synonymous with grand strategy. If Europe fails to treat it as such, the costs will not be theoretical – they will be political, economic, and irreversible.



Actions required to attain the goals

Resilience at the Core

Hardening Europe's Energy and Industrial Backbone

European energy systems are under pressure from all sides. Price volatility, foreign dependencies, physical sabotage, and rising cyber threats all expose the fragility of its core infrastructure. At the same time, the EU is trying to lead a clean energy transition while maintaining strategic industries and defending its sovereignty. These goals do not automatically align.

Calls for better coordination or more investment are no longer enough. Europe needs a complete reset in how it designs, protects, and governs its energy system. **Resilience must become the principal objective – it cannot remain a secondary outcome.** Moreover, it must extend beyond the energy sector into industrial and strategic planning.

The EU cannot afford to treat energy, industry, and security as separate tracks. The ability to produce clean technologies, process critical raw materials, and keep advanced manufacturing operational depends on access to stable, affordable and protected energy systems.

Resilience must become the central tenet of, and the essential link between energy security, industrial strength, and Europe's freedom to act.



Design to Withstand

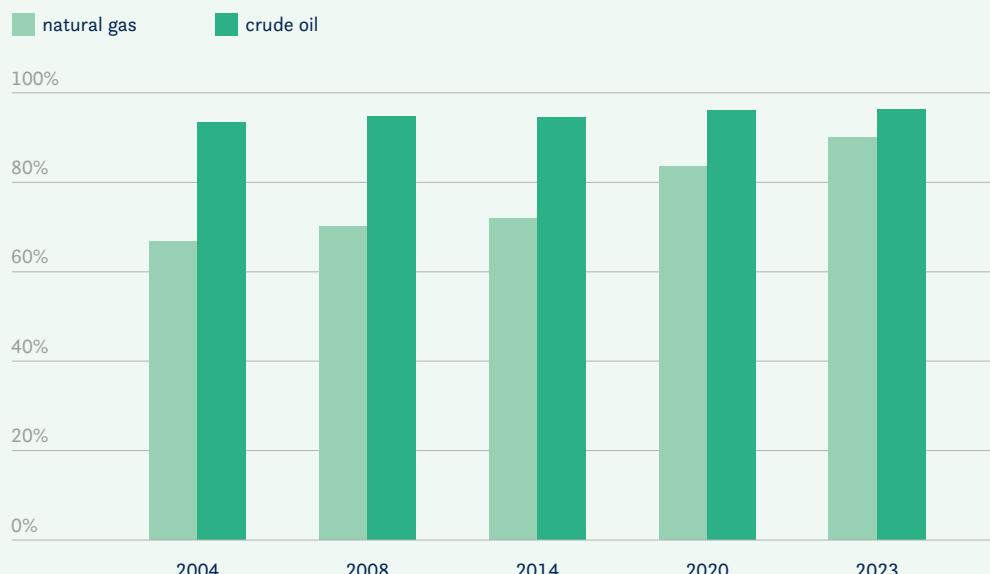
Why Energy Infrastructure Must Be Built for Pressure

Europe's energy system was never meant to withstand the kinds of threats it now faces. Pipelines, grids, LNG terminals, and data centers were built to optimize cost, efficiency, and integration. They were not designed to survive sabotage, state-sponsored cyberattacks, or systemic shocks. Yet these threats are now part of the daily operating environment for governments and companies across Europe. For example, the primary cause of the blackout in the Iberian Peninsula was – according to the Spanish government and the Spanish grid operator – the failure of conventional energy

transmitters to adequately control voltage.⁴¹ This was coupled with a failure of the telecommunication system.

The war in Ukraine serves as a wake-up call. The EU's energy model was already showing signs of structural vulnerability before even a single missile had struck a Ukrainian substation. Moreover, the Union remains heavily dependent on external supplies. It imports close to 90% percent of its oil and gas combined.⁴² It has limited domestic production of critical raw materials. And, in clean energy sectors, it relies on foreign manufacturing, particularly from China, for essential components like solar panels and batteries.

The share of natural gas and crude oil imports to the EU over the years



Source European Commission, Eurostat⁴⁵

This dependence on imports, combined with liberalized markets, has led to some of the highest industrial energy prices in the world. On average, EU energy prices are two and a half times higher per mwh than in the United States.⁴³ The comparison is similar with China. Higher prices are more than an economic concern, they are a deep strategic liability.

True resilience means building energy systems that are capable of absorbing shocks during times of crisis, whilst maintaining continuous functionality. This design philosophy must be extended to infrastructure, supply chains, market dynamics, and institutional responses as well. Europe must shift from a system designed for efficiency to one designed for endurance.

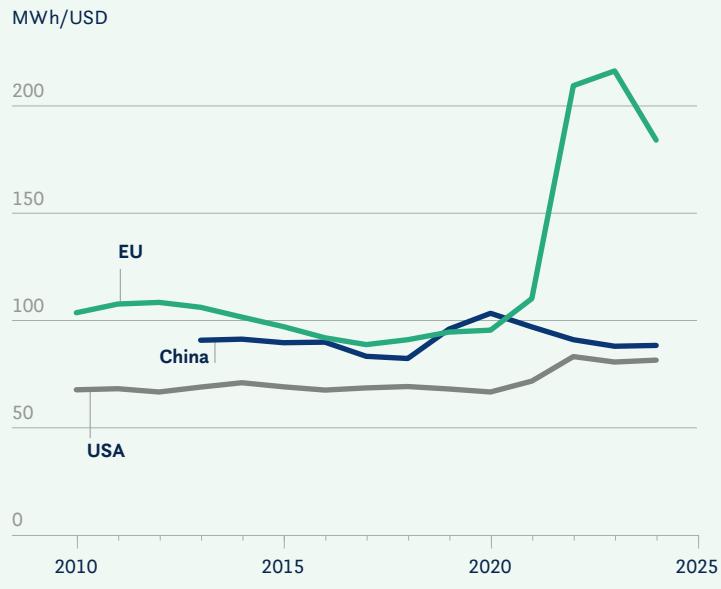
Integrate Redundancy

Europe's energy systems remain anchored in large-scale generation, and these assets will continue to play a central role. However, relying on them alone presents a soft target during a crisis. Decentralisation must therefore advance in parallel. New investments should strengthen modularity, geographic dispersion, and local fallback capacity. Technologies like distributed generation, microgrids, and flexible storage do not replace large units, but complement them by limiting the risks of single-point failure and enabling faster recovery. Redundancy should no longer be seen as inefficiency, but as vital protection against disruption.

Address the Vulnerabilities in the Baltic

EU states bordering the Baltic Sea account for around 40% of the EU's electricity generation and over 30% of its total GDP. The Baltic region, a frontline of energy transit and a trade gate for many EU states, must be treated as a strategic resilience zone. It hosts or will soon host key assets such as offshore wind, LNG terminals, nuclear projects, and undersea interconnectors. **These require stronger protection against both physical and cyber threats.** Smart cables with sensor capabilities should monitor underwater links, with similar surveillance systems deployed onshore. EU support must target these needs to close critical gaps.

A Comparison of Industrial Energy Prices in the EU, US and China



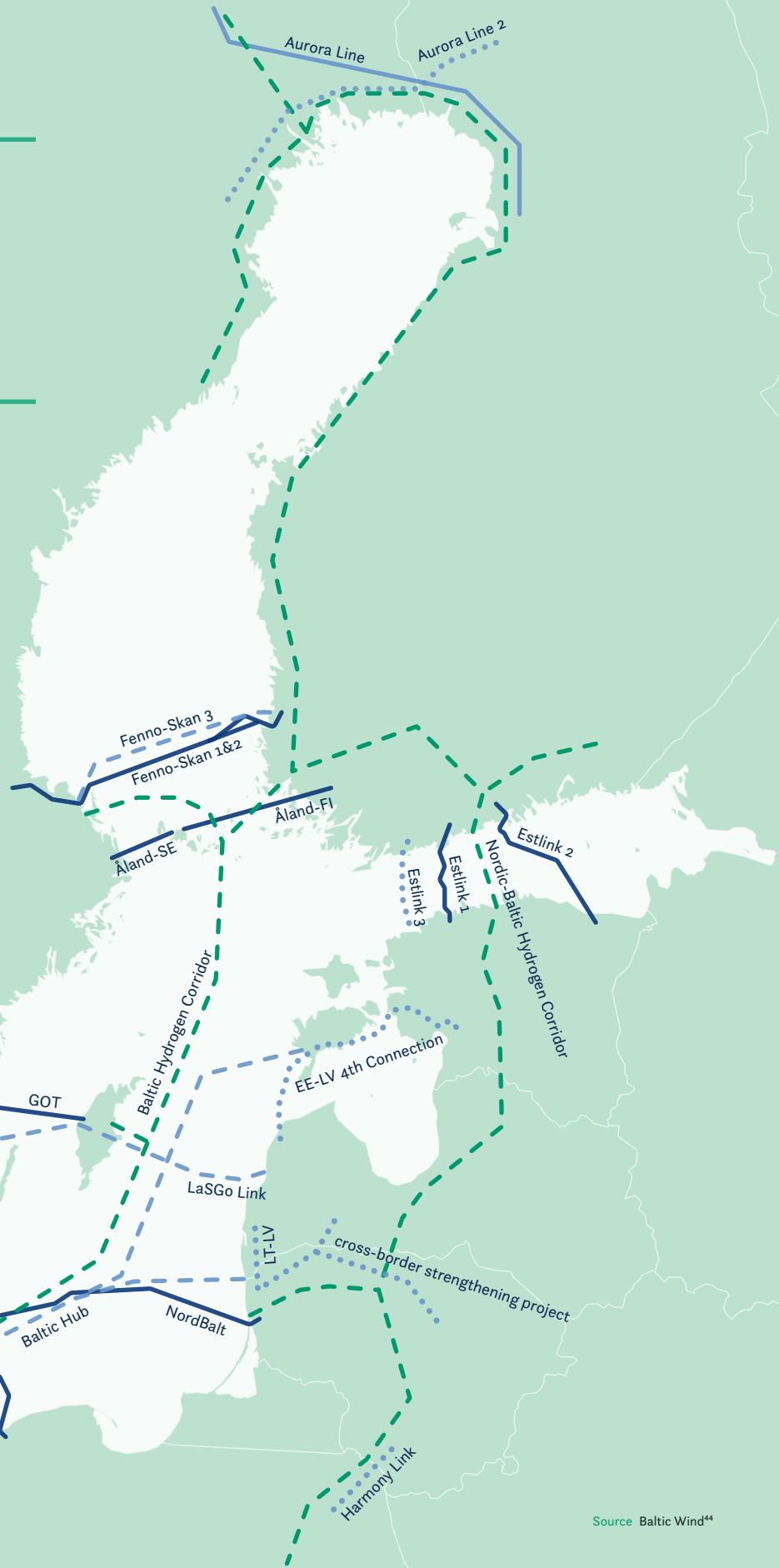
Grid Connections Around the Baltic Sea

Electricity

- existing
- under construction
- in planning phase
- under consideration

Hydrogen

- under consideration



Current and Planned Investments in Offshore Wind Farms, LNG Terminals and Nuclear Power Plants

Operating Planned

- ▲ LNG terminal
- Nuclear reactor
- ◆ Offshore wind farm

Sources: Global Energy Monitor⁴⁷

Mandate Full-System Stress Testing

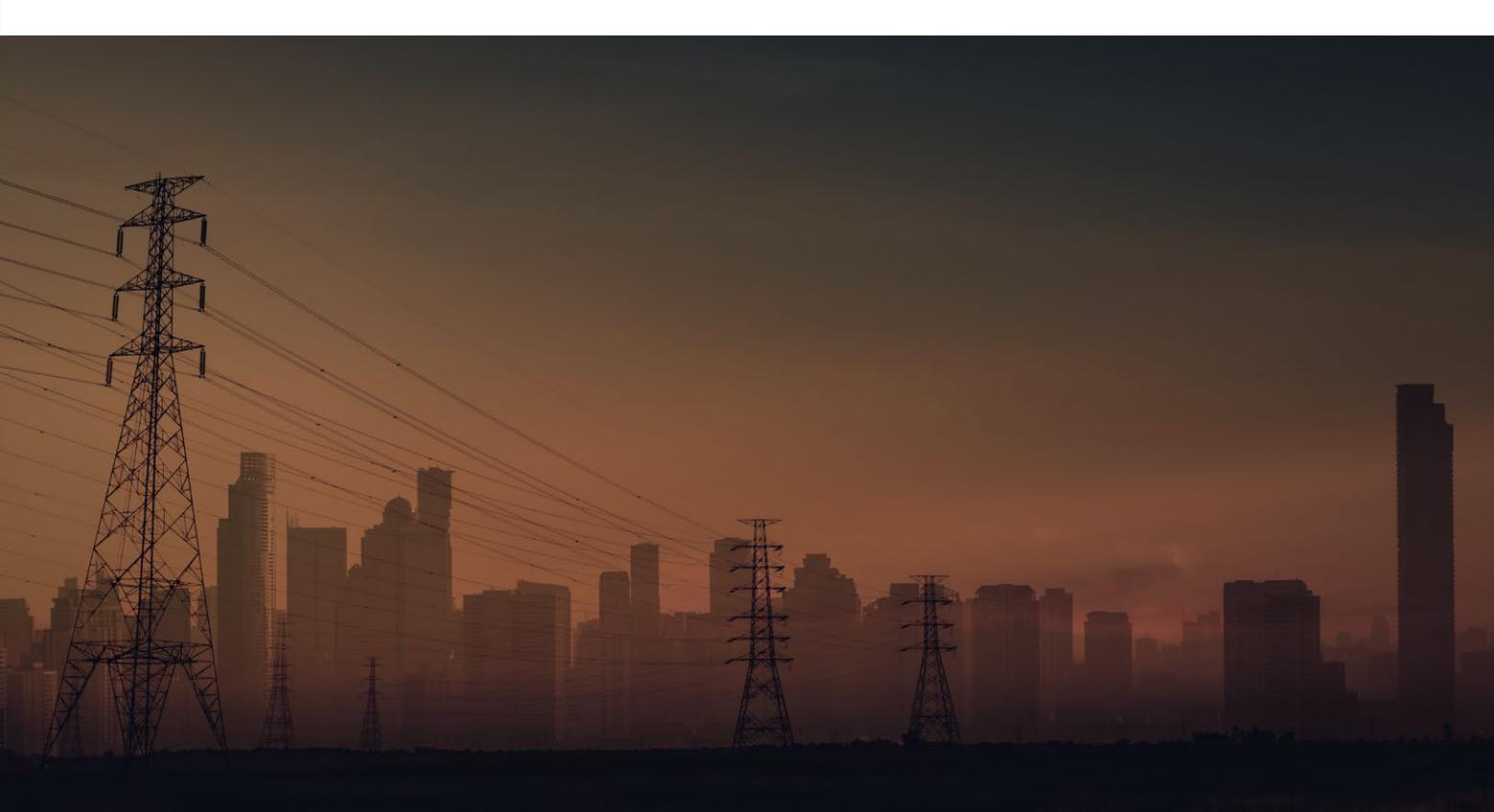
Europe has made progress on market integration and emissions reductions, but far less on system stress resilience. **Each Member State should be required to conduct scenario-based tests of its critical energy infrastructure.** These tests must go beyond modelling normal fluctuations, and simulate blackouts, cyber-physical attacks, and climate disasters as well. Results should feed into EU-wide coordination and investment priorities.

Shift Funding to Reward Resilience

Current EU investment frameworks – such as REPOWEEU, the Connecting Europe Facility, and the Modernisation Fund – remain overly focused on cost efficiency and emissions reductions. **Resilience must be elevated to a qualifying criterion.** Projects that improve redundancy, provide backup capacity, or strengthen regional buffers should receive higher scores in funding competitions. Public procurement rules should be revised to reward resilience-first planning.

Deploy Rapid Repair Capacity

In a crisis, speed is security. Europe lacks an integrated mechanism to repair energy infrastructure quickly after a blackout, disaster, or an act of sabotage. **A Rapid Response Mechanism should be established under the coordination of the European Commission and ACER.** This mechanism ought to include pooled spare parts, mobile repair teams, pre-authorised logistics channels, and pre-positioned technical reserves. These capacities must be ready to be activated within days, not weeks.



Align to Endure: How Industrial Competitiveness Depends on Resilient Energy

Europe's energy system does not exist in a vacuum; it powers everything from defense production to semiconductor fabs to AI data centers. Yet Europe continues to plan its industrial and energy futures on separate tracks.

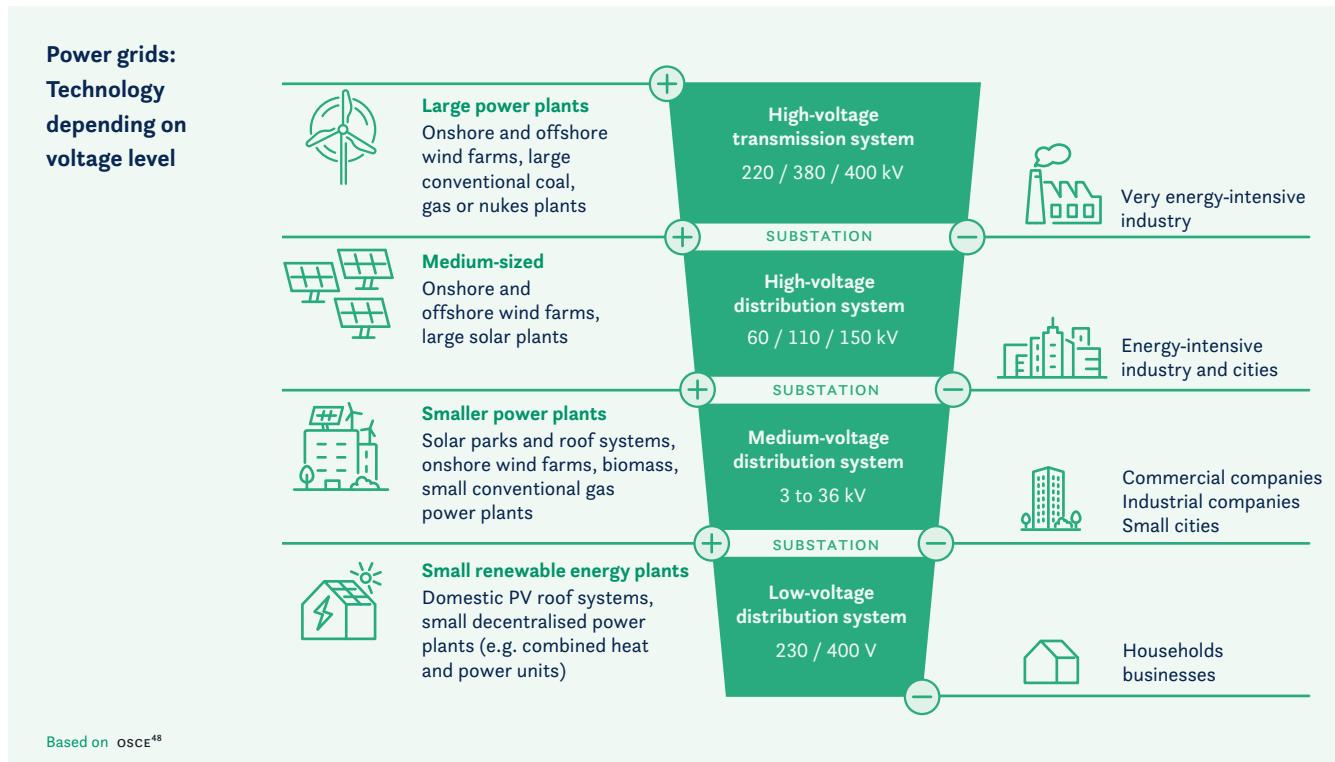
This is no longer tenable. Without secure, affordable, and predictable energy, Europe cannot lead in clean technology, cannot compete in digital infrastructure, and cannot maintain its defense industrial base. **The idea of growing European resilience and security becomes meaningless if factories cannot operate during an energy crunch or if critical sectors are the first to experience energy rationing when supply is constrained.**

The EU must move toward a system of deliberate, integrated alignment between energy and industry. That means co-designing infrastructure, funding mechanisms, and regulatory frameworks with shared strategic goals. Resilience is the common denominator that binds them.

Protect Critical Loads

Defense industry clusters, semiconductor plants, AI training facilities, and digital infrastructure hubs are not ordinary energy consumers – they are strategic assets. **National regulators and TSOs must classify these as protected loads with guaranteed minimum supply during energy stress events.** This includes integrating black start capability, priority dispatch, and exemption from rolling blackouts.





Map and Forecast Industrial Demand

Too many national energy and climate plans (NECPs) rely on outdated or generic assumptions about industrial demand. This results in grid bottlenecks, supply mismatches, and missed investment signals. **NECPs should include granular, forward-looking forecasts of energy demand by strategic sectors.** These forecasts must inform infrastructure upgrades, load balancing strategies, and public funding allocation.

Build Resilient Industrial Zones

Europe should designate and develop protected industrial energy enclaves. These zones must be equipped with on-site renewables, backup generators, autonomous energy management systems, and hardened grid connections. **They**

should be situated in close proximity to key strategic assets and developed in partnership with industrial and security stakeholders, particularly from Ukraine. Their function is to serve as secure production nodes in times of wider grid instability.

Apply Resilience Criteria to Industrial Support

The EU is investing billions into clean technology scale-up. But without energy resilience, these investments are fragile. **All strategic value chain support, including for batteries, solar, hydrogen, and advanced manufacturing, should require resilience criteria as a precondition for EU-funding.** These include supply continuity plans, secure grid integration, and fallback protocols. Resilience should be seen as a foundation of competitiveness.

Coordinate Energy and Security Planning

Institutional silos persist between DG ENER, DG GROW, DG DEFIS, and Member State counterparts. This undermines strategic coherence. **The European Commission should establish a permanent coordination unit that integrates energy planning with defense and industrial priorities, including the AI sector.** This unit should oversee joint

vulnerability assessments, scenario planning, and co-investment strategies for dual-use infrastructure. In this context, initiatives such as the European Nuclear Alliance, which brings together a group of EU member states to promote and defend nuclear energy as an essential component of both the European energy mix and the transition towards carbon neutrality, should be factored into broader energy-security planning.

Shared Objectives for Europe



Make Resilience the Priority

Elevate resilience to a core principle in all EU energy and industrial policy



Protect Strategic Infrastructure

Harden and decentralise key assets in vulnerable regions, especially in the Baltic area



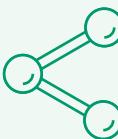
Secure Industrial Capacity

Guarantee stable and protected energy access for critical sectors like defence and digital



Lower Strategic Dependencies

Reduce external reliance on energy, components, and raw materials through diversified supply and substitutes where technologically feasible



Coordinate Policy Tracks

Bridge institutional silos by aligning energy, industrial, and security planning across the Europe, with the EU working closely with Ukraine



Plan for Real-World Threats

Test infrastructure, funding, and regulation against plausible disruption scenarios

Roadmap for Attaining the Goal

| | | 18 months | 36 months | |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| | | SHORT TERM | MEDIUM TERM | LONG TERM |
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require Member States to include resilience-focused annexes in NECPs, covering critical sectors and infrastructure stress scenarios Establish a joint EU task force on energy, industry, and security coordination to oversee cross-sector planning and implementation Amend REPOWEREU and Connecting Europe Facility funding rules to require resilience scoring for eligible projects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harmonise infrastructure resilience metrics across ENTSO-E, ACER, ENTSOG, and national regulators Develop a continent-wide emergency energy prioritization framework to shield critical sectors during crises Deploy modular backup generation and mobile storage units to reinforce vulnerable industrial and frontline areas Expand the EU's strategic stockpiles to include key energy infrastructure components and repair assets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a European Energy Resilience Authority to coordinate stress testing, infrastructure recovery, and funding oversight Complete a network of black start-capable grid segments covering all Member States and major industrial zones Institutionalise civil-military energy planning cycles at the EU level with participation from Member States and NATO liaison structures Integrate resilience planning into all revisions of the Electricity Regulation, TEN-E, and European Industrial Strategy documents |

OBSTACLES AND LIMITATIONS

Fragmented Governance Structures

Coordination between energy, defense, and industrial institutions remains limited at both EU and national levels. This slows decision-making and leads to disjointed infrastructure planning.

Inconsistent Threat Perception

Not all Member States share the same level of concern about infrastructure sabotage, cyber threats, or supply chain manipulation. This leads to uneven implementation of resilience measures.

Political and Budgetary Constraints

Resilience investments often lack political visibility and compete with other urgent priorities. Without strong mandates, they risk being deprioritised despite their strategic value.

Regulatory Lag

Existing EU regulation does not consistently reflect the need to embed resilience. Funding guidelines, project assessment tools, and grid codes must be modernised to reflect current risks.

Persistent Supply Chain Exposure

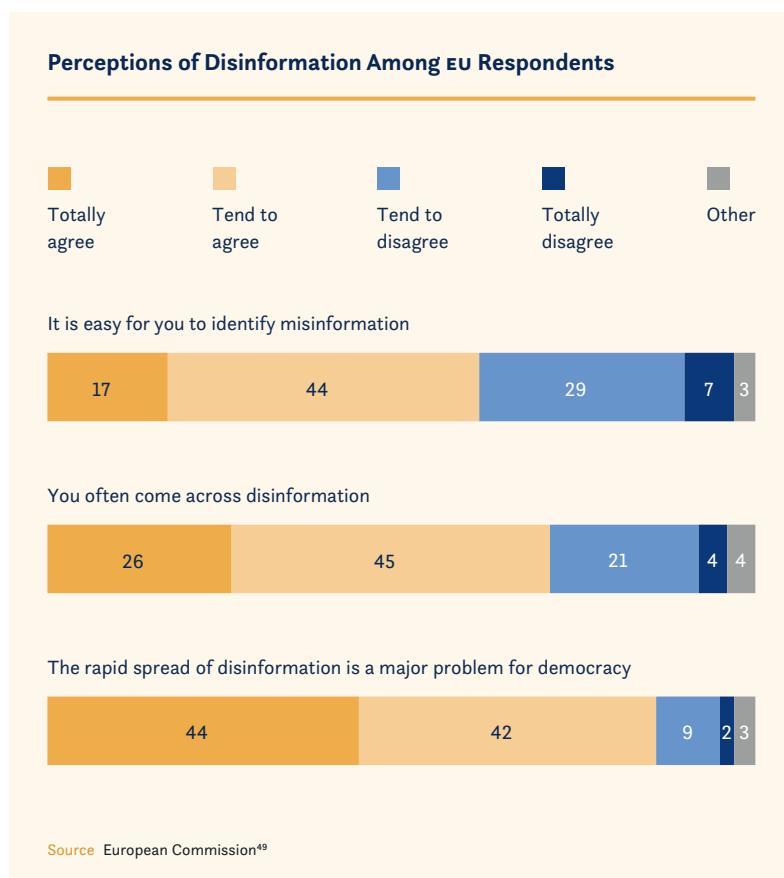
Europe remains vulnerable to external shocks due to high dependence on imported components, energy technologies, and raw materials. Without reshoring or diversification, old vulnerabilities will deepen and new ones will emerge.

DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE ADVOCACY CAUSE

The Information Front: Protecting Minds, Preserving Democracy

Context

Europe is already at war, and not just on the battlefield in Ukraine. The war of the 21st century takes a different form from those of the past, and it is fought on an entirely different field. This is a war of competing world-views, and it takes place in the cognitive, digital, and societal domains – areas which authoritarian regimes seek to undermine and exploit.



Hybrid threats strike at the very foundations of democracy. They operate below the threshold of conventional armed conflict, leveraging ambiguity and deniability to avoid clear attribution or direct retaliation. They blur the lines between war and peace, state and non-state actors, and even between truth and fiction. Crucially, they target the cognitive domain: public understanding, societal trust, and institutional legitimacy.

At the center of these activities stands the Russian Federation. Over the past decade, Moscow has refined techniques to exploit the vulnerabilities of open societies, employing coordinated influence operations on social media, cyber intrusions into government and infrastructure networks as well as AI-generated deepfakes and conspiracy narratives. These methods allow Russia to shape public perception, provoke unrest, and paralyze decision-making processes without triggering traditional military responses. While Russia remains the most aggressive actor, China, Iran, and North Korea have demonstrated similar capabilities and intent.



The information space has become the primary battlefield: a domain where cyberattacks, AI-enabled disinformation campaigns, and psychological operations converge to erode trust, polarize societies, and disrupt governance. Generative AI accelerates these trends by enabling synthetic voices, deepfakes, and algorithmically amplified falsehoods at scale. The objective is not only to mislead but to confuse, exhaust, and fracture societies, making them less resilient and more vulnerable to authoritarian narratives.

This challenge demands a whole-of-society response. National governments, ministries of defence and digital affairs, critical infrastructure operators, private technology firms, NATO and EU hybrid threat units, civil society organisations, and citizens themselves all have a role to play. Resilience against hybrid threats is not merely a technical issue as it is a democratic imperative.

Problem

Despite growing awareness, Europe remains dangerously vulnerable to hybrid warfare. Institutional fragmentation, underinvestment in secure digital infrastructure, and the absence of a common doctrine hinder effective responses.

Most national strategies remain reactive and isolated, allowing adversaries to exploit gaps in coordination and attribution. Without bold, coordinated action, the continent risks not only manipulation but the long-term erosion of democratic governance.

Hybrid operations are attractive to authoritarian adversaries because they deliver disproportionate impact at low cost. Unlike conventional warfare, they do not require mass mobilisation or open military confrontation. Instead, they exploit the openness of liberal democracies, where freedom of expression, pluralism, and connectivity provide multiple entry points for manipulation.

The consequences are already visible. Disinformation campaigns undermine trust in institutions and fracture public discourse, giving rise to extremist voices. Cyberattacks target hospitals, energy grids, and government services. Sophisticated influence operations – such as

Kremlin-sponsored content on TikTok, amplified by paid influencers – spread narratives designed to normalise aggression and delegitimise Europe's response to Russia's war against Ukraine. In one widely circulated example, influencers repeated identical themes and hashtags like "#RLM" ("Russian Lives Matter"), gaining hundreds of thousands of views and shaping perceptions far beyond Russia's borders.

This is not simply a question of information security, but of strategic credibility as well. A Europe unable to defend its information space risks losing influence at home and abroad. Worse, democracies may be tempted to "fight fire with fire" by adopting authoritarian methods of censorship or engaging in covert manipulation operations of their own. **Yet retaliatory hybrid operations risk undermining international law, eroding democratic norms, and ultimately confirming the narrative that adversaries seek to promote:** that democracy is weak and hypocritical under pressure.



The ongoing war in Ukraine has given rise to new methods of disinformation aimed at polarizing public opinion and distorting democratic discourse. A report by EUvsDisinfo documents the coordinated use of TikTok videos to amplify Kremlin narratives through social media influencers. In one such campaign, paid influencers appeared kneeling with signs displaying terms such as “Russophobia,” “Donbas,” “hate speech,” “Luhansk,” “sanctions,” “info war,” and “nationalism.” The performance culminated with the sign being flipped to reveal the slogan “Russian lives matter.” These videos shared identical stylistic elements including the same filter, remixed soundtrack, and the hashtag #RLM – signaling deliberate coordination. By reaching audiences in the hundreds of thousands, such content illustrates how artificially amplified campaigns can shape public perception and contribute to the normalization of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.⁵⁰

The real challenge, then, is twofold. The first is to harden Europe against hybrid operations, while the second is to do so without sacrificing the principles that make democracy worth defending in the first place. In this arena, the best defence is not mere imitation of authoritarian tactics, but resilience itself. It means taking concrete steps to ensure that attempts at manipulation falter, intrusions prove costly, and societal trust remains robust enough to withstand prolonged assault.

As Nietzsche warned, “He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster.” For Europe, the task ahead is to ensure that democratic resilience itself becomes a form of deterrence. The goal must be nothing less than to **develop a self-defence instinct for democracy**, one that equips European societies with the tools to withstand hybrid warfare without compromising the values they stand for.

Actions Required to Attain the Goal

Fortifying the Democratic Home Front

Hybrid threats exploit the openness of democratic societies. They target not just parliaments or ministries but the everyday infrastructure of governance and trust. To counter this, European states must treat democratic resilience as a matter of national security. Building it requires new institutions, secure platforms, hardened systems, and cognitive defences that make manipulation costly and ineffective.

Establish Central Digital Threat Commands (CDTCS)

Governments can no longer afford fragmented or ad hoc responses to hybrid threats. The first step is to create dedicated Central Digital Threat Commands (CDTCS) in every European state. These would operate as national operational hubs distinct from traditional military posts or cybersecurity centres. CDTCS would unify cyber defence units, intelligence services, and strategic communications teams into a single framework designed to recognize and counter hybrid campaigns, including AI-driven disinformation. Their mandate would be to detect threats quickly, coordinate responses across agencies, and advise policymakers in real-time during hybrid disruptions.

Perceived Threats to Democracy in the EU

In your view, which of the following are the most serious threats to democracy in the EU? Please select up to three answers.

| | |
|-----|--|
| 36% | Growing distrust and scepticism towards democratic institutions |
| 34% | False and/or misleading information in general circulating online and offline |
| 31% | Propaganda and false and/or misleading information from a non-democratic foreign source |
| 30% | Covert foreign interference in the politics and economy of [COUNTRY], including through financing of domestic actors |
| 27% | Lack of engagement and interest in politics and elections among regular citizens |
| 20% | Lack of opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions |
| 19% | Lack of knowledge among voters about the functioning of democratic processes |
| 17% | Destabilization of electoral infrastructure or process, such as cyber-attacks |
| 16% | Lack of media freedom and media diversity |
| 12% | Lack of integrity of the electoral system |
| 2% | Other |
| 2% | None |
| 5% | Don't know |

Source European Commission⁵¹

The model is already visible in Finland's comprehensive security system.⁵² By integrating public, private, and civil society actors into national preparedness planning, Finland has built a culture of resilience that prevented panic during the 2022 border incidents and enabled swift debunking of Russian narratives during both the COVID-19 pandemic and the NATO accession debate.⁵³ European states should adapt this approach to the hybrid domain: CDTCS could become operational nerve centres for democratic defence. To succeed, they must be tied into EU and NATO hybrid units, ensuring real-time information sharing and joint capacity at the transatlantic level.

Develop Secure Civic Intranets

In an environment saturated with misinformation, citizens need a digital space they can trust. Governments should therefore develop encrypted, closed-loop platforms – “civic intranets” – that are accessible only to verified citizens and residents. These platforms would serve as safe gateways to public services, verified news, and emergency communications during crises, thus providing a trusted alternative when open networks are polluted or compromised.

Estonia has shown that this is possible. Its e-Estonia ecosystem has streamlined governance, reduced bureaucracy, and, crucially, fostered high levels of public trust in digital governance.⁵⁴ By adopting similar models, other European states could create digital sanctuaries where citizens are confident that the information provided is authentic and secure. In times of hybrid disruption, the credibility of the delivery channel often matters more than the message itself. Civic intranets would therefore become more than just technical solutions, they would prove to be political assets as well: ones that strengthen confidence in democratic institutions even in the midst of sustained attack.

Key initiatives of e-Estonia



e-Governance



e-Identity



e-Banking



e-Health Record



e-Ambulance



e-Prescription



e-Tax



X-Road



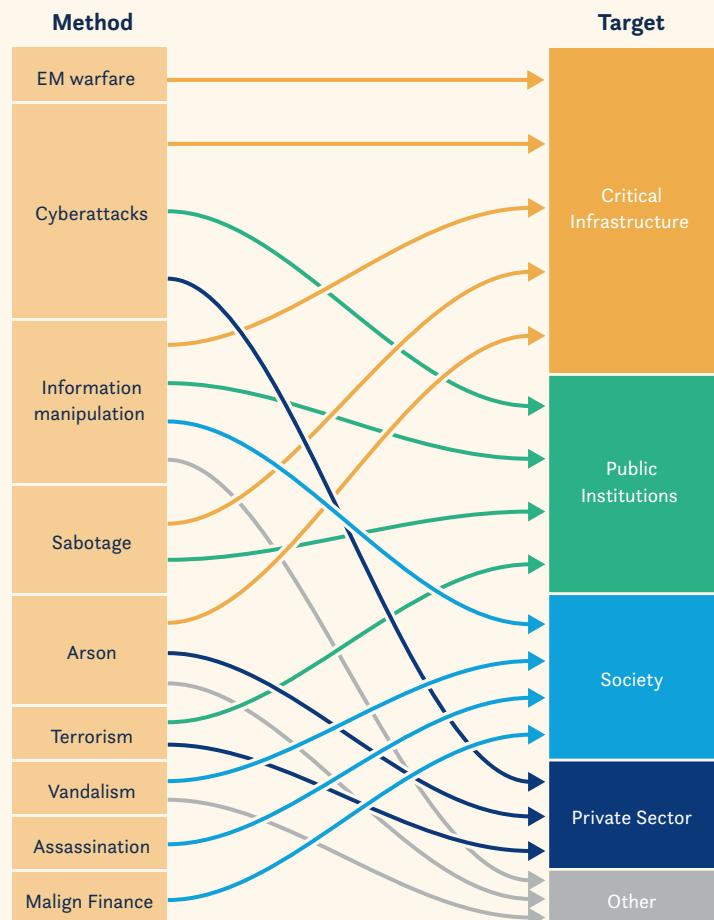
A virtual assistant

Harden Critical Digital Infrastructure

Hybrid threats also aim at the backbone of modern society: energy grids, health records, municipal IT systems, and communication networks. Europe's recent experience shows just how vulnerable these assets are – ransomware attacks have shut down healthcare systems in Poland,⁵⁵ phishing campaigns have targeted senior Czech officials,⁵⁶ and repeated attempts have been made to breach Baltic energy grids.⁵⁷ These are not isolated incidents; they are warnings that hybrid adversaries know exactly where to strike.

To address these vulnerabilities, states must mandate rigorous stress tests and advanced threat simulations for all operators of essential services, whether state-owned or private. Governments should impose enforceable cybersecurity standards and back them with meaningful penalties for negligence. At the same time, they must provide targeted technical support to ensure compliance, recognising that smaller operators often lack the resources to secure themselves. Protecting critical infrastructure has risen beyond mere theory – and deserves more than simply idle talk; it is the foundation of sovereignty in the digital age, and it must be protected at all costs.

Hybrid Warfare Tactics, and their Targets



Source European Union Institute for Security Studies⁵⁸

Institutionalize Psychological Defence Agencies

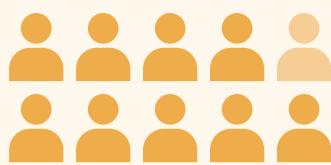
Finally, hybrid operations do not just target systems, they target minds as well. The cognitive domain – public trust, shared conceptions of reality, and the legitimacy of institutions – is where hybrid warfare is most dangerous. Sweden's decision to create a dedicated Psychological Defence Agency in 2022 offers a model for how democracies can respond. Unlike dedicated intelligence or cyber units, this agency has a public mandate as it offers systemic support aimed at raising societal awareness of increased disinformation activities during electoral cycles. It also pre-bunks malign narratives before they can take root and coordinates strategic communications that defend democratic discourse without eroding freedoms.

Other European states must follow suit. Psychological defence agencies would act as the

guardians of societal coherence, focusing on public trust and resilience rather than secrecy or surveillance. They would work with independent media, civil society, and local communities to reinforce the integrity of democratic debate. By institutionalising such agencies, governments can ensure that societies are not only able to repel hybrid attacks but also to preserve the democratic principles that make them worth defending.

Moreover, Europe should institutionalize co-operation between them, creating networks for sharing best practices, pooling expertise, and conducting joint pre-bunking campaigns. Co-ordinated messaging across borders is essential because hybrid operations exploit cross-national divides. An attack aimed at polarizing debate in one country often echoes across the region within days. Collective resilience therefore depends on a collective defence of the cognitive domain.

Respect for the EU's Core Values



Close to
9 in 10 EU Citizens
consider it important that
all EU Member States respect
the core values of the EU,
an opinion stable since 2019

Percentage of citizens who consider the following points important



All EU Member States
respect the core values
of the EU, including
fundamental rights, the rule of law, and democracy



Media and civil society
organizations in all other
EU Member States than
their country are able to
operate freely and without pressure, even when they are critical



When you live, travel or
do business in another
EU Member State, you can
trust its public authorities
to make decisions based
on the law, in a transparent
manner



When you live, travel or
do business in another
EU Member State, you can
access an independent and impartial court there

Building Collective Resilience

Hybrid threats do not respect borders. Disinformation campaigns cross languages within hours, cyber intrusions ripple through interconnected networks, and hostile narratives exploit every gap in coordination. A purely national response is insufficient; resilience must be collective. Europe must move beyond fragmented measures and build a common framework for attribution, transparency, and legal safeguards. Only then can democracies present a united front against adversaries who thrive on division.

Adopt Regional Attribution Protocols

One of the greatest weaknesses in Europe's response to hybrid threats is the absence of a common framework for attribution. Currently, each state operates with different standards of proof, investigative methods, and levels of public disclosure. This patchwork not only slows down responses but also undermines their credibility. For example, when the Czech Republic exposes a Russian disinformation actor but Bulgaria declines to do so, the deterrent effect is diluted, and adversaries are emboldened by division.

A shared attribution protocol is therefore essential. Such a framework should establish common evidentiary thresholds, codify standards of proof, and create mechanisms for

cross-border intelligence validation. By moving toward collective attribution, Europe can reduce ambiguity, respond more swiftly, and shield smaller states from the political risks of acting alone. Models already exist – the EU's Joint Cyber Unit⁶⁰ and NATO's Cyber Rapid Reaction Teams⁶¹ – but these efforts must be expanded and adapted to the hybrid domain. Fast, coordinated, and collective attribution not only strengthens deterrence but also enhances Europe's credibility on the international stage.

Introduce Digital Sovereignty Legislation

Hybrid threats exploit legal and regulatory loopholes. Foreign ownership of information platforms, opaque algorithms that shape political discourse, and the absence of clear prohibitions against digital interference create fertile ground for manipulation. To close these gaps, European states must introduce comprehensive digital sovereignty legislation.

Such laws should criminalize hostile digital interference, regulate foreign stakes in sensitive media and technology platforms, and require algorithmic transparency for political content. They must also give authorities the power to freeze or confiscate assets linked to hybrid operations. Denmark has already taken a first step by adapting copyright law to protect citizens



from unauthorized use of their likeness in deepfakes.⁶² Europe should build on this precedent to create a harmonized legal framework that prevents malign actors from exploiting open systems. Legal clarity and operational agility are indispensable if democracies are to remain resilient while upholding the rule of law.

Launch Public Digital Threat Dashboards

Transparency is one of democracy's strongest tools, and it can also be a shield. Governments should establish national or EU-aligned public dashboards cataloguing verified incidents of hybrid interference, from disinformation

campaigns to deepfake deployments and cyber intrusions. These platforms would provide early warnings to citizens while demonstrating state accountability and seriousness in tackling hybrid threats.

Sweden's Civil Contingencies Agency and Estonia's National Cyber Security Index already provide useful models. A broader European effort would serve not only to inform but also to inoculate societies against manipulation, helping citizens recognize hostile interference in real time. By making the invisible visible, public dashboards can convert fear and uncertainty into awareness and resilience.

Applying Strategic Pressure to Russia

Resilience at home and coordination across allies are necessary, but they are not enough on their own. Hybrid adversaries escalate precisely because they see low costs and little risk in doing so. To change this calculus, **Europe must apply external pressure, raising the political, economic, and technological price of hostile interference.**

The most visible and effective form of doing so would be a coordinated digital blockade targeting the Russian Federation. Such a measure would restrict Russia's access to global digital infrastructure, peering agreements, and platform reach. It could include DNS filtering to curb the spread of state-controlled propaganda channels, restrictions on Russian ISPs, deplatforming of Kremlin-linked services, and limitations on access to cloud hosting or payment systems. Precedents already exist: the EU's bans on RT and Sputnik,⁶³ as well as sanctions against

Russian tech firms,⁶⁴ demonstrate that digital exclusion is both legally and technically feasible.

A full blockade would require broad political consensus, careful legal framing under EU digital single market rules, and a phased implementation to limit collateral damage or circumvention by third parties. While complex, beginning formal exploratory talks within the EU and NATO would already shift the strategic balance by sending a clear message that **hostile states cannot expect unfettered access to European digital ecosystems whilst simultaneously weaponizing them against democracies.** Even the debate itself imposes costs by creating uncertainty for Russia's digital economy and signalling collective resolve.

Hybrid interference cannot be addressed in isolation from other forms of aggression. Just as energy blackmail or military escalation trigger sanctions, so too must hybrid attacks. Europe should establish automatic links between verified hybrid operations and economic penalties against the perpetrators. This approach would transform hybrid defence from a reactive posture into a deterrent one. The principle should be clear. If Europe's democratic fabric is targeted, a political and economic price is a cost.

Pressure is not only applied through sanctions and blockades; it is also applied through narrative strength. Adversaries exploit ambiguity and division to claim victories in the information space. Europe must therefore commit to multilateral unity in its strategic communication, ensuring that hybrid operations are not only attributed collectively but also condemned collectively. Coordinated exposure of hostile activity increases reputational costs for aggressors and reassures citizens that democracies are neither blind nor passive in the face of manipulation.



Roadmap for Attaining the Goal

| SHORT TERM | MEDIUM TERM | LONG TERM |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish national Central Digital Threat Commands (CDTCs) unifying cyber defence, intel, and strategic comms. Develop secure civic intranets for verified news, services, and emergency comms. Mandate stress tests for critical digital infrastructure. Launch public threat dashboards to track hybrid incidents and build trust. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pass digital sovereignty laws: criminalize hostile interference, regulate foreign platform ownership, mandate algorithm transparency. Institutionalize psychological defence agencies to counter malign narratives and build resilience. Create EU/NATO mechanisms linking verified hybrid attacks to automatic sanctions or consequences. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop EU–NATO frameworks for a potential digital blockade of Russia (DNS filtering, ISP restrictions, platform bans). Build a European psychological defence network with permanent institutional links and shared comms capacity. Integrate hybrid defence into transatlantic planning as a core pillar alongside defence and energy. |

OBSTACLES AND LIMITATIONS

Overreach and Democratic Backlash

New legislative initiatives will inevitably face resistance. Restrictions on media and anti-misinformation rules may be seen as censorship. As such, messaging must be airtight, implementation transparent, and subject to judicial and independent oversight.

Attribution Missteps

Accusing foreign actors without firm evidence risks diplomatic fallout. Attribution must rely on verified, multi-stakeholder processes with intelligence-sharing, forensic expertise, and legal input. Where uncertain, provisional attributions should use independently verifiable methods.

Economic Blowback

Targeting foreign-owned media or tech assets could trigger retaliation. Measures should be introduced under EU frameworks to share risk and preserve leverage. Industry must be supported with legal guidance and relief where needed.

Fragmentation of the Information Space

Creating secure intranets or alternative ecosystems risks isolating users and fostering echo chambers. New platforms should complement open discourse, focus on integrity and interoperability, and incorporate community feedback.

Strategic Escalation

Strong retaliatory measures may heighten tensions. Coordination with allies is essential to ensure actions remain multilateral, proportionate, and centered on deterrence through capability rather than rhetoric.

Losing by “Winning”

Counter-disinformation tactics like spreading falsehoods, doxing, or covert influence operations mimic authoritarian practices. Democracies that abandon press freedom, legality, and rights risk losing citizen trust and undermining what they aim to defend.

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