

2026 STUDY GUIDE

COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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MUNLawS 2026

COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Study Guide

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From the Secretary General...

Dear Delegates,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this year's MUNLawS!

After ten months of planning, organising, and probably overthinking every possible detail, the day has finally come! We have put a lot of ourselves into making this conference happen, and we hope that you will enjoy it as much as we have enjoyed creating it.

Having been part of the MUN community for a few years now, organising a conference of your own is definitely a different experience, one filled with equal parts excitement, stress, and the occasional crisis. A big thank you goes to my team, Živa Srše, Živa Rozina, Vito Vidmar, and Maks Novak, for everything they have done along the way. I truly could not have asked for a better team!

*As a law student with a particular interest in human rights, I find myself increasingly concerned by the ongoing conflicts and divisions across different regions of the world. This is one of the reasons why, this year, we have chosen **Strengthening Regional Cooperation** as our overall theme.*

While that might sound like a very diplomatic way of saying “let's get along”, there is much more to it. In a world that often seems too divided, cooperation can sometimes feel difficult but that is exactly why it matters. And what better place to promote cooperation among young people than an MUN, where people from different countries and backgrounds come together, ready to listen to one another and, sometimes, even let go of their own ideas for the sake of finding common ground?

Throughout this conference, I encourage you to challenge one another, question your own assumptions, and defend your positions but most importantly, remember to listen to one another. The goal is not to be the loudest person in the room, but rather to see what we can achieve when all those voices are heard.

And of course, do not forget to have fun. At the end of the day, we are not real diplomats (yet)!

I hope you have an unforgettable few days filled with great debates, questionable amounts of caffeine, and, hopefully, many new friendships.

See you in the committee!

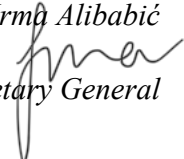
Irmā Alibabić

Secretary General



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INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMITTEE

Chairs' Welcome

Dear Delegates,

It is our great pleasure of welcoming you to the Council of the European Union at MUNLawS 2026.

As representatives of the European Union and its Member States, you are stepping into a committee tasked with addressing two pressing issues facing Europe today, at a time of evolving security threats, geopolitical uncertainty and increasing pressure on democratic institutions. Throughout our sessions, you will be challenged to navigate complex political realities, reconcile differing national interests, and work towards solutions which uphold the principles and values upon which the EU was founded.

Our first topic, ***The Future of European Defence***, invites you to consider how the European Union can strengthen its collective security and defence capabilities in an increasingly uncertain world. As questions of defence readiness, strategic autonomy, and investment become ever more prominent, delegates will be expected to examine the delicate balance between national sovereignty and deeper European integration. Equally important will be the role of cooperation with NATO and the question of how Europe can develop a security architecture capable of responding effectively to emerging threats while respecting the diverse priorities of its Member States.

Our second topic, ***Protecting Electoral Integrity***, turns to the foundations of European democracy. Free and fair elections, the rule of law, and public trust in democratic institutions are essential to the legitimacy of the European project and to the preservation of the free and democratic societies which our forefathers fought for. Today, more than ever before, these principles face growing challenges, from external interference and disinformation to democratic backsliding and attempts to undermine electoral processes. As delegates, you will have the opportunity to explore how the European Union can

strengthen democratic resilience, safeguard electoral integrity, and protect its citizens' ability to participate freely and confidently in democratic life.

Although these topics address different dimensions of European governance, they share a common question: how can the European Union respond collectively to shared challenges while respecting the sovereignty, diversity, and democratic values of its Member States? We encourage you to approach both discussions with an open mind, a willingness to engage with perspectives different from your own, and a commitment to constructive diplomacy. Defending national positions is important, but identifying common ground and developing practical, balanced, and forward-looking solutions is paramount.

We are delighted to guide you through these discussions and look forward to the perspectives, ideas, and debates you will bring to the committee.

Now, a few words about us:

Domen Bogdan is a fourth-year student at the Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana. During his studies, he served as a tutor in legal history and criminal law and represented his university at the Price Media Law Moot Court Competition in Oxford, where he was awarded the prize for Best Speaker. Following a study exchange at *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, his academic interests have shifted toward public international law and environmental law. Outside the lecture hall, Domen is an avid reader of fantasy and historical literature, and increasingly fond of the mountains. MUNLawS 2026 represents his first experience as a chair, and he is looking forward to facilitating debate on two of the most consequential issues currently facing the European Union.

Francesco Giorgino is a second-year law student at the University of Malta, enthusiastic about debating and international relations. He currently serves as an elected Executive Board Member of Malta's National Youth Council, and is a Benjamin Franklin Transatlantic Fellowship Alumnus, with experience and awards in a variety of simulations, including Presiding over the Model European Parliament to MUN and Moot Courts. With a strong interest in the perspectives delegates will bring to the table, and naturally, an obligatory

cup of coffee, he looks forward to engaging discussions on the challenges and opportunities shaping Europe's future.

We both hope that this conference will indeed be an opportunity to deepen your understanding of European affairs, while strengthening your abilities in negotiation, public speaking and critical thinking. However, most importantly, we encourage you to make the most out of this experience with lasting memories and friendships.

We cannot wait to meet you in beautiful Ljubljana this November!

Your chairs,

Domen Bogdan & Francesco Giorgino



About the Council of the European Union

'The Council shall, jointly with the European Parliament, exercise legislative and budgetary functions. It shall carry out policy-making and coordinating functions as laid down in the Treaties.'

– Article 16(1) of the Treaty on European Union¹

The Council of the European Union is one of the principal institutions of the EU, established under Article 13 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and governed primarily by Articles 16 TEU and 237–243 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Together with the European Parliament, it exercises the Union's **legislative** and **budgetary functions**, and it holds the **primary decision-making authority** in areas of intergovernmental character, most notably the Common Foreign and Security Policy, where it acts alone. Unlike the European Parliament, which represents the citizens of the Union, the Council **represents the governments of the Member States**, making it the institution where national interests are directly brought to bear on European law and policy.²

The Council of the EU is a single legal entity, however, in practice, it convenes in **ten different configurations** depending on the subject matter at hand. Foreign and defence ministers meet as the Foreign Affairs Council, finance ministers as the Economic and Financial Affairs Council, and so on. Each configuration brings together the relevant **national minister from all twenty-seven Member States**. Voting rules vary by policy area and while qualified majority voting applies in most legislative matters, decisions in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy – which includes defence – generally require unanimity, giving every Member State an effective right of veto.³

¹ European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union.", 2016, Art. 16(1).

² Ibid, arts 13(1), 14(1), 16(1)-(2) and 24(1).

³ Council Decision 2009/878/EU of 1 December 2009 establishing the list of Council configurations in addition to those referred to in the second and third subparagraphs of Article 16(6) of the Treaty on European Union [2009] OJ L315/46, as amended by Council Decision 2010/594/EU [2010] OJ L263/12; Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2016] OJ C202/13, arts 16(3), 16(6) and 31(1).

The Foreign Affairs Council is unique among the Council configurations as it is the only one without a rotating national presidency. It is chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who also serves as a Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP). This dual role makes the HR/VP an institutional bridge between the intergovernmental and supranational dimensions of EU external action. The position is currently held by Kaja Kallas.⁴

At MUNLawS 2026, the Council of the EU will convene in the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) configuration if delegates vote to debate Topic A, or in the General Affairs Council (GAC) configuration if delegates vote to debate Topic B. Delegates will represent the governments of all twenty-seven Member States, each acting as the relevant national minister. Therefore, delegates must formulate their positions based on their assigned country's government and its established policy priorities. In addition, one delegate will assume the role of the HR/VP and, depending on which topic delegates vote to debate, will perform one of the two roles associated with this position: the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy for Topic A, addressing defence and external security, or the Vice-President of the European Commission for Topic B, addressing democratic governance and the rule of law.⁵

The committee will operate under the MUNLawS 2026 Rules of Procedure for Political Committees. Decisions in the areas covered by Topic A and in certain areas covered by Topic B, such as Article 7 action or proposals for Treaty amendment, will generally require unanimity. Delegates should bear in mind that, where unanimity is required, a single sustained objection can block a decision entirely, which is precisely what makes this committee's debates consequential. The goal of the committee is to adopt a **Council conclusions** document – the form a Council would realistically use to express its agreed position and give direction to the Commission and the HR/VP.⁶

⁴ Ibid, arts 16(9), 18(2)–(4) and 27; European Commission, 'Kaja Kallas – High Representative/Vice-President (2024–2029)' https://commission.europa.eu/about/organisation/college-commissioners/kaja-kallas_en accessed 9 October 2026.

⁵ Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2016] OJ C202/13, arts 16(2) and 18(2)–(4).

⁶ Ibid, arts 7, 31(1) and 48.

Topic A:

THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN DEFENCE



Figure 1: Eurocorps soldiers carrying a European Union flag⁷

⁷ F. Florin/AFP via Getty Images, “Eurocorps Soldiers Carry a European Union Flag during a Flag-Raising Ceremony in Front of the European Parliament Building in Strasbourg.”, 2024.

KEY TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS USED	
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EDP	European Defence Policy
EDF	European Defence Fund
EDIP	European Defence Industry Programme
EDIS	European Defence Industrial Strategy
EPF	European Peace Facility
European Defence Union	Vision of deeper EU defence integration
HR/VP	High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the European Commission
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
Readiness 2030	EU initiative to strengthen European defence capabilities and industry by 2030
SAFE	Security Action for Europe – EU financial instrument supporting joint defence procurement
Strategic Autonomy	The EU's capacity to act independently in security and defence when necessary
Strategic Compass	The EU's security and defence strategy adopted in 2022
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

Introduction

‘World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.’

– Robert Schuman, Declaration of 9 May 1950⁸

Few documents in the canon of European statecraft have been more selectively read than Schuman’s Declaration. Delivered by a French foreign minister whose primary concern was the practical management of German coal and steel production, it has since been elevated into something closer to prophecy, being cited as founding scripture by European federalists. Schuman was a pragmatist solving a problem of post-war industrial rivalry, not a visionary sketching the blueprint for a continental state. Yet the words endure, and the question they quietly pose has never been resolved: ***what, precisely, are the ‘creative efforts proportionate to the dangers’ that Europe owes the world and itself?***

That question has acquired a sharp new urgency. For seven decades, European integration proceeded on the comfortable assumption that security was someone else’s business – NATO’s, and behind it, Washington’s. The EU built its identity primarily as a civilian power, a trade bloc, a regulatory giant, a normative actor that projected influence through law rather than arms. Defence was the one domain where the logic of integration consistently faltered, where intergovernmentalism held firm, and where the aspiration of an ‘ever-closer union’ met its most stubborn limits. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did not simply disrupt that arrangement – it exposed it as a historical accident dependent on a set of geopolitical conditions that no longer reliably obtain. Europe’s security guarantee, long outsourced and long taken for granted, is now the subject of the most consequential debate the Union has faced. It is that debate – its legal architecture, its institutional instruments, its unresolved contradictions, and its very real stakes – that this study guide places before the Committee.

⁸ Schuman, “Schuman Declaration.”

Historical development of European defence

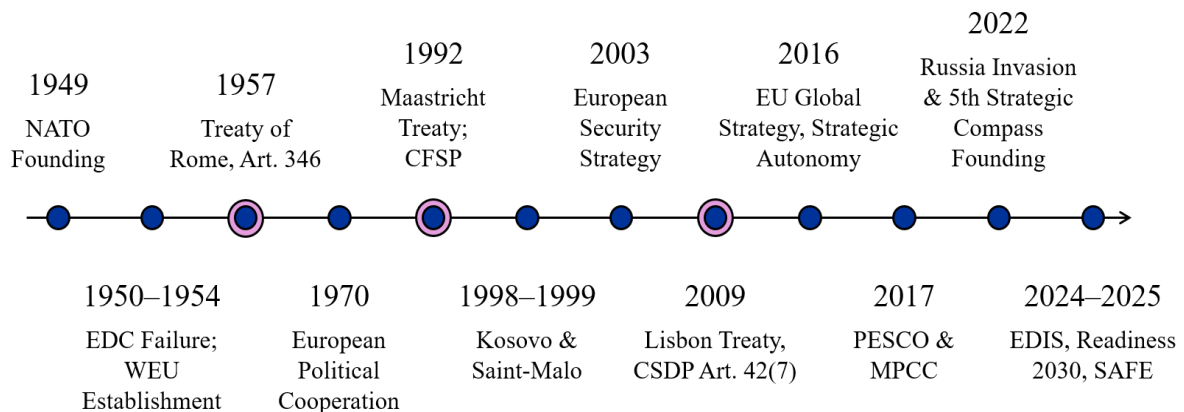


Figure 2: Timeline of key historical events⁹

The story of European defence integration begins not with a success, but with a failure that shaped everything that followed. In the aftermath of the World War II, Western European states found themselves in a paradoxical position, as they desperately needed collective security yet remained unwilling to sacrifice the national sovereignty that defence has historically represented as its most fundamental. The solution that emerged was dependence on the United States. The signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949 and the subsequent transformation of that arrangement into the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** – an integrated military alliance with American troops, an American Supreme Allied Commander, and an American strategic nuclear umbrella – settled the question of *who* would defend Europe, at least for the foreseeable future. As Keukeleire notes,¹⁰ this dependency also fundamentally ‘defined and restricted the parameters of Member States’ national foreign and security policies’, introducing what he calls the “‘what do the Americans think?’ test’ that would govern European defence deliberations for decades to come.

In 1950, French Prime Minister René Pleven proposed a **European Defence Community (EDC)**, envisaging the full merger of the six European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Member States’ armed forces into supranational European Defence Forces, with common

⁹ Figure created by the authors of the study guide.

¹⁰ Keukeleire, “From Taboo to a Spearhead,” [52], 2009.

institutions, a common budget, and binding majority decisions.¹¹ It was, as Trybus observes,¹² ‘the only precedent for a more supranational European defence organisation to date’. Yet on 30 August 1954, the French Assemblée Nationale rejected the Treaty – the very country that had proposed it. The reasons were predictable: Gaullists feared sovereignty loss, Communists opposed Western military integration, and many deputies resisted a framework where rearmed West Germany would participate as an equal. The fundamental lesson the EDC taught was that supranationality in defence goes too far for most European States.¹³

The collapse resulted in European defence passing almost entirely to NATO. The **Western European Union (WEU)**, established as the EDC’s intergovernmental replacement in 1954, became ‘a largely dormant European club within NATO’.¹⁴ The Treaty of Rome (1957) explicitly carved defence out of the common market through what became Article 346 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), ensuring that economic and defence integration would develop on entirely separate institutional tracks. The **European Political Cooperation (EPC)**, launched in 1970, offered foreign policy coordination but it ‘lacked both military and civilian crisis management instruments’¹⁵ and its limitations became painfully obvious during the several military conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁶

The fall of the Berlin Wall, German reunification, and the Yugoslav crisis happening simultaneously forced the **Maastricht negotiations** (1992) to confront defence for the first time in four decades. The result was carefully crafted ambiguity.¹⁷ Title V of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) committed to ‘the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence’, while incorporating safeguards for neutral Member States, NATO members, and Atlantic Alliance compatibility.¹⁸ As Keukeleire

¹¹ Trybus, *European Union Law and Defence Integration* [49]–[50], 2005.

¹² Ibid, [49].

¹³ Ibid, [23]–[25].

¹⁴ Ibid, [396].

¹⁵ Keukeleire, “From Taboo to a Spearhead,” [54], 2009.

¹⁶ Pijpers, “The Twelve Out-of-Area,” [143], 1988.

¹⁷ Menon, Forster, and Wallace, “A Common European Defence?” [102]–[104], 1992.

¹⁸ Dyson and Konstadinides, *European Defence Cooperation* [60]–[61], 2013.

concludes bluntly,¹⁹ ‘the UK and other Member States had conceded much on words and symbols, but nothing on substance and practice’. Maastricht included the term ‘defence’ but provided no instruments, no institutions, and no capabilities.

The decisive breakthrough came from an unexpected direction. Kosovo (1998–1999) exposed European dependence on American air power and produced a convergence between Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac at Saint-Malo in December 1998. The Declaration stated that ‘the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces’, while reaffirming NATO compatibility – capturing Paris’s insistence on autonomy and London’s insistence on the Alliance in a single text.²⁰ Within months, the Cologne and Helsinki European Councils **formally established the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP)** and set the Headline Goal of deploying 50,000–60,000 troops within sixty days. Less than three years after Cologne, the EU had launched its first operations – in Macedonia and the Democratic Republic of Congo – and had ‘not only created the necessary institutional and instrumental apparatus, but had also moved to operational action’.²¹

The **European Security Strategy (2003)** gave the EU its first comprehensive strategic document.²² The **Treaty of Lisbon (2009)** renamed ESDP the **Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)**, introduced a **mutual assistance clause** under Article 42(7), and provided the legal basis for **Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)** – while leaving the fundamental intergovernmental character of the policy wholly intact.²³ The EU battlegroups established from 2004 were never deployed. PESCO, activated in 2017, produced numerous projects but, as Dyson and Konstadinides observe,²⁴ ‘traditional dividing lines among the Member States continue to undermine EU efforts towards policy coherence and collective action’. The **EU Global Strategy (2016)** introduced ‘**strategic autonomy**’ explicitly for the first time²⁵ – language that would prove increasingly

¹⁹ Keukeleire, “From Taboo to a Spearhead,” [54]–[55], 2009.

²⁰ France and United Kingdom, *Joint Declaration on European Defence*, 1998.

²¹ Keukeleire, “From Taboo to a Spearhead,” [55]–[61], 2009.

²² Mérand, *European Defence Policy*, [130]–[131], 2005.

²³ Nissen et al., “EU Security and Defence Policy,” [27], 2020.

²⁴ Dyson and Konstadinides, *European Defence Cooperation* [4], 2013.

²⁵ Nissen et al., “EU Security and Defence Policy,” [25]–[26], 2020.

consequential when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, triggering the most significant transformation of EU defence policy since Saint-Malo.

The historical arc is one of repeated attempts to reconcile two fundamentally incompatible impulses: the imperative of collective security, which requires pooled sovereignty and shared command, and the imperative of national sovereignty, which makes states reluctant to transfer control over the most sensitive element of statehood. Russia's war – together with other international tensions – may now be forcing the most substantive reckoning yet.

Legal and institutional framework

The legal framework described in the following chapter is the direct juridical expression of every political compromise traced above. Unanimity, intergovernmentalism, and the near-total exclusion of judicial review are the price that France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the neutral States demanded for agreeing to any common framework at all.

The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is governed by **Title V TEU**, with its placement under the intergovernmental pillar carrying profound legal consequences. Unlike most EU law – where the Commission holds the right of initiative, Parliament co-legislates, and the Court of Justice exercises general jurisdiction – the CSDP gives Member States dominant control, confines the Commission and Parliament to marginal roles, and almost entirely excludes judicial oversight under Article 24(1) TEU, amounting to what Trybus calls a 'rule of law deficit' from which every other area of EU action is exempt.²⁶ The foundational operational rule is **Article 42(4) TEU**: all CSDP decisions require **unanimity** in the Council, the right of initiative belongs solely to the High Representative or Member States, and no legislative acts of general application can be adopted within the CSDP framework at all. A single Member State can therefore block any CSDP decision – as Hungary demonstrated by withholding over €6.6 billion in approved European Peace Facility (EPF)

²⁶ Trybus, *European Union Law and Defence Integration* [80], 2005.

reimbursements to Ukraine.²⁷ **Article 42(2) TEU** ambiguously mandates a ‘progressive framing of a common Union defence policy’ that ‘will lead to a common defence, when the European Council, acting unanimously, so decides’. While the word *will* suggests inevitability, the unanimity requirement slows the process. The one significant structural exception is **Article 46**, which governs PESCO: uniquely among CSDP provisions, it may be established and expanded by **qualified majority** voting – a deliberate design choice to prevent individual States from blocking deeper cooperation, though one whose practical consequences have proved more modest than intended. Whether the **Article 31(3)** passerelle clause should be used to extend QMV to further CSDP decisions is among the most contested institutional reform issues to be debated.

The **mutual assistance** in **Article 42(7) TEU** is the provision most directly tested by current events. It obliges Member States to provide ‘aid and assistance by all the means in their power’ if another Member State suffers armed aggression. On its face this appears stronger than NATO’s Article 5, which requires only ‘such action as it deems necessary’ – but in practice it is materially weaker. As Ozora notes,²⁸ the ‘most notable weakness is the absence of military action’: Member States determine the nature of their assistance individually, a neutrality safeguard insulates Ireland, Malta, and Austria from military obligation, and the TEU’s failure to define ‘armed aggression’ creates a structural gap that its legal consequences cannot fill. Crucially, as Dyson and Konstadinides conclude, it is ‘an entirely intergovernmental device’; no EU institution has any formal coordinating role, and no enforcement mechanism exists. The clause was invoked once – following the November 2015 Paris attacks – as a political act rather than a military mechanism, with each Member State responding independently and no EU coordination. Its structural inadequacy was exposed far more acutely on 1 March 2026, when Iranian Shahed-type drones struck Cyprus, with one hitting RAF Akrotiri. President Christodoulides declined to invoke Article 42(7), publicly describing it as ‘poorly defined’. Cyprus secured the clause’s operationalisation on the agenda of the informal European Council in Nicosia in April 2026, where leaders agreed on the need to define how it would function if activated and a Commission blueprint was

²⁷ Psara, “European Peace Facility.”, 2024.

²⁸ Ozora, “Article 42.7.”, 2026.

presented. EU Military Committee Chair General Seán Clancy has proposed a ‘burden shifting’ framework: Article 42(7) would apply to non-existential threats (hybrid attacks, limited strikes, terrorism) complementing rather than replacing NATO’s Article 5 for existential threats. The April 2026 European Council represents neither a legal transformation of the clause nor a resolution of its structural weaknesses, but the beginning of a serious political reckoning with a provision that was never, until now, intended to be tested.²⁹ The **solidarity clause** in **Article 222 TFEU** addresses terrorist attacks and natural or man-made disasters, explicitly foreseeing a role for EU institutions, but its boundary with Article 42(7), as Dyson and Konstadinides observe,³⁰ ‘lacks legal definition’, a gap the Cyprus incident has rendered increasingly urgent.

Alongside the TEU’s intergovernmental structures, an increasingly important legal basis for EU defence action lies in the **TFEU’s internal market and research competences**, principally **Articles 114 and 173 TFEU**. This supranational track gives the Commission a role and subjects decisions to qualified majority voting. Three major instruments now operate on this basis: the **European Defence Fund (EDF)** – €7.9 billion for 2021–2027 – financing collaborative research and capability development;³¹ the **SAFE instrument** – **Regulation (EU) 2025/1106**, adopted 27 May 2025 – providing up to €150 billion in loans for joint defence procurement with a 65% EU/EEA/Ukraine content requirement;³² and the **European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP)** – **Regulation (EU) 2025/2643**, adopted 16 December 2025 – providing €1.5 billion for 2025–2027 to incentivise common procurement and establish the EU’s first structured security-of-supply framework.³³ The jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) over this architecture remains limited: **Articles 24(1) TEU** and **275(1) TFEU** exclude it from strategic CSDP decisions, though the Court’s post-*KS* and *KD* jurisprudence has progressively narrowed this exclusion to acts constituting purely

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Dyson and Konstadinides, *European Defence Cooperation* [68]–[69], 2013.

³¹ European Commission, “EDF.”, 2026

³² Council of the EU, “SAFE Press Release.”, 2005.

³³ European Commission, “EDIP.”, 2026.

‘strategic or political choices’, making non-contractual liability claims from CSDP missions now justiciable.³⁴

Strategic direction flows from the **European Council**, with operational decisions adopted by the **Foreign Affairs Council** by unanimity. The central institutional figure is the **High Representative** who presides over the Foreign Affairs Council and serves as a Commission Vice-President; since December 2024 the post has been held by Kaja Kallas of Estonia. Day-to-day political-military work runs through the **Political and Security Committee (PSC)**; military advice to the PSC from the **EU Military Committee (EUMC)**; and operational planning through the **EU Military Staff (EUMS)** and its Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), the EU’s first permanent operational headquarters, established in 2017. The **European Defence Agency (EDA)** coordinates capability development with no binding powers. The architecture’s defining structural weakness is the absence of any enforcement mechanism: no institution within it can compel a Member State to contribute forces, increase spending, or honour a PESCO commitment. The CSDP is a coordination framework that depends entirely on the political will of sovereign States and when that will is divided, the gap between declared ambition and operational reality follows inevitably.

The CSDP framework is explicitly designed to **coexist with rather than replace NATO**. **Article 42(2) TEU** designates NATO as ‘the foundation of their collective defence’ for Member States that belong to it, and the **Berlin Plus Arrangements** express this complementarity in institutional form – EU access to NATO planning, command, and assets – though they have been suspended in practice due to the Cyprus–Turkey dispute.³⁵

Current EU defence initiatives

The limits of the Treaty framework described above have become increasingly visible precisely as the security environment has demanded more from it. Russia’s full-scale

³⁴ Cantraine, “Effective Remedies or Empty Promises?”, 2026.; Verellen, “Effective Judicial Protection.”, 2026.

³⁵ European Union, “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union.”, 2016, Art. 42(2) and 42(7); Council of the European Union, “Background on EU-NATO Permanent Arrangements (Berlin+).”, 2003; S. Acikmese Akgul and D. Triantaphyllou, “The NATO-EU-Turkey Trilogy: The Impact of the Cyprus Conundrum.”, 2012.

invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shattered the post-Cold War security order and exposed critical gaps in European readiness, stockpiles, production capacity, and industrial base. The CSDP's unanimity rule, its absence of legislative competence, and its separation from the EU's budgetary and internal market mechanisms mean that **the Union cannot, through CSDP alone, finance rearmament, mandate procurement cooperation, or enforce capability commitments**. The response since 2022 has not been to change the Treaty, which is an effectively impossible task requiring unanimous ratification by all 27 Member States, but to work around it. The cluster of **new instruments described below are deliberately grounded in the TFEU's internal market and emergency economic competences rather than in the TEU's CSDP provisions**. By routing defence investment through Articles 114 and 122 TFEU, the Commission gains a role, qualified majority voting applies, and parliamentary oversight becomes possible – all things the CSDP's intergovernmental architecture would preclude. The **result is a dual-track EU defence architecture**, one intergovernmental and one supranational, operating in parallel and generating new constitutional tensions that remain unresolved.³⁶

1. EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

The **Strategic Compass** (March 2022) – the EU's first comprehensive strategic document in the security and defence field – **named Russia explicitly as a threat**, committed the EU to an **EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC)** of 5,000 troops, and structured ambitions around **four pillars: Act, Secure, Invest, and Partner**.³⁷ The EU RDC can mobilise up to 5,000 troops across land, air, maritime, cyber, and space domains within 10 days from heightened readiness, building on the EU Battlegroup framework – two rotating battlegroups of approximately 1,500 troops each, operational since 2007 but never deployed.³⁸ Critical limitations remain: deployment still requires Council unanimity, and

³⁶ S. Clapp et al., "ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030.", 2025; L. Scazzieri, "Towards an EU Defence Union?", 2025; European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.", 2016, Arts. 114, 122 and 173; European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union.", 2016, Art. 48.

³⁷ Hartley, "European Defence Policy," [507], 2024.

³⁸ EEAS, "RDC Becomes Operational.", 2025.

the gap between declared capability and political will to deploy persists. The Compass is a political guidance document, not a legally binding instrument; its commitments are therefore subject to the same voluntarism that characterises CSDP as a whole.

2. CSDP missions and operations

The EU currently runs approximately 20 civilian and military missions across three continents.³⁹ The most strategically significant are:⁴⁰

- **EUMAM Ukraine** – established October 2022, trains Ukrainian Armed Forces on EU territory; the largest EU military training mission ever launched, with a mandate extended until November 2026 and a budget of nearly €409 million for that period;
- **EUFOR ALTHEA** – EU military operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina since December 2004, supporting the Dayton Agreement and retaining executive powers;
- **EU NAVFOR ATALANTA** – counter-piracy operation in the Indian Ocean since 2008, one of the EU’s longest-running military operations;
- **EULEX Kosovo** – the EU’s most substantial civilian rule-of-law mission, continuing with a reduced footprint.

The **Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)**,⁴¹ established within the EUMS in 2017, provides operational command for non-executive training missions including EUMAM Ukraine. Extending the MPCC’s mandate to cover executive operations remains an ongoing political debate.

3. PESCO

PESCO, established under **Article 46 TEU** and **activated in December 2017**, currently has **26 Member States participating**. As of late 2024, 83 projects had been launched across six thematic clusters, with approximately 75 ongoing, each receiving a 10% EDF allocation

³⁹ EEAS, “Missions and Operations.”, 2025.

⁴⁰ Ibid.; European External Action Service, “Council Extends the Mandate of the EU Military Assistance Mission for Two Years.”, 2024.

⁴¹ EEAS, “MPCC.”, 2025.

bonus. In early 2026, **Canada became the first non-European country formally associated with PESCO projects**, which was described at the Munich Security Conference as ‘an unprecedented legal precedent’.⁴² The **gap between legal ambition and operational output** is nonetheless PESCO’s defining problem. The founding compromise – Germany’s preference for broad inclusion prevailing over France’s vision of a smaller, higher-capability core – produced a framework wide in membership but modest in output.⁴³ Average participation per project has fallen from 7.6 Member States in the first wave to just 3.6 in the third, suggesting real cooperation is happening in small self-selected groups regardless of the formal all-inclusive architecture.⁴⁴ As the ICDS observed in October 2025,⁴⁵ ‘PESCO must step up’.

4. EDIS and EDIP

The **European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS)**,⁴⁶ adopted on 5th of March 2024, is the EU’s first comprehensive industrial policy for defence, targeting by 2030 at least 40% of equipment procured collaboratively – a level that remains well below the EDA’s existing 35% benchmark, with EDA’s 2024-2025 data confirming that only 12 of 27 Member States submitted collaborative procurement data, making a current baseline figure impossible to establish – at least 35% sourced from intra-EU trade, and at least 50% of procurement budgets remaining within the EU. EDIS is **implemented through EDIP (Regulation (EU) 2025/2643**, adopted 16 December 2025),⁴⁷ which provides €1.5 billion for 2025–2027 and establishes the EU’s first structured security-of-supply framework through the new **Structure for European Armament Programme (SEAP)**.

5. ReArm Europe / Readiness 2030 and SAFE

The ReArm Europe Plan / Readiness 2030, presented by the Commission on 6 March 2025 and formalised in the **White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030** (19 March

⁴² de Vries, “New Security Architecture.”, 2026.

⁴³ Blockmans and Crosson, “PESCO,” [87]–[109], 2021.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Cordet, “PESCO Must Step Up.”, 2025.

⁴⁶ Clapp, *European Defence Industrial Strategy*., 2024.

⁴⁷ European Commission, “EDIP.”, 2026.

2025), is the most ambitious EU defence initiative in the Union's history.⁴⁸ It mobilises up to €800 billion through **five pillars**:

- fiscal flexibility under the **Stability and Growth Pact**'s national escape clause (up to €650 billion over four years);
- EU-backed loans through **SAFE** (€150 billion);
- budget repurposing of cohesion and structural funds;
- a **Defence Omnibus** simplification of regulations; and
- the **Defence Readiness Roadmap**, which translates seven priority capability domains into four flagship projects covering air defence, drones, space, and the eastern flank.

The centrepiece is **SAFE**, as aforementioned, which authorises the Commission to raise up to €150 billion on capital markets and lend the proceeds to Member States for joint arms purchases, with repayment horizons of up to 45 years and a '**Buy European**' preference prioritising EU supply chains. Its adoption under **Article 122 TFEU** – an emergency economic measures provision – enabled Council-only adoption without European Parliament co-decision, a procedural choice that has attracted significant criticism on democratic accountability grounds.⁴⁹

Assessment

The current EU defence landscape represents a genuine qualitative leap: weapons financing, mass military training, a common industrial strategy, and EU budget instruments oriented toward defence were all unthinkable a decade ago. **Three structural tensions** nonetheless persist. First, the dual legal architecture creates **accountability gaps**: SAFE was adopted without Parliament, the EDF operates under TFEU industrial policy rules, while PESCO and CSDP missions remain intergovernmental under the TEU. Second, the **voluntarism problem** is unresolved: EDIS targets are non-binding, PESCO commitments unenforceable, and collaborative procurement remains demonstrably below even the EDA's existing 35% benchmark. Third, the **NATO question is unresolved**: the Readiness 2030 package presents EU defence build-up as complementary to NATO, but the scale of

⁴⁸ Clapp et al., *ReArm Europe Plan.*, 2025.

⁴⁹ Arshad, "Qualified Majority Voting", 2025. ; Clapp et al., *ReArm Europe Plan.*, 2005.

ambition – particularly SAFE and the ‘Buy European’ preference – creates friction with non-EU NATO allies who fear exclusion from the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). These concerns reproduce the structural anxieties that have shadowed EU defence ambitions since the ESDP’s inception – what Madeleine Albright termed **the ‘three Ds’**: the risk of **duplicating** NATO structures, **decoupling** European defence from the Alliance, and **discriminating** against non-EU allies. As Larik notes,⁵⁰ the same logic that produced Berlin Plus continues to constrain how far the EU can go before triggering allied resistance. How far the EU’s strategic autonomy hedge extends before it undermines the Alliance it is meant to complement remains the central unresolved political question.

Member States’ positions and political divides

The debate over European defence does not follow the traditional left–right axis of EU politics, but is structured by geography, history, threat perception, constitutional tradition, and industrial interest. A State’s stance on deeper integration is shaped above all by proximity to Russia, NATO membership, domestic defence industry, constitutional constraints on military engagement, and trust in EU institutions to handle genuinely sensitive security decisions.

One structural fact frames all that follows. In 2025, the US alone accounted for approximately 60% of total NATO spending. EU collective defence expenditure reached €381 billion (~2.1% of GDP), but distribution is radically unequal – from Poland at 4.48% to Ireland at 0.2%. Germany and France together account for 43% of total EU defence expenditure.⁵¹ Sixteen EU states activated the fiscal escape clause in 2025 to increase spending outside normal deficit rules,⁵² signalling a new political consensus on rearmament, even as the pace and direction remain sharply contested.

The table below provides a reference overview of all 27 Member States.

⁵⁰ Larik, “Arma Fero, Ergo Sum?,” [19]–[20], 2013.

⁵¹ EP Think Tank, “EU Member States’ Defence Budgets.”, 2026.

⁵² Council of the EU, “National Escape Clause.”, 2026.

Table 1: EU Member States' military spending⁵³

EU Member State	NATO	~2025 spend (% GDP)
Austria	No	~1.1%
Belgium	Yes	~2.0%
Bulgaria	Yes	~2.0%
Croatia	Yes	~2.0%
Cyprus	No	~1.7%
Czech Republic	Yes	~2.0%
Denmark	Yes	~3.2%
Estonia	Yes	~3.4%
Finland	Yes	~2.8%
France	Yes	~2.1%
Germany	Yes	~2.0%
Greece	Yes	~2.9%
Hungary	Yes	~2.1%
Ireland	No	~0.2%
Italy	Yes	~2.0%
Latvia	Yes	~3.7%
Lithuania	Yes	~4.0%
Luxembourg	Yes	~1.3%
Malta	No	~0.4%
Netherlands	Yes	~2.5%
Poland	Yes	~4.5%
Portugal	Yes	~2.0%
Romania	Yes	~2.3%
Slovakia	Yes	~2.0%
Slovenia	Yes	~2.0%

⁵³ NATO, *Defence Expenditure 2014–2025*, 2025; Council of the EU, “National Escape Clause.”, 2026; Reuters, “Five NATO Members Seen to Spend Over 3.5% GDP on Core Defence This Year.”, 2026.

Spain	Yes	~2.0%
Sweden	Yes	~2.5%

France: strategic autonomy champion

France is the most consistent advocate of European strategic autonomy, resting on **three structural pillars** no other EU state shares simultaneously: **nuclear deterrence** (France is the EU's only nuclear power post-Brexit), a **major sovereign defence industrial base** (Airbus, Naval Group, Safran, Thales, MBDA), and a **Gaullist strategic culture** that treats dependence on the United States as a structural vulnerability rather than a temporary inconvenience. France's **National Strategic Review 2025** (RNS 2025) reaffirms this explicitly, calling for Europe to take matters into its own hands in the defence.⁵⁴ France also takes the **strongest position on 'buy European' conditionality** in SAFE, EDIP, and the EDF, viewing US platform purchases as perpetuating exactly the dependency strategic autonomy is meant to overcome. President Macron announced consultations with European allies in March 2025 on the **potential role of French nuclear deterrence in collective European defence** – the furthest any French government has gone toward Europeanising nuclear policy, while preserving full presidential prerogative.⁵⁵

The limits of France's position are equally important. Its vision of EU defence integration tends to assign France a disproportionate leadership role, and partners in Central and Eastern Europe view French calls for strategic autonomy partly as a national project dressed in European language.

Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium: Atlanticist-integrationists

Germany occupies the most pivotal position in European defence politics: the EU's largest economy, its **largest absolute defence spender** (€95 billion in 2025, approximately double its 2021 level), and the State whose strategic culture has undergone the most dramatic shift

⁵⁴ France, *National Strategic Review 2025*, [2], 2025.

⁵⁵ France, "National Strategic Review 2025.", 2025; Polish Institute of International Affairs, "France Invites Allies to a Debate on Extending its Nuclear Deterrent.", 2025.

since 2022.⁵⁶ Chancellor Merz secured a constitutional amendment **removing debt brake constraints on defence spending** and has stated that ‘the absolute priority must now be to strengthen Europe quickly so that we can step by step become independent of the United States’.⁵⁷ Yet Germany’s posture remains fundamentally Atlanticist: Berlin supports EDF, PESCO, and SAFE as instruments to **strengthen the European pillar within NATO, not as stepping-stones toward an autonomous EU defence union**. Its continued purchases of F-35 fighters over European alternatives illustrate the ambivalence that survives the Zeitenwende rhetoric.⁵⁸ The Netherlands and Belgium broadly mirror this position, supporting EU instruments while insisting NATO must remain primary.

Poland, the Baltic States, Finland: NATO-first

Poland has become the single most important new actor in European defence politics, **spending 4.5% of GDP in 2025** – the highest among all 32 NATO Allies – with procurement focused overwhelmingly on US and South Korean platforms. Poland’s position is deliberately paradoxical: deeply sceptical of EU command structures and Commission procurement competence, yet an eager SAFE participant for the financial advantage of EU-backed borrowing rates. Warsaw **sees permanent US troop presence as a security guarantee no EU institution can replicate**. The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) mirror this logic and are jointly developing **the Baltic Defence Line**. Finland, sharing the EU’s longest border with Russia and a NATO member since 2023, states explicitly that ‘Finland’s membership of NATO is the cornerstone of Finland’s security policy’ and supports EU instruments only insofar as they serve, and do not substitute, the Alliance.⁵⁹

Italy, Spain, Greece: southern mixed camp

Italy and Spain present different versions of the southern mixed camp. Italy (~2.0% GDP) has a significant industrial base (Leonardo, Fincantieri, Avio) and supports EU instruments

⁵⁶ Chassany and Abboud, “Germany re-arms: what does it mean for Europe?”, 2026.

⁵⁷ Etzold, *Germany's Security and Defence Policies after the Zeitenwende* [8], 2025.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ NATO, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025).”, 2025; T. Iso-Markku, “Finland’s NATO Accession.”, 2023.

in principle while resisting procurement conditionality that could benefit French or German champions. Spain only reached 2.0% of GDP in 2025 after sustained US pressure under President Trump – including suggestions of NATO suspension – but explicitly rejected the Alliance’s 5% mandate, negotiating a 2.1% ceiling instead, illustrating the persistent gap between political commitment and strategic ambition.⁶⁰ Greece spends approximately 2.9% of GDP but its primary driver is bilateral deterrence vis-à-vis Turkey, making its contribution to collective capability less significant than raw figures suggest.

Austria, Ireland, Malta, Cyprus: neutral and non-aligned

Austria, Ireland, Malta, and Cyprus sit outside NATO and maintain forms of legal or constitutional neutrality. Austria participates selectively in PESCO and joined the European Sky Shield Initiative, framing these as defensive resource-pooling consistent with its 1955 constitutional neutrality. Ireland, at 0.2% of GDP the EU’s lowest spender, operationalises non-alignment through the ‘Triple Lock’ requiring simultaneous UN Security Council authorisation, government approval, and parliamentary approval for deployments – placing it in increasingly isolated political company as the EU’s defence agenda accelerates. Malta is the only EU member outside PESCO entirely. Cyprus presents the most acutely current case: excluded from NATO by Turkey’s veto, struck by Iranian Shahed-type drones in March 2026 so,⁶¹ and the catalyst – through its decision not to invoke Article 42(7) – for the EU’s most serious reckoning with its mutual defence clause, as detailed in the legal chapter above.

Hungary: from disruptive actor to open question

Hungary was the EU’s **most disruptive actor on defence between 2022 and early 2026**: withholding over €6.6 billion in approved EPF assistance to Ukraine, filing a CJEU lawsuit to annul the Council decision channelling frozen Russian asset revenues to the EPF, and opposing joint EU borrowing mechanisms. This ended abruptly on 12 April 2026, when Péter Magyar’s Tisza Party won a landslide two-thirds parliamentary majority, ending Orbán’s 16-

⁶⁰ Murray, “Pentagon Considers Suspending Spain.”, 2026.

⁶¹ K. Ozora, “Europe’s Other Defence Clause: What Article 42.7 Actually Means.”, 2026; F. de Vries, “Toward a New Security Architecture.”, 2026.

year rule; Magyar visited Brussels on 29 April 2026 to signal **Hungary's EU realignment**. Chatham House has warned that while Orbán has been defeated, 'Orbánism' may outlast him.⁶² Most structurally, the Orbán period demonstrated precisely what a determined veto-wielder can do within CSDP's unanimity framework and that lesson remains regardless of who governs Hungary.

Other Member States and emerging positions

Slovenia illustrates the constraint many smaller Central European states face: a firm NATO commitment since 2004 and rhetorical support for PESCO, the EDF, and joint procurement sit uneasily alongside historically low defence spending – being the only NATO MS projected not to fulfil the 2% GDP goal in 2026 –⁶³ and a limited industrial base, meaning Ljubljana treats EU mechanisms primarily as a route to interoperability and capability access rather than as vehicles for strategic autonomy. The **Czech Republic**, by contrast, has used the post-2022 security shock to raise spending and position itself as a more assertive Central European security actor, remaining firmly Atlanticist while still engaging actively in EU-level initiatives, aided by a defence industry increasingly relevant in ammunition and land-systems production. Romania and Bulgaria, anchoring NATO's Black Sea flank, diverge in emphasis: **Romania** has pushed hardest for a sustained allied presence and modernisation on its territory, while **Bulgaria** has moved more cautiously but is gradually converging toward a firmer deterrence posture, and both were among the first group of states to have national defence investment plans approved for SAFE financing in early 2026.⁶⁴ **Portugal** and **Denmark** represent a distinct Atlanticist-but-integrationist current within the group, notable above all for Denmark's abolition of its long-standing CSDP opt-out following the 2022 referendum, which now allows Copenhagen to participate fully in EU defence structures it had previously stayed outside.⁶⁵ **Croatia, Slovakia**, and other smaller Central and Eastern European states largely follow a pragmatic pattern common to

⁶² Roos, "Hungary Election.", 2026.

⁶³ Reuters, "Five NATO Members Seen to Spend Over 3.5% GDP on Core Defence This Year.", 2026.

⁶⁴ European Commission, "Commission Approves First Wave of Defence Funding for Eight Member States under SAFE.", 2026.

⁶⁵ EEAS, "Denmark: Statement by the High Representative on the Outcome of the Referendum on the Opt-Out in Defence Matters.", 2022.

this cohort: support for higher spending and NATO-centred deterrence, combined with selective, funding-driven engagement in EU instruments rather than any deeper ideological commitment to defence integration as such.⁶⁶

Cross-cutting fault lines

Four structural fault lines cut across all bloc groupings and recur in every specific debate.

Divergent spending trajectories. NATO's 2025 Summit adopted a new benchmark of 5% of GDP by 2035 (3.5% core + 1.5% dual-use). Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are already near or exceeding 3.5%, while many countries struggled to reach the original 2% target in the past. Additionally, Spain only committed to 2.1% as a ceiling, rejecting the 5% mandate. Any binding EU-level spending floor must navigate this structural divergence.⁶⁷

Commission competence vs. intergovernmentalism. A persistent tension runs between those who see an expanded Commission role as essential for effective EU defence and those who insist defence must remain primarily in Member State hands. The use of Article 122 TFEU for SAFE, which bypasses the European Parliament, reflects the political reality that most Member States will not grant the Commission new supranational powers in this domain.⁶⁸

Procurement nationalism vs. joint procurement. Even states that support EU integration in principle tend to favour national champions or proven foreign suppliers. The EDIS target of 40% collaborative European procurement by 2030 – against a current level of ~18% – faces resistance across the political spectrum. Poland, Germany, and Finland all made major US or non-EU procurement decisions in 2024–2025.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Reuters, "Five NATO Members Seen to Spend Over 3.5% GDP on Core Defence This Year, Alliance Says.", 2026; European Commission, "Commission Approves First Wave of Defence Funding for Eight Member States under SAFE.", 2026; European External Action Service, "Denmark: Statement by the High Representative on the Outcome of the Referendum on the Opt-Out in Defence Matters.", 2022; C. Nissen et al., "EU Security and Defence Policy.", 2020.

⁶⁷ NATO, "Defence Investment and NATO's 5% Commitment.", 2026; S. Murray, "Pentagon Considers Suspending Spain from NATO, Leaked Email Suggests.", 2026; Council of the European Union, "SAFE: Council Adopts €150 Billion Boost for Joint Procurement on European Security and Defence.", 2025; S. Clapp, "European Defence Industrial Strategy.", 2024; B. Schreer, "Europe's Defence Procurement since 2022: A Reassessment.", 2024; K. Ozora, "Europe's Other Defence Clause: What Article 42.7 Actually Means.", 2026.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Article 42(7) and the mutual defence clause. The Cyprus drone incidents and the April 2026 Nicosia Summit have posed a key question: whether and how to operationalise Article 42(7) as a sub-Article 5 complement to NATO. Neutral States resist any strengthening that could compromise their opt-out, eastern States worry it could dilute Article 5's primacy, France sees it as a vehicle for EU strategic autonomy, and non-NATO members face the hardest questions about what 'aid and assistance by all means in their power' means in practice.⁷⁰

Evaluation of deeper EU defence integration

The debate over deeper EU defence integration cannot be reduced to a binary choice between national sovereignty and a European army. The more productive question is how far and in which specific areas EU-level coordination, funding, and industrial policy can add genuine military and economic value that Member States cannot easily achieve independently. The four fault lines identified in the previous chapter – procurement nationalism, the Commission competence debate, divergent spending trajectories, and the unresolved status of Article 42(7) – are the substance for this evaluation.

The case for

Europe's core defence problem is structural inefficiency of the *status quo*.²⁷ Member States maintain overlapping armed forces, procure independently, and sustain separate national industries. The costs of 'non-Europe' in defence are estimated at between €26 billion and €130 billion annually. EU Member States operate 154 types of weapons systems compared with just 27 in the US. When nations develop a weapons programme jointly, they share development costs and pool production runs, reducing unit costs through scale and learning. Instruments like ASAP – funding 31 projects to double EU artillery shell production – and EDIRPA, which leveraged €310 million in EU funding to mobilise over €11 billion in joint procurement, demonstrate that even modest EU financial incentives can reshape industry behaviour significantly.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Additionally, between June 2022 and June 2023, an estimated 78% of EU Member States' defence procurement went to non-EU suppliers, with 63% accounted for by the US alone.⁷¹ This dependency suppresses domestic production capacity, constrains European freedom of action, and exposes the EU to conditions that foreign suppliers – particularly through US ITAR regulations – can impose on equipment end-use. EDIS targets 50% of procurement from EU sources by 2030 and 60% by 2035.⁷²

The case against

The case against begins with the politics of sovereignty. Defence remains one of the most sensitive areas of national sovereignty. Article 346 TFEU explicitly allows Member States to exempt defence procurement from single market rules, and most have shown little appetite for transferring meaningful planning or command authority to EU institutions. The EDF in particular has been criticised for dispersing funding too widely and losing connection with actual military priorities – as the EDA noted, capability priorities are 'considered initially, but later lost' as annual work programmes are developed. Moreover, the unanimity rule in the CSDP decision-making hampers any attempts at progress, as demonstrated by the above-mentioned Hungary's blocking of over €6.6 billion in EPF reimbursements to Ukraine.⁷³

Furthermore, most EU defence industrial capacity is concentrated in France, Germany, and Italy. Eastern and smaller Member States, lacking significant domestic defence sectors, fear that EU instruments primarily benefit western champions and consequently buy off-the-shelf from outside the EU, precisely the behaviour that integration aims to reverse. This creates a fundamental trade-off: instruments that prioritise efficiency concentrate benefits

⁷¹ Schreer, "Europe's Defence Procurement since 2022", 2024.

⁷² S. Clapp, "European Defence Industrial Strategy.", 2024; S. Clapp et al., "ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030.", 2025; K. Hartley, "European Defence Policy: Prospects and Challenges.", 2024; L. Scazzieri, "Towards an EU Defence Union?", 2025.

⁷³ European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.", 2016, Art. 346; M. Trybus, "Buying Defence and Security in Europe.", 2014; M. Psara, "What Is the European Peace Facility and Why Hungary Is Blocking the Disbursements to Ukraine.", 2024.

in established western centres, while instruments that spread benefits widely introduce the political distortions that made previous collaborative programmes expensive.⁷⁴

Multinational programmes carry inherent inefficiency costs too: each partner demands workshare, a national assembly line, and design involvement that are politically necessary but economically suboptimal. The Franco-German FCAS and MGCS have both been repeatedly delayed by workshare disagreements,⁷⁵ and each added partner typically demands a national assembly line and design involvement that is politically necessary but economically suboptimal.

Finally, many Member States, particularly in northern and eastern Europe, remain wary of EU defence initiatives that could be read as duplicating NATO structures or irritating Washington. Under President Trump's second term the US has been more sceptical of EU defence efforts, making states that depend most heavily on American security guarantees cautious about initiatives that appear protectionist or that might unsettle the transatlantic relationship.⁷⁶

Points a Council conclusions document should address

1. Should the EU pursue a genuine defence union, or should its role remain firmly supplementary to NATO and national efforts?

As the legal chapter established, **Article 42(2) TEU** already contains a mandate for a 'common Union defence policy' leading eventually to 'common defence', but defers it entirely to a unanimous European Council decision that no political circumstance has yet produced. The question this committee must confront is therefore not whether the Treaty

⁷⁴ K. Hartley, "European Defence Policy: Prospects and Challenges.", 2024; B. Schreer, "Europe's Defence Procurement since 2022: A Reassessment.", 2024; L. Scazzieri, "Towards an EU Defence Union?", 2025.

⁷⁵ J. Möhring, "Troubled Twins: The FCAS and MGCS Weapon Systems and Franco-German Co-operation.", 2023.

⁷⁶ L. Scazzieri, "Towards an EU Defence Union?", 2025; F. de Vries, "Toward a New Security Architecture.", 2026; J. Larik, "Arma Fero, Ergo Sum? The European Union, NATO and the Quest for 'European Identity.'", 2013.

permits a defence union, but whether Member States are willing to build one *within* or *beyond* the existing framework.

Commission President von der Leyen has spoken openly of a ‘defence union’ and appointed former Lithuanian Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius as the EU’s first dedicated Defence Commissioner with an explicit mandate to advance this project. Yet most Member States continue to regard defence as a fundamentally national prerogative and look to NATO, not the EU, as the primary framework for collective security.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Should the EU become a genuine collective defence actor capable of coordinating planning, pooling capabilities, and eventually sharing strategic decision-making, or should it remain what it largely is today: a set of industrial incentives and procurement tools that support, but do not replace, national and NATO efforts?
- What level of ambition is both credible and achievable within the existing Treaty framework?
- What institutional or treaty changes would be required to go further, including whether the Article 31(3) passerelle clause should be used to extend qualified majority voting to further CSDP decisions?

2. How should EU defence integration relate to NATO? What should happen when the two pull in different directions?

The official position repeated in every EU document is that EU efforts ‘complement’ NATO and aim to strengthen rather than duplicate the alliance. In practice, the two frameworks generate persistent tensions. The ‘Buy European’ conditionality in SAFE and EDIP creates friction with non-EU NATO allies who fear exclusion from the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base, the Cyprus–Turkey dispute continues to block formal EU–NATO information-sharing, and when resources are scarce, Member States invariably finance NATO structures first. The scale of ambition in Readiness 2030 – and the shift in US posture under President Trump’s second term, which has both accelerated European

rearmament and made some allies more cautious about initiatives that could unsettle Washington – has sharpened this tension considerably. Larik has argued that acknowledging ‘NATO primacy’ in the Treaties amounts in practice to little more than a formal ‘transatlantic nod’ – States choose NATO over the EU not because the law compels them to, but for political reasons, as the Libya intervention demonstrated when France and the UK opted for NATO’s Unified Protector rather than an EU framework.⁷⁷ If that is right, the legal architecture of complementarity is largely performative, and the real question is whether Member States’ political preferences are shifting durably enough to sustain a stronger EU operational role, or whether, when the moment arrives, they will reach for NATO first regardless of what the Treaties say.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Should the EU formally accept NATO’s primacy for operational matters and concentrate its ambitions on industrial policy, cyber resilience, and procurement – the domains where it adds value NATO structurally cannot?
- Or does the current geopolitical moment, with US commitment less predictable than at any point since 1949, make a stronger EU operational role not merely desirable but strategically necessary?
- Where exactly is the line between complementarity and duplication, and who should draw it?

3. How should the EU manage the reality that Member States are deeply divided in their willingness and capacity for deeper defence integration?

PESCO was specifically designed with qualified majority voting to prevent individual States from blocking deeper cooperation, but the framework it produced is wide in membership and modest in output. This trajectory suggests that meaningful cooperation is consolidating in small, self-selected groups regardless of the formal all-inclusive architecture, which raises the question of whether the EU should acknowledge and accommodate this reality rather than resist it. Denmark’s CSDP opt-out illustrates the

⁷⁷ Larik, “Arma Fero, Ergo Sum?” [17]–[20], 2013.

costs of poorly managed differentiation: a State that broadly supports EU defence goals but arrives late to every negotiation with structurally limited influence.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Should PESCO be restructured to distinguish clearly between a committed core group and a wider participating tier?
- Should the EU embrace variable-geometry instruments – such as the Structures for European Armament Programmes (SEAPs) under EDIP – allowing coalitions of willing States to jointly procure without requiring consensus from all 27?
- How should the EU address the structural fault line between a western defence industrial base and eastern States most urgently demanding new capabilities – a divide that cuts across almost every financing and institutional design decision in this area?

4. How should deeper EU defence integration be financed and who should bear the cost?

Financing is inseparable from the constitutional question identified in the legal chapter: because the EU lacks direct Treaty competence in defence, every major instrument must be grounded in industrial policy or emergency economic law, which constrains both its design and democratic legitimacy. SAFE's adoption under Article 122 TFEU – bypassing the European Parliament entirely – has already generated a significant accountability critique. The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (2028–2034) is the most consequential near-term test: the Commission has proposed a fivefold increase of €131 billion for defence, security, and space, but the precedent from the current cycle, in which Member States cut the EDF proposal from €13 billion to under €8 billion, suggests the political resistance to EU-level defence spending remains substantial. 'Defence bonds' modelled on the post-pandemic Recovery Fund could raise hundreds of billions, but face strong resistance from fiscally conservative Member States.⁷⁸

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

⁷⁸ Scazzieri and Tordoir, "EU Defence Bonds.", 2025.

- Should financing mechanisms include distributional safeguards to ensure central and eastern European States – which host most of the strategic risk but little of the industrial capacity – are not simply subsidising western champions?
- How should the tension between efficiency and equity in instrument design be resolved?
- Should the next generation of financing tools be placed on a sounder democratic footing – through the ordinary legislative procedure rather than Article 122 TFEU – even if that makes adoption slower and more politically difficult?

5. Should EU defence instruments be designed around industrial goals or around actual military capability needs?

Because EU instruments are legally grounded in industrial policy rather than CSDP, they are formally designed to foster a competitive European defence industry – not to build military capability as such. This is not merely a legal technicality: it shapes what gets funded, how consortia are structured, and what success looks like. The EDA has noted that capability priorities are ‘considered initially, but later lost’ as annual EDF work programmes are developed, and winning consortia averaging 17 participants in 2023 raises genuine questions about whether scale is serving industrial politics rather than military output.⁷⁹

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Should EU instruments be more formally anchored to NATO-identified capability gaps and EDA priorities, with the EDA given a stronger formal role in programming rather than serving merely as an observer?
- Should annual funding cycles be replaced with multiannual frameworks providing more predictable demand signals to industry?
- Can a single instrument realistically serve both long-term industrial development and short-term military urgency – or do these two fundamentally different goals require separate tools designed from the outset for distinct purposes?

⁷⁹ European Commission, “Commission Invests over €1 Billion.”, 2024.

6. Should EU defence programmes be opened up to third-country partners and on what terms?

EU defence instruments are currently largely closed to non-EU partners, justified by the logic that EU money should not subsidise non-EU industries and that EU-funded equipment must remain free of third-country export controls – above all US ITAR regulations, which give Washington control over any product incorporating US technology. Logic here is coherent, but the blanket approach has generated significant alliance friction, the UK's post-Brexit exclusion being the starkest case, as Europe's most capable non-EU military partner is structurally shut out of the instruments designed to build European capability. Canada's 2026 association with PESCO projects established a new precedent, but on terms distinct from full programmatic participation.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Should third-country access be formalised into a principled case-by-case framework, evaluating partners on financing contribution, export control regime, and technology sensitivity?
- Should the answer differ depending on whether the partner is the UK, a non-EU NATO ally, or a State outside the alliance entirely?
- How does the EU balance the imperative of building genuine European industrial autonomy – reducing the very dependency that 78% non-EU procurement figures expose – with the practical necessity of maintaining the alliance cohesion on which European security ultimately still depends?

Additional preparation materials

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Topic B:

PROTECTING ELECTORAL INTEGRITY



Figure 3: Elections⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Daniel Jędzura / Adobe Stock. In European Parliament Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services, “‘Europeanising’ the electoral ballot”, 2024.

KEY TERMS USED	THEIR DEFINITIONS
Democratic integrity	Protecting democratic institutions, rights and processes from manipulation or erosion.
Electoral integrity	Ensuring elections are free, fair, transparent, competitive and trusted.
Rule of law	The principle that governments remain subject to law and independent courts.
Article 2 TEU	Establishes democracy, human rights and the rule of law as foundational EU values.
Article 7 TEU	Enables EU action against a Member State that seriously breaches EU values.
Principle of conferral	The EU may act only within powers granted by the Member States.
Subsidiarity	Decisions should remain national unless EU action would be more effective.
Supranational oversight	EU supervision of Member States' compliance with common standards.
Democratic backsliding	The gradual weakening of democratic institutions by elected governments.
Competitive authoritarianism	Elections continue, but incumbents make political competition unfair.
Democratic resilience	A democracy's ability to resist threats and maintain public confidence.

Disinformation	False or misleading information deliberately spread to deceive.
Foreign interference	Covert foreign activity intended to influence another country's politics or elections.
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference conducted to distort democratic debate.
Hybrid threat	The combined use of cyberattacks, disinformation, financing and political pressure.
Covert political financing	Hidden funding intended to influence parties, candidates or campaigns.
Algorithmic amplification	Digital systems increasing the visibility of engaging or divisive content.
Political microtargeting	Using personal data to deliver tailored political messages.
Deepfake	Convincing AI-generated or manipulated audio, video or imagery.
Bot network	Coordinated automated accounts used to amplify political narratives.
Rule of Law Toolbox	The EU's collection of monitoring, legal and financial enforcement measures.
Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism	Permits restrictions on EU funding when rule-of-law breaches threaten the EU budget.

European Democracy Action Plan	EU strategy addressing election integrity, disinformation and media freedom.
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Introduction

The integrity of democratic systems has emerged as one of the defining political concerns of the twenty-first century, particularly within the European Union (EU), where the preservation of shared values is both a legal obligation and a political necessity. Democratic integrity, broadly understood, encompasses the maintenance of electoral systems that are free, fair, transparent, and resistant to manipulation, as well as the institutional frameworks that ensure accountability, pluralism, and adherence to the rule of law. In the EU context, these principles are codified within the Union’s foundational treaties. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) explicitly affirms that the Union ‘is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights’.⁸¹

Despite this normative clarity, the practical safeguarding of democratic integrity has become increasingly complex. Over the past decade, the EU has confronted a range of challenges that collectively threaten the stability and legitimacy of its democratic systems. These include internal dynamics of democratic backsliding within certain Member States, the proliferation of disinformation across digital platforms, and the growing sophistication of foreign interference in electoral processes. As the Council of the European Union has emphasised, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) constitutes ‘a major and systemic threat to democratic processes, public debate and the integrity of elections’.⁸²

The convergence of these threats reflects broader transformations in the global political and technological landscape. The rise of digital communication technologies has fundamentally altered the nature of political engagement, enabling unprecedented levels of connectivity while simultaneously creating new vulnerabilities. Social media platforms,

⁸¹ European Union, Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2016.

⁸² Council of the European Union, “Disinformation and Democratic Resilience”, n.d.

for instance, have become central arenas for political discourse, yet their algorithmic structures often amplify sensationalist or polarising content, thereby exacerbating societal divisions. At the same time, geopolitical tensions have increasingly manifested in the form of hybrid threats, combining cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and covert political influence operations.

Within this context, the EU faces a dual challenge. On the one hand, it must develop effective mechanisms to protect electoral integrity and uphold the rule of law across its Member States. On the other hand, it must do so in a manner that respects the principle of national sovereignty, particularly in areas such as the administration of elections, which remain primarily within the competence of individual states. This tension between supranational oversight and national autonomy lies at the heart of the EU's response to democratic threats.

This section of the study guide aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of these issues by examining the theoretical and legal foundations of democratic integrity in the EU, the nature and evolution of contemporary threats, the institutional mechanisms available to address these challenges, and the broader political debates that shape policy responses.

Theoretical and legal framework

The safeguarding of democratic integrity within the European Union is rooted in a complex legal and normative framework, reflecting both the Union's supranational character and the sovereignty of its Member States. Central to is the concept of the **rule of law**, which serves as both a foundational principle and a practical mechanism for ensuring that democratic processes operate within clearly defined legal constraints.

The European Commission has articulated the rule of law as requiring that all public powers act within the constraints set out by law, in accordance with the values of democracy and fundamental rights, and under the control of independent and impartial courts.⁸³ This definition underscores the interdependence of legal and democratic principles,

⁸³ European Commission, 2023 Rule of Law Report, 2023.

emphasising that free elections alone are insufficient to guarantee democratic legitimacy in the absence of institutional safeguards such as judicial independence and effective checks and balances.

International standards further reinforce this understanding of democratic integrity. The **Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)**, through its **Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)**, has established a comprehensive set of **guidelines for democratic elections**,⁸⁴ which emphasise that elections must be characterised by universal suffrage, equality of opportunity for candidates, transparency in the electoral process, and accountability of public authorities. Importantly, also including media freedom, campaign financing, and the impartiality of electoral administration.

However, the EU's capacity to enforce these standards is shaped by the **principle of conferral**, which limits the Union's competences to those explicitly granted by the Member States.⁸⁵ Electoral processes, particularly at the national level, remain largely within the jurisdiction of individual States, creating a structural limitation in the EU's ability to directly intervene in electoral matters. Thus, necessitating a reliance on **indirect mechanisms such as monitoring, dialogue, and financial conditionality**.

This institutional arrangement gives rise to a fundamental tension between the EU's role as a guardian of shared values and its respect for national sovereignty. As legal scholar R. Daniel Kelemen argues, the EU operates within an 'authoritarian equilibrium', in which political considerations often inhibit decisive action against Member States that violate democratic norms. This equilibrium reflects the reality that enforcement mechanisms, such as **Article 7 TEU**, require the support of other Member States, which may be reluctant to set precedents that could later be used against them.⁸⁶

The **concept of subsidiarity** further complicates this dynamic. Enshrined in **Article 5 TEU**, subsidiarity requires that decisions be taken as closely as possible to the citizen, with the

⁸⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Election Observation Handbook, 2013.

⁸⁵ European Union, "Division of Competences within the European Union," EUR-Lex, 2026.

⁸⁶ R. Daniel Kelemen, "The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium," Journal of European Public Policy 27, no. 3, 2020.

EU acting only where objectives cannot be sufficiently achieved by Member States.⁸⁷ While this principle is intended to preserve democratic legitimacy, it can also limit the EU's ability to respond effectively to cross-border threats such as disinformation and foreign interference, which transcend national boundaries.

Key threats to electoral integrity

The contemporary threats to electoral integrity within the European Union are diverse and evolving, reflecting broader changes in the political, technological, and geopolitical environment. These threats can be broadly categorised into:

- **external challenges**, such as foreign interference and cyberattacks, and
- **internal challenges**, including democratic backsliding and institutional erosion.

Among the most prominent external threats is the phenomenon of **disinformation**, which the European Commission defines as 'verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public'.⁸⁸ Disinformation campaigns have become increasingly sophisticated, often leveraging social media platforms to reach large audiences with minimal cost. The algorithmic structures of these platforms, which prioritise engagement over accuracy, can amplify misleading content, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing biases.

The impact of disinformation on electoral processes is significant. By distorting public debate and undermining trust in institutions, disinformation can influence voter behaviour and weaken the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. As the Council of the European Union has noted, such activities are frequently part of broader strategies of foreign interference aimed at 'manipulating public opinion and destabilizing democratic systems'.⁸⁹

Foreign interference itself represents a multifaceted threat, encompassing a range of activities from cyberattacks on electoral infrastructure to covert political financing and propaganda campaigns. These activities are often attributed to state actors, particularly

⁸⁷ European Union, Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2016.

⁸⁸ European Commission, European Democracy Action Plan, 2020.

⁸⁹ Council of the European Union, "Disinformation and Democratic Resilience.", n.d.

Russia, which has been accused of conducting coordinated interference operations across Europe. Such operations typically combine multiple tactics, including hacking, the dissemination of false information, and the exploitation of social and political divisions.⁹⁰

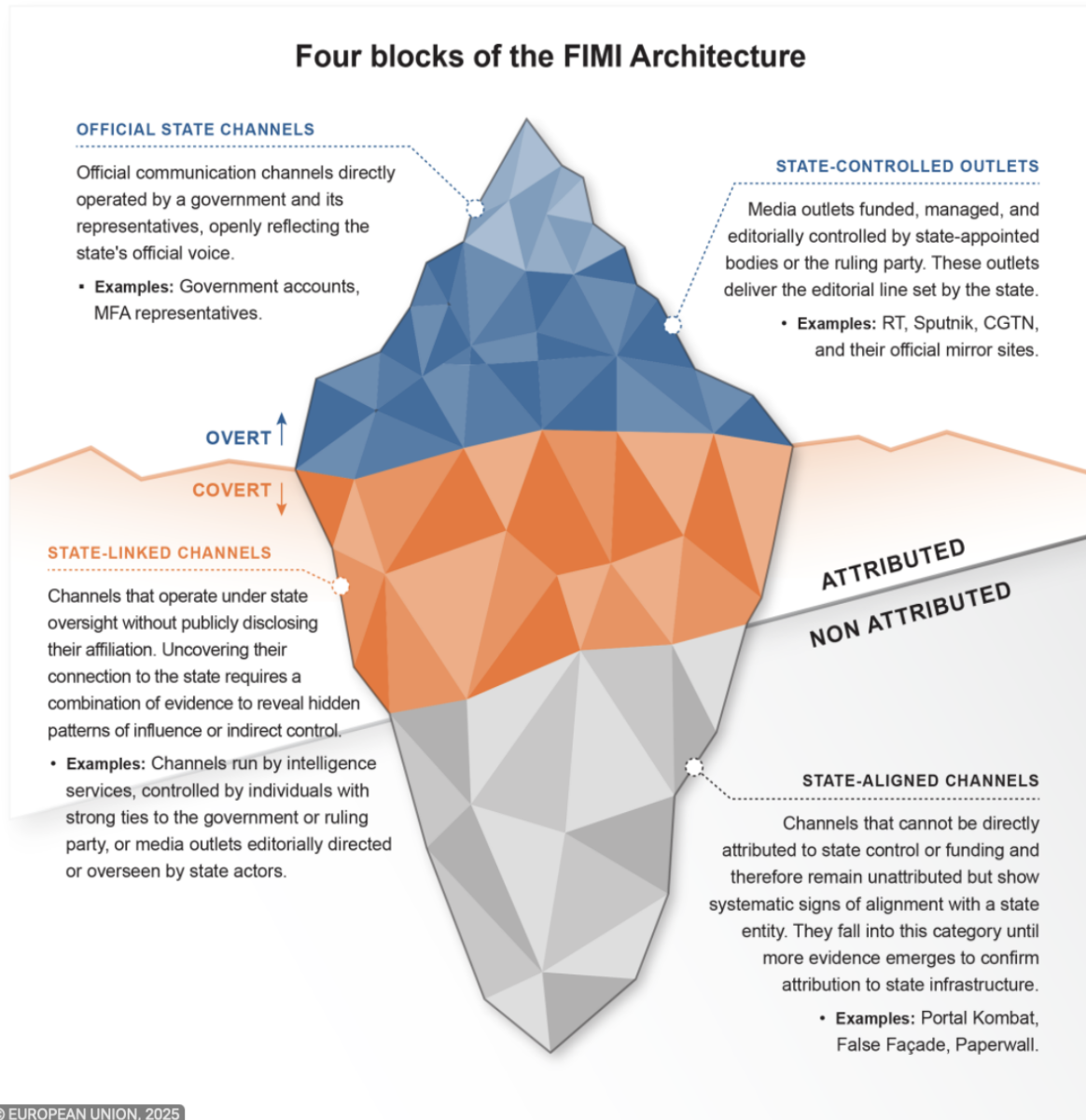


Figure 4: Four blocks of the FIMI architecture⁹¹

Cybersecurity threats further exacerbate these vulnerabilities. Electoral infrastructure, including voter registration systems and vote-counting mechanisms, can be targeted by cyberattacks designed to disrupt or manipulate the electoral process. Even in cases where

⁹⁰ European External Action Service, Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threat Report, 2023.

⁹¹ European External Action Service. "Four Blocks of the FIMI Architecture" [infographic]. In "Inside the Infrastructure of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) Operations.", 2025.

such attacks are unsuccessful, they can undermine public confidence in the integrity of elections. This highlights the importance of not only ensuring the security of electoral systems but also maintaining public trust in their reliability.

In its vast nature, electoral integrity concerns multiple issues, among these being **emerging technologies**, particularly artificial intelligence, which introduce additional complexities. As the development of deepfake technology, which allows for the creation of highly realistic but fabricated audio and video content, poses a significant challenge for regulators and policymakers.

Moreover, internal threats, particularly **democratic backsliding**, represent a distinct but equally significant challenge. Unlike external interference, which can often be framed as a security issue, democratic backsliding occurs within the legal and institutional framework of Member States. This includes measures that undermine judicial independence, restrict media freedom, or alter electoral rules in ways that favour incumbent governments. As R. Daniel Kelemen argues, democratic backsliding within the European Union has contributed to the emergence of forms of ‘competitive authoritarianism’, in which formal democratic institutions and elections continue to exist while the fairness and competitiveness of the political system are progressively undermined.⁹²

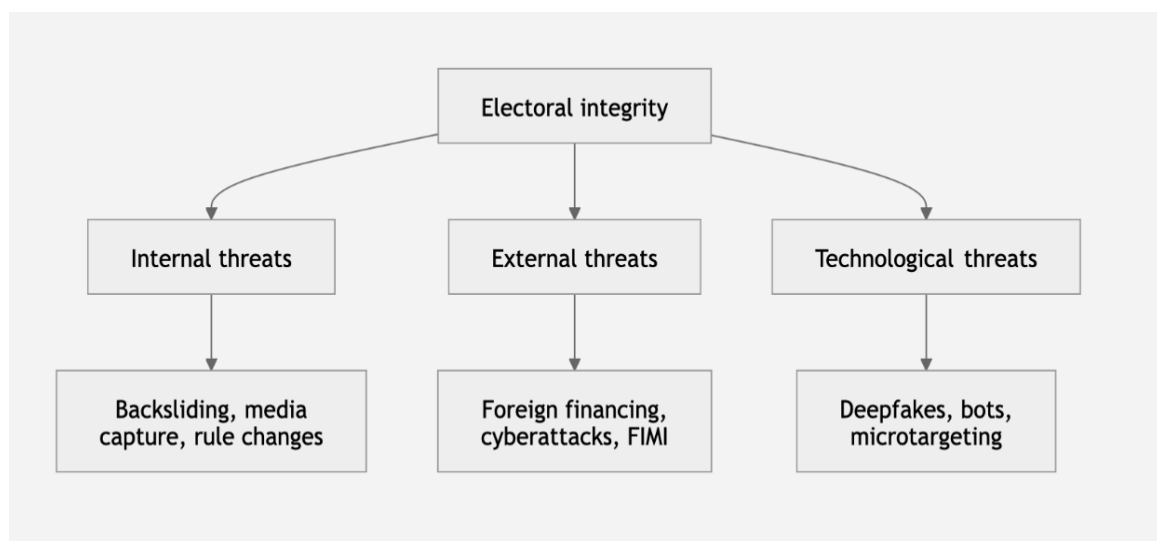


Figure 5: Summary of key threats to electoral integrity⁹³

⁹² R. Daniel Kelemen, “The European Union’s Authoritarian Equilibrium,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 3, 481–499, 2020.

⁹³ Figure created by the authors of the study guide.

EU institutional frameworks and policy tools

One of the primary preventive tools is the **Annual Rule of Law Report**, introduced in 2020. This mechanism provides a systematic review of developments in all Member States across four key areas: **justice systems**, **anti-corruption frameworks**, **media pluralism**, and **institutional checks and balances**. This report is intended to foster dialogue and early detection of risks, thereby preventing escalation into more serious violations.⁹⁴

However, where preventive measures fail, the EU may resort to corrective mechanisms. The most prominent of these is the **Article 7 procedure** under the Treaty on European Union. Article 7 allows the Union to determine whether there is ‘**a clear risk of a serious breach**’ or ‘**a serious and persistent breach**’ of EU values. In theory, this mechanism can lead to the suspension of a Member State’s voting rights in the Council. In practice, however, its effectiveness has been limited by the requirement for unanimity among Member States which has proven politically difficult to achieve.⁹⁵

Recognising these limitations, the EU introduced the **Rule of Conditionality Mechanism** in 2021. This mechanism represents a significant innovation in the Union’s approach to enforcement by **linking access to EU funds to compliance with rule-of-law standards**. Under this regulation, the EU can suspend or reduce funding where violations of the rule of law affect or risk affecting the Union’s financial interests.⁹⁶ This approach leverages the EU’s budgetary power to incentivise compliance, thereby circumventing some of the political constraints associated with Article 7.

The application of this mechanism in cases such as Hungary has demonstrated its potential effectiveness, with the EU introducing a tangible cost for non-compliance by conditioning access to substantial financial resources on adherence to democratic standards. At the same time, this approach has raised concerns about politicisation and the potential impact on citizens, who may bear the consequences of funding suspensions.

⁹⁴ European Commission, 2023 Rule of Law Report, 2023.

⁹⁵ European Union, Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2016.

⁹⁶ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2020/2092 on a General Regime of Conditionality for the Protection of the Union Budget, 2020.

In addition to these legal and financial instruments, the EU has developed a range of policy initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic resilience. Among the most significant is the **European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP)**, adopted in 2020. The EDAP seeks to ‘empower citizens and build more resilient democracies’ by addressing key challenges such as disinformation, electoral interference, and media freedom by emphasising the importance of transparency in political advertising, the protection of journalists, and the promotion of media literacy.⁹⁷

Another critical component of the EU’s framework is the role of the **European External Action Service (EEAS)**, particularly through its work on foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). The EEAS has developed **analytical and operational capacities** to detect and respond to disinformation campaigns, often in coordination with Member States and international partners.⁹⁸

Collectively, these instruments reflect a shift toward a more proactive and multifaceted approach to safeguarding democratic integrity. However, their effectiveness depends on the political will of Member States to support and implement them.

Key challenges

1. Digital platforms and electoral integrity

The role of digital platforms in shaping contemporary electoral processes cannot be overstated. Over the past two decades, platforms such as Facebook, X, and YouTube have become central arenas for political communication, fundamentally transforming the way information is produced, disseminated, and consumed.

While these platforms have **enhanced access to information and facilitated political participation**, they have also introduced **new risks that pose significant challenges to electoral integrity**.

⁹⁷ European Commission, *European Democracy Action Plan*, 2020.

⁹⁸ European External Action Service, “Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)”, n.d.

One of the primary concerns is the **algorithmic amplification of content**. As digital platforms typically prioritise content that generates high levels of engagement, often favouring sensationalist or emotionally charged material, contributing to the spread of disinformation and the polarisation of political discourse. As scholars have observed, ‘the architecture of social media platforms is not neutral but actively shapes the nature of political communication’.⁹⁹

In response to these challenges, the EU has sought to regulate digital platforms through a combination of legislative and voluntary measures such as **the Digital Services Act (DSA)**, which establishes a comprehensive framework for the governance of online platforms. The DSA imposes obligations on platforms, particularly Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), to assess and mitigate systemic risks related to the dissemination of illegal content, disinformation, and threats to electoral processes.¹⁰⁰

Under the DSA, platforms are required to conduct regular risk assessments, implement mitigation measures, and provide transparency regarding their algorithms and content moderation practices. These requirements showcase a significant shift toward greater accountability and oversight in the digital sphere, while also raise complex questions on the balance between regulation and freedom of expression.

In addition to the DSA, the EU has promoted the **Code of Practice on Disinformation**, a voluntary framework involving major technology companies. While this code has facilitated cooperation between the EU and private actors, concerns on its effectiveness and enforceability are raised due to its voluntary nature. Moreover, the regulation of digital platforms is further complicated by the global nature of these companies, which operate across multiple jurisdictions with differing legal and cultural norms, creating challenges for the EU in enforcing its standards and ensuring compliance.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Joshua A. Tucker et al., “Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature,” SSRN Electronic Journal, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act), 2022.

¹⁰¹ European Commission, “Code of Practice on Disinformation,” Shaping Europe’s Digital Future, n.d.

Despite these difficulties, the EU's efforts spearheaded the approach on digital governance, with potential implications beyond its borders.

2. Artificial intelligence, deepfakes and emerging electoral threats

The information environment in which democratic processes operate has been fundamentally altered by the rapid development of artificial intelligence technologies (AI). AI offers significant **opportunities for innovation, efficiency, and political engagement**. Yet, it also introduces profound risks to electoral integrity. Concerns regarding the misuse of AI in elections have intensified in recent years, particularly following the emergence of **generative AI systems** capable of producing highly convincing fake content. These developments have transformed disinformation from a largely text-based phenomenon into a sophisticated ecosystem involving **manipulated audio, video, imagery, and algorithmically targeted messaging**.

One of the most significant emerging threats is the **proliferation of deepfakes**, being digitally manipulated media generated through AI systems that can realistically imitate the appearance or voice of public figures. Deepfakes pose a unique challenge because they undermine the evidentiary value of visual and audio media, traditionally regarded as credible forms of proof in political communication. Significant risks arise with the ability to fabricate realistic videos of political leaders making inflammatory statements or endorsing false narratives, where rapid dissemination and emotional impact can shape voter perceptions before verification mechanisms can respond.¹⁰²

The political implications of deepfakes became particularly apparent during the 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections, when fabricated audio recordings allegedly depicting electoral fraud circulated online immediately prior to the vote. Although the recordings were later exposed as fake, their dissemination during the electoral silence period limited

¹⁰² Robert Chesney and Danielle Citron, "Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security," *California Law Review* 107, no. 6, 2019.

the ability of authorities and media organisations to effectively counter the misinformation before voters cast their ballots.¹⁰³

Within the European Union, concerns regarding AI-driven electoral manipulation intensified further following the Romanian presidential election crisis of 2024. Romanian authorities identified coordinated campaigns involving AI-enhanced disinformation, automated amplification networks, and manipulated digital content designed to shape political narratives and undermine confidence in electoral institutions.¹⁰⁴ Thus showcasing the efficiency of foreign interference.

In addition to deepfakes, AI systems enable **increasingly sophisticated forms of political microtargeting**. Through the large-scale analysis of personal data, political actors and external entities can tailor messages to highly specific demographic, behavioural, or psychological profiles. While targeted political communication is not inherently incompatible with democratic practice, concerns arise when such techniques exploit individual vulnerabilities, reinforce political polarisation, or disseminate misleading information in ways that remain largely invisible to broader public scrutiny.¹⁰⁵

The controversy surrounding political microtargeting emerged prominently following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which revealed the extensive use of harvested Facebook user data for behavioural political advertising during major electoral campaigns.¹⁰⁶ The integration of artificial intelligence into these practices has significantly expanded their scale and sophistication. Machine-learning systems are capable of continuously refining messaging strategies based on user interaction and engagement patterns, thereby optimising persuasive effectiveness in real time.¹⁰⁷

The role of **social media recommendation algorithms** further intensifies these concerns. Platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and X rely heavily on algorithmic

¹⁰³ Samuel C. Woolley and Tomáš Křišťák, “Beyond the Deepfake Hype: AI, Democracy, and the Slovak Case,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, n.d.

¹⁰⁴ Reuters, “Romanian Parliament Sees Evidence of Election Meddling,” 2024.

¹⁰⁵ European Data Protection Supervisor, Opinion 3/2018 on Online Manipulation and Personal Data, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ United Kingdom, House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, Disinformation and “Fake News”: Final Report, Eighth Report of Session 2017–19, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Tsedal Neeley and Paul M. Leonardi, “Developing a More AI-Ready Workforce,” 2022.

recommendation systems designed to maximise user engagement. Research has demonstrated that such systems often prioritise emotionally charged, sensational, or polarising content, inadvertently amplifying disinformation and political extremism.¹⁰⁸ As scholars have observed, ‘algorithmic curation has become a central mechanism shaping political exposure and public opinion formation’.¹⁰⁹

This dynamic creates a structural challenge for democratic governance. Unlike traditional media systems, where editorial accountability is more clearly identifiable, algorithmic systems frequently operate through opaque decision-making processes that remain inaccessible to both regulators and ordinary users. Consequently, digital platforms have become powerful intermediaries in electoral discourse while often lacking the democratic accountability traditionally associated with public information institutions.¹¹⁰

Recognising these risks, the European Union has sought to establish a regulatory framework capable of addressing AI-related threats to democracy. One of the most significant developments in this regard is the adoption of the **Artificial Intelligence Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689)**, widely regarded as the world’s first comprehensive legal framework governing artificial intelligence.¹¹¹

Under the AI Act, certain AI practices involving manipulative techniques, biometric categorisation, and social scoring are prohibited or subject to strict limitations. The regulation also introduces transparency obligations for providers of generative AI systems, including requirements that AI-generated or manipulated content, such as deepfakes, be appropriately disclosed where relevant to public interest or electoral contexts.¹¹² The AI Act complements existing digital governance frameworks, particularly the **Digital Services Act**

¹⁰⁸ European Commission, European Democracy Action Plan 2020, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Joshua A. Tucker et al., “Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature,” 2018.

¹¹⁰ Tarleton Gillespie, “Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media,” 2018.

¹¹¹ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 Laying Down Harmonised Rules on Artificial Intelligence (AI Act), 2024.

¹¹² Ibid.

(DSA), which requires major online platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks related to disinformation and electoral manipulation.¹¹³

Nevertheless, the implementation of these frameworks remains highly contested. Critics argue that extensive regulation may inhibit technological innovation or create indirect risks for freedom of expression and political debate.¹¹⁴ Others contend that current measures remain insufficient given the rapid pace of AI development and the increasingly transnational nature of digital disinformation campaigns. A central challenge therefore lies in balancing the protection of democratic processes with the preservation of democratic, open political discourse and technological advancement.

Another emerging concern involves the use of **AI-powered bots and automated influence networks**. These systems can simulate authentic political engagement on a massive scale, creating the false appearance of widespread support for specific narratives, movements, or candidates. During electoral periods, coordinated bot networks may distort online discourse, artificially amplify extremist or misleading content, and overwhelm fact-checking mechanisms. Malicious actors can operate across jurisdictions while exploiting differences in legal frameworks, enforcement capacities, and platform governance standards. This challenge is particularly significant in the context of foreign interference, where state-sponsored actors may simultaneously target multiple democratic systems through coordinated information operations.¹¹⁵

At the same time, **AI also offers opportunities for strengthening democratic resilience**. Artificial intelligence can assist in identifying coordinated disinformation campaigns, detecting manipulated media, and improving cybersecurity responses. Several EU institutions and Member States have consequently begun investing in AI-assisted

¹¹³ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act), 2022.

¹¹⁴ Anu Bradford, *Digital Empires: The Global Battle to Regulate Technology*, 2023.

¹¹⁵ European External Action Service, “Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI),” n.d.

monitoring systems designed to identify foreign information manipulation and coordinated inauthentic behaviour.¹¹⁶

Ultimately, the relationship between artificial intelligence and democracy will depend upon the capacity of institutions to develop adaptive governance frameworks capable of balancing innovation with accountability. The European Union’s regulatory approach represents one of the most ambitious global attempts to address these challenges, positioning the EU as a leading actor in the field.

3. Media freedom and democratic integrity

Press freedom in Europe

Global ranking and situation of press freedom, 2025

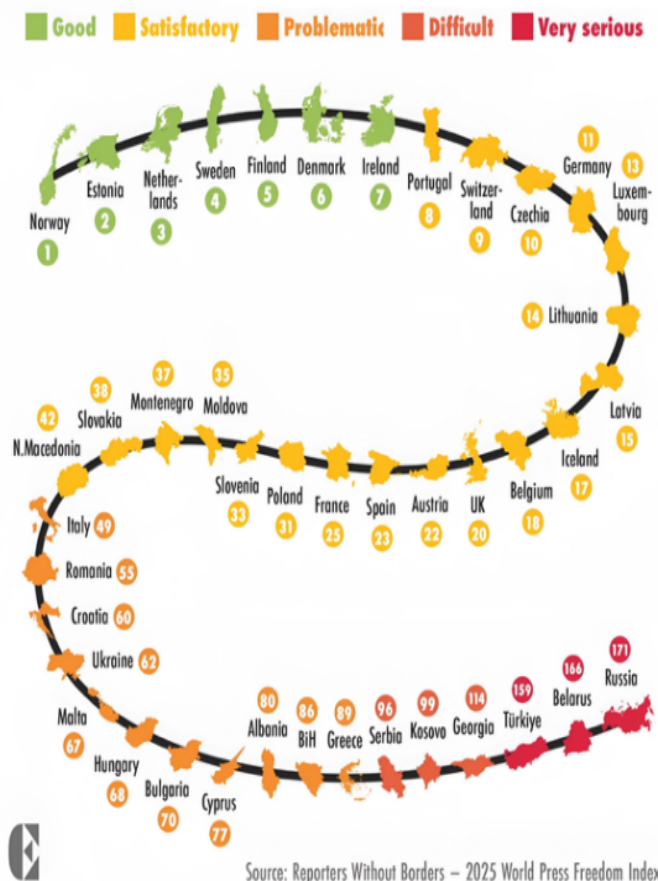


Figure 6: Press freedom in Europe¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ European Commission, Countering Disinformation: EU Toolbox and Monitoring Mechanisms, 2024.

¹¹⁷ europe.magazine (Instagram). “Press Freedom in Europe: Global Ranking and Situation of Press Freedom, 2025.”, 2025.

Media freedom and pluralism constitute fundamental components of democratic integrity and are indispensable to the conduct of free and fair elections. Within democratic systems, the media serves as a critical mechanism of accountability, scrutiny, and public deliberation. The ability of citizens to make informed electoral choices rests on access to diverse, independent, and reliable sources of information. Consequently, threats to media freedom increasingly represent threats to democratic governance itself.¹¹⁸

The European Union recognizes this connection explicitly. **Article 11** of the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union** guarantees both freedom of expression and ‘the freedom and pluralism of the media’.¹¹⁹ Similarly, the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly emphasised that free media constitutes one of the ‘essential foundations of a democratic society’.¹²⁰ Yet, despite these legal protections, concerns regarding media independence and democratic pluralism have intensified across Europe in recent years. These concerns are particularly privy in the context of elections, as control over information flows can directly influence public opinion, voter behaviour, and the fairness of political competition.

One of the central challenges confronting European democracies is the phenomenon of **media capture**, whereby political or economic actors exert disproportionate influence over media institutions. Media capture may occur through direct state ownership, political appointments to regulatory authorities, concentration of private ownership among politically aligned actors, or financial dependence on government advertising. Unlike overt censorship, media capture often operates through subtler mechanisms that preserve the appearance of media freedom while gradually undermining editorial independence.¹²¹ This creates an uneven informational environment in which opposition parties, independent journalists, and dissenting voices face structural disadvantages.

¹¹⁸ europe.magazine (Instagram). “Press Freedom in Europe: Global Ranking and Situation of Press Freedom, 2025.”, 2025.

¹¹⁹ European Union, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 11, 2012.

¹²⁰ European Court of Human Rights, *Handyside v. United Kingdom*, 1976.

¹²¹ Media Development Investment Fund, *Media Capture in Europe*, 2023.

The case of Hungary illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly. Since 2010, the government of Viktor Orbán has overseen significant restructuring of the Hungarian media landscape. The **Media Law (Act CLXXXV of 2010)** centralised regulatory authority within the National Media and Info Communications Authority, whose leadership became closely aligned with the ruling party. Simultaneously, pro-government business figures acquired significant portions of the private media sector, culminating in the creation of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) in 2018, which consolidated hundreds of media outlets under a single pro-government entity. International observers, including the European Parliament and Freedom House, argued that these developments significantly reduced media pluralism and weakened the ability of opposition parties to compete on equal terms during elections.¹²²

The erosion of media pluralism has broader implications beyond electoral fairness as independent journalism plays a central role in exposing corruption, monitoring abuses of power, and countering disinformation. In recent years, increasing attention has focused on the use of **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs)**, legal actions intended not necessarily to win in court but to burden journalists, activists, and independent media organisations with costly and time-consuming litigation. Such lawsuits create a chilling effect on investigative reporting, discouraging scrutiny of powerful political or economic actors.¹²³

The murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in 2017 became a defining moment in European debates surrounding media freedom and journalist protection. Caruana Galizia had investigated corruption, money laundering, and political misconduct prior to her assassination. Her death prompted widespread criticism of the failure of Maltese institutions to adequately protect journalists and uphold the rule of law. Similarly, the murder of Slovak investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018 highlighted the risks faced by journalists investigating corruption and organized crime. These cases reinforced

¹²² Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: Hungary*, 2024.

¹²³ Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE), *SLAPPs in Europe Report*, 2023.

concerns that threats to media freedom are not limited to authoritarian regimes outside Europe but increasingly affect EU Member States themselves.¹²⁴

In response to these developments, the European Union has sought to strengthen protections for media freedom and pluralism through both legislative and policy initiatives. One of the most significant recent developments is the adoption of the **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)** in 2024.¹²⁵ The EMFA seeks to establish safeguards for editorial independence, increase transparency regarding media ownership, and limit political interference in public service media. The regulation also introduces protections against the use of spyware targeting journalists and enhances cooperation between national media regulators. Importantly, the EMFA reflects a shift in EU thinking whereby media pluralism is no longer viewed solely as a cultural or economic issue but increasingly as a matter of democratic security. This shift recognises that information manipulation and media concentration can undermine the fairness of electoral competition in ways comparable to more traditional forms of electoral interference. The EU has also introduced measures addressing SLAPP lawsuits. In 2024, the Union adopted the **Anti-SLAPP Directive**, aimed at protecting journalists and civil society actors from abusive cross-border litigation intended to suppress public participation. The directive allows courts to dismiss manifestly unfounded claims at an early stage and provides safeguards for defendants targeted by abusive lawsuits.¹²⁶

Digital transformation has significantly complicated the relationship between media and democracy. Traditional media organisations increasingly compete with online platforms and decentralised digital information ecosystems, where false or misleading content can circulate rapidly with limited editorial verification or professional gatekeeping.¹²⁷ At the

¹²⁴ Robert Mahoney, “After Murders of Kuciak and Caruana Galizia, Investigative Journalists Band Together for Justice,” Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018.

¹²⁵ European Commission, “European Media Freedom Act,” 2018.

¹²⁶ European Union, Directive (EU) 2024/1069 on Protecting Persons Engaging in Public Participation from Manifestly Unfounded Claims or Abusive Court Proceedings, 2024.

¹²⁷ Manuel Castells, “Power in the Network Society,” 2019.

same time, declining advertising revenues and changing media consumption patterns have increased the economic vulnerability of independent journalism across Europe.¹²⁸

The growing dominance of major digital platforms has also transformed advertising markets, redirecting revenue away from traditional news organisations and weakening the financial sustainability of local and investigative journalism. As a result, many independent media outlets face increasing economic precarity, potentially making them more vulnerable to political pressure, concentrated ownership structures, or corporate influence. This transformation has generated significant debate regarding the role of public funding and state support for journalism. While public subsidies may help sustain media pluralism and independent reporting, they may also create risks of political dependence if allocation mechanisms are not administered transparently and impartially.¹²⁹

Another critical issue concerns the relationship between media regulation and freedom of expression. Measures aimed at combating disinformation, hate speech, or harmful online content may inadvertently create opportunities for censorship or political misuse. Governments may invoke concerns regarding ‘fake news’ to justify restrictive measures targeting dissenting voices, opposition actors, or critical journalism.¹³⁰

The **rise of foreign state-sponsored media operations** has further complicated this environment. Russian state-backed outlets such as RT and Sputnik were accused by European institutions of disseminating coordinated disinformation and propaganda targeting European audiences, particularly following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022.¹³¹ In response, the European Union imposed restrictions on the broadcasting and distribution of these outlets within the Union under **sanctions measures** adopted by the Council of the European Union, arguing that they functioned as instruments of systematic information manipulation and hybrid warfare rather than independent journalistic organisations.¹³²

¹²⁸ Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2024, 2024.

¹²⁹ European Commission, European Media Industry Outlook, 2023.

¹³⁰ ARTICLE 19, “Fake News” Laws and Freedom of Expression 2020.

¹³¹ European External Action Service, “Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).”, n.d.

¹³² Council of the European Union, “EU Imposes Sanctions on State-Owned Outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik’s Broadcasting in the EU,” 2022.

These measures nevertheless generated debate regarding freedom of expression and the legitimacy of restricting media outlets, even in contexts involving foreign propaganda and information warfare. Critics warned that such restrictions risk creating precedents that could potentially be misused by less democratic governments to suppress critical or oppositional media under the justification of combating disinformation.¹³³

Ultimately, media freedom and pluralism remain essential pillars of democratic resilience. Electoral integrity cannot be understood solely in procedural or institutional terms; it also depends upon the broader informational environment in which political competition takes place. Citizens must have access to diverse, independent, and reliable sources of information to exercise meaningful democratic choice.¹³⁴

The challenges confronting media systems in Europe therefore extend beyond journalism itself. They concern the broader capacity of democratic societies to sustain informed public debate, resist manipulation, and maintain institutional accountability within an increasingly fragmented and contested information landscape.

4. Public trust and democratic resilience

Public trust constitutes one of the most essential yet fragile components of democratic resilience. While legal safeguards, institutional oversight, and technological protections are critical to safeguarding electoral integrity, **democratic systems ultimately depend on citizens' confidence in the legitimacy and fairness of political processes.** Elections can only effectively confer democratic legitimacy when voters believe that institutions operate transparently, impartially, and free from manipulation.

In recent years, declining trust in political institutions has emerged as a significant concern across the European Union. Factors such as political polarisation, corruption scandals, disinformation campaigns, and perceptions of unequal representation have contributed to growing scepticism toward democratic institutions.¹³⁵ Foreign interference and online

¹³³ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2023: Freedom of Expression and Online Regulation*, 2023.

¹³⁴ European Union, *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, Article 11, 2012.

¹³⁵ Eurobarometer, *Citizens' Trust in EU Institutions Report*, 2023.

disinformation further exacerbate this erosion of trust as the objective of many hybrid interference campaigns is not necessarily to support a specific candidate, but rather to undermine faith in democratic systems altogether.

The spread of disinformation during electoral periods can create confusion regarding the reliability of information sources, while repeated allegations of fraud or manipulation may weaken acceptance of electoral outcomes. This dynamic is particularly dangerous in polarised political environments, where distrust can deepen societal divisions and reduce citizens' willingness to engage constructively in democratic processes.

Recent polling also suggests that democratic scepticism is becoming increasingly pronounced among younger Europeans. A 2025 YouGov survey conducted for the TUI Foundation found that only 57 percent of Europeans aged 16–26 considered democracy preferable to other forms of government, while 21 percent expressed openness to authoritarian rule under certain circumstances. Support for democracy was particularly low in countries such as Poland, France, and Spain, reflecting broader concerns regarding political polarisation, economic insecurity, and declining confidence in traditional political institutions.¹³⁶ The findings are especially significant in the context of electoral integrity debates, as declining trust in democratic governance may increase societal vulnerability to populism, disinformation, and anti-democratic narratives. The survey also highlighted growing perceptions among young Europeans that democratic systems are failing to address major contemporary challenges effectively, including economic inequality, migration, and geopolitical instability. These trends illustrate that safeguarding democratic resilience requires not only institutional protections against external interference but also sustained efforts to strengthen democratic legitimacy and civic trust among younger generations.

¹³⁶ Jon Henley, "Young Europeans Losing Faith in Democracy, Poll Finds," 2025.

Case study: Moldova

Although not a Member State of the European Union, Moldova represents one of the most significant recent examples of direct electoral interference in Europe and offers important insights into the evolving nature of hybrid threats.

During the **2024 presidential election and accompanying referendum on EU accession**, Moldovan authorities and European institutions identified what was widely described as **unprecedented foreign interference linked to Russian and pro-Russian actors**.¹³⁷

According to Moldovan officials, European institutions, and investigative reporting, this interference involved both **direct and indirect attempts to influence electoral outcomes**. These activities reportedly included large-scale vote-buying schemes, coordinated disinformation campaigns targeting EU integration, cyber operations, and the illicit financing of political actors aligned with foreign interests.¹³⁸ Digital platforms played a particularly important role in disseminating misleading narratives designed to exploit existing social and political divisions within Moldova.

The European Parliament stated that these activities constituted a deliberate attempt to ‘undermine democratic processes and destabilise Moldova’s European path’.¹³⁹ Reports further indicated that extensive bribery and influence networks linked to pro-Russian actors targeted substantial numbers of voters during the electoral period.¹⁴⁰ Such actions represented a direct challenge to core democratic principles, including electoral fairness, voter autonomy, and political transparency.

In response, Moldovan authorities implemented a series of **defensive measures aimed at protecting the electoral process**. These included restricting access for certain foreign observers suspected of links to interference operations, strengthening cybersecurity

¹³⁷ European Parliament, “Parliament Condemns Russia’s Interference in Moldova,” 2024.

¹³⁸ Reuters, “EU Slams ‘Unprecedented’ Interference by Russia in Moldova Referendum,” 2024.

¹³⁹ European Parliament, “Parliament Condemns Russia’s Interference in Moldova,” 2024.

¹⁴⁰ The Guardian, “Moldova Vote and Foreign Interference,” 2024.

protections, and increasing cooperation with European institutions and international partners.¹⁴¹

The European Union responded by formally condemning the interference, expanding financial and technical assistance to Moldova, and reinforcing support for the country's democratic resilience and EU integration process.¹⁴² The Moldovan case illustrates the evolution of foreign electoral interference into a sophisticated form of hybrid warfare in which traditional political influence techniques are combined with digital manipulation, cyber operations, and economic leverage.

Conclusions

The safeguarding of democratic integrity and electoral processes in the European Union represents one of the most complex and pressing challenges of contemporary governance. As this study guide has demonstrated, the threats facing EU democracies are multifaceted, encompassing both internal dynamics of democratic backsliding and external pressures such as disinformation and foreign interference.

The EU has responded to these challenges through the development of a diverse set of institutional mechanisms, ranging from legal procedures such as Article 7 TEU to innovative tools such as the Rule of Conditionality Mechanism and the Digital Services Act. These measures reflect an evolving understanding of democratic resilience, one that recognises the interconnected nature of legal, technological, and societal factors.

However, significant challenges remain. The effectiveness of EU mechanisms is often constrained by political considerations, institutional limitations, and the need to balance competing values such as sovereignty and freedom of expression. The debates surrounding these issues highlight the difficulty of developing policies that are both effective and legitimate within a diverse and pluralistic Union.

¹⁴¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Moldova Election Observation Mission Reports, 2024.

¹⁴² European Commission, "EU Support for Moldova's Democratic Resilience," 2024.

Looking forward, the future of democratic integrity in the EU will depend on the ability of institutions and Member States to adapt to an increasingly complex and dynamic environment. This will require not only the refinement of existing tools but also the development of new approaches that address emerging threats, particularly those associated with technological innovation.

Ultimately, the resilience of European democracy will depend not only on institutional safeguards but also on the engagement and trust of its citizens. As the EU continues to navigate this evolving landscape, the protection of democratic integrity must remain at the forefront of its political and legal agenda.

Points a Council conclusions document should address

The safeguarding of democratic integrity and electoral processes within the European Union raises a series of complex legal, political, and normative questions that remain deeply contested among Member States, institutions, scholars, and civil society actors. Delegates should therefore approach this topic not as a matter with clear or universally accepted solutions, but as an evolving debate concerning the future of democracy, sovereignty, and governance in Europe.

1. To what extent should the European Union intervene in the domestic democratic affairs of Member States?

One of the central debates concerns the balance between national sovereignty and supranational oversight. Elections and constitutional structures have traditionally been regarded as core aspects of state sovereignty and democratic self-determination. Many governments therefore argue that excessive EU involvement in domestic democratic affairs risks undermining national constitutional autonomy and the principle of subsidiarity established under Article 5 TEU.

At the same time, the European Union is founded upon shared democratic values codified in Article 2 TEU, including democracy, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental rights. EU institutions increasingly argue that democratic backsliding within one Member State

threatens the integrity and legal coherence of the Union as a whole, particularly given the interconnected nature of EU law and mutual recognition mechanisms.

This debate raises broader questions concerning the future trajectory of European integration.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Should the EU possess stronger enforcement powers regarding democratic standards, or would this risk transforming the Union into an excessively centralised political actor?
- Conversely, can the EU remain politically and legally credible if it fails to respond effectively to democratic erosion within its own Member States?

2. Are the EU's current enforcement mechanisms sufficient to address democratic backsliding?

The limitations of existing EU enforcement tools remain highly controversial. Article 7 TEU, theoretically permits sanctions against Member States that seriously breach EU values. However, the requirement for unanimity among Member States has significantly constrained its practical effectiveness, particularly in the cases of Hungary and Poland.

The introduction of the Rule of Conditionality Mechanism represented an important shift toward financial enforcement by linking access to EU funds with compliance regarding rule-of-law standards. Supporters argue that this mechanism provides the EU with meaningful leverage capable of producing tangible institutional reforms. Critics, however, contend that suspending EU funds may disproportionately affect citizens, local authorities, or civil society organisations rather than the governments responsible for democratic violations.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Should the EU should further expand financial conditionality mechanisms, reform Article 7 procedures, or develop entirely new institutional tools for protecting democratic standards?

3. How should the European Union regulate digital platforms without undermining freedom of expression?

The rise of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed political communication and electoral campaigning. Social media platforms now function as central intermediaries within democratic discourse, shaping information exposure through the recommendations by the algorithm. At the same time, these platforms have become major tools for disinformation, foreign interference, and online political manipulation.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) reflects the EU's effort to impose greater accountability upon major online platforms, particularly concerning systemic risks affecting democratic processes. Nevertheless, significant controversy remains regarding the appropriate balance between regulation and freedom of expression. Critics warn that aggressive content moderation requirements may encourage over-removal of lawful political speech, create risks for journalistic freedom, or even enable future political misuse.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Who should determine what constitutes harmful disinformation?
- Should private technology companies effectively become arbiters of acceptable political discourse?
- How can democratic societies combat manipulation while preserving open debate and political pluralism?

4. How should democracies respond to AI-generated disinformation and deepfakes?

The European Union has sought to address the risks brought by deepfakes through the AI Act, which introduces transparency obligations and restrictions on certain AI applications capable of affecting democratic processes. However, the rapid pace of technological development continues to outpace many regulatory structures.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- A central debate concerns whether existing legal frameworks are sufficient to address emerging AI threats. Some policymakers advocate stricter regulation of generative AI

technologies during electoral periods, while others caution that excessive regulation could stifle innovation and technological competitiveness.

- Delegates should also consider the broader implications of synthetic media for democratic trust. If citizens increasingly struggle to distinguish between authentic and manipulated content, how can democratic societies maintain informed public deliberation and trust in electoral information?

5. How can the European Union effectively counter foreign interference while preserving democratic openness?

Foreign interference has become one of the defining security concerns affecting democratic systems across Europe. Recent developments in Romania and Moldova illustrated how cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, covert financing, and coordinated online manipulation may be used to influence elections and undermine public confidence in democratic institutions.

The EU has increasingly framed foreign information manipulation as a form of hybrid warfare requiring coordinated European responses involving cybersecurity, intelligence-sharing, digital regulation, and public resilience strategies. However, countering foreign interference raises significant legal and political dilemmas.

Measures restricting foreign media outlets, online platforms, or political financing may strengthen democratic resilience, but they may also generate concerns regarding censorship, proportionality, and freedom of expression. The EU's restrictions on Russian state-backed media organisations such as RT and Sputnik following the invasion of Ukraine generated precisely such debates.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Delegates may therefore consider how democratic systems can defend themselves against external manipulation without undermining the openness and pluralism that distinguish democratic governance from authoritarian models.

6. To what extent does media concentration threaten democratic pluralism?

Media freedom and pluralism remain essential conditions for fair democratic competition. Yet across Europe, concerns have intensified regarding media capture, concentrated ownership structures, political pressure on journalists, and the weakening financial sustainability of independent journalism.

Cases such as Hungary demonstrated how media concentration and regulatory restructuring may gradually erode pluralism while formally preserving electoral procedures. Simultaneously, digital transformation has weakened traditional journalism business models, increasing the vulnerability of independent media organisations to political or economic influence.

This raises difficult questions concerning the role of the state in supporting journalism.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Should governments provide greater public funding for independent media? If so, how can such support be administered without creating political dependency or undermining editorial independence?

7. How can democratic resilience and public trust be strengthened?

Ultimately, democratic resilience depends not only upon legal frameworks and technological safeguards but also upon public confidence in democratic institutions.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- Delegates should therefore consider what role civic education, media literacy, institutional transparency, and citizen participation should play in strengthening democratic resilience.
- Can regulatory responses alone protect democracy, or must long-term resilience also depend upon rebuilding public trust and democratic legitimacy?

Additional preparation materials

VIDEO RESOURCES:

- European Parliament. *Explained: How to Protect European Democracy*. 2026. <https://youtu.be/q-dwDdrCyqs?si=FHV58LFEMgCJwoin>.

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