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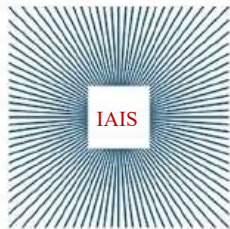
EUROPE IN TRANSITION

Strategic Choices amid Transatlantic
and Global Rivalries in 2025



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FROM THE EDITOR

This report brings together a comprehensive set of analytical papers and commentaries examining the evolving strategic, political, economic, and institutional landscape of the European Union and its wider neighbourhood at a moment of profound transformation. Comprising twenty-one in-depth analytical chapters, the publication seeks to move beyond episodic commentary and instead offer a structured, evidence-based interpretation of the forces reshaping Europe's internal cohesion, external partnerships, and global role.

The year under review has been marked by the convergence of several systemic challenges. Prolonged geopolitical turbulence, the war in Ukraine, intensifying transatlantic uncertainty, and accelerating global technological competition have fundamentally altered the assumptions that long underpinned European integration and security. At the same time, internal pressures, ranging from institutional governance constraints and social polarisation to identity debates and reform fatigue, have increasingly shaped the EU's capacity to act as a unified strategic actor. This report approaches these developments not as isolated phenomena, but as interconnected dynamics that collectively define the EU's new strategic reality.

Taken together, this report aims to provide policymakers, researchers, and practitioners with a coherent analytical map of Europe's current trajectory. The contributions are intentionally written in a policy-relevant yet academically grounded manner, combining verified data, institutional analysis, and forward-looking assessment. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, the report seeks to clarify choices, illuminate trade-offs, and identify the structural constraints within which European actors operate.

In an era characterised by strategic uncertainty and accelerated change, the value of such analysis lies not in predicting outcomes, but in enhancing preparedness. It is our hope that this volume will contribute to more informed debate and more resilient decision-making as Europe navigates an increasingly complex international environment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A central finding of the report is that the European Union is operating in an environment where external pressures and internal constraints increasingly reinforce one another. The prolonged conflict in Ukraine has become a structural factor shaping Europe's security posture, defence spending, industrial policy, and diplomatic priorities. At the same time, the return of strategic unpredictability in relations with the United States has intensified debates on European strategic autonomy, NATO's future role, and the sustainability of existing security arrangements. These dynamics are unfolding against a backdrop of fiscal pressures, uneven economic performance among member states, and rising political fragmentation within the Union.
- Several chapters focus on the internal resilience of the EU, analysing the state of its economy, institutional governance, and societal cohesion. The report highlights persistent structural challenges, including slow growth, high public debt in key member states, and tensions between ambitious regulatory frameworks and global competitiveness. Defence-related initiatives, including the EU's rearmament agenda and long-term readiness planning, are assessed not only as responses to external threats, but also as tests of political solidarity and financial sustainability. The analysis underscores that Europe's capacity to act externally is inseparable from its ability to maintain internal coherence and public legitimacy.
- A significant portion of the report is devoted to transatlantic relations, which are shown to be undergoing a qualitative shift. The second Trump administration has amplified long-standing disagreements over burden-sharing, trade, technology regulation, and strategic priorities. Rather than treating these tensions as temporary or personality-driven, the report frames them as structural divergences that compel Europe to reassess its dependence on U.S. security guarantees while simultaneously avoiding a complete rupture of the alliance. Case studies on France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and NATO illustrate how individual actors are recalibrating their policies within this changing framework.
- The report also examines Europe's eastern and south-eastern neighbourhood, with particular attention to Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Slovenia. Ukraine is analysed not only as a focal

point of security policy, but as a catalyst reshaping European diplomacy, defence integration, and enlargement debates. Contributions on Serbia and Bulgaria demonstrate how enlargement fatigue, domestic political dynamics, and competing external influences complicate the EU's role as a transformative actor. Slovenia's position highlights how smaller EU member states seek to uphold principled foreign-policy stances while navigating broader strategic uncertainty.

- Beyond Europe's immediate neighbourhood, the report situates the EU within a wider global context of strategic competition, particularly in relation to China and emerging regions such as Central Asia. The analysis of EU–China relations points to a deepening trust deficit, driven by trade imbalances, technological rivalry, and differing approaches to global governance. At the same time, Central Asia is identified as a potential space for limited, pragmatic cooperation between the EU and China, especially in infrastructure, climate policy, and connectivity, provided that regional agency and multivector diplomacy are preserved.
- A dedicated section on technology and artificial intelligence underscores the growing centrality of digital governance to geopolitical competition. The Paris AI Action Summit is examined as a revealing moment that exposed divergent regulatory philosophies among major powers. While the EU seeks to position itself as a global norm-setter balancing innovation and control, the report notes the risk that overly stringent regulation could undermine competitiveness vis-à-vis the United States and China. At the same time, AI is shown to be increasingly linked to issues of energy security, sustainability, and global inequality, reinforcing the need for coordinated—but realistically achievable—multilateral frameworks.
- Overall, the report concludes that the European Union is entering a phase in which strategic ambiguity is no longer sustainable. The accumulation of external shocks and internal debates forces European actors to make clearer choices regarding security commitments, economic models, technological governance, and global partnerships. While fragmentation and divergence are evident, the analyses also identify areas of adaptation and potential consolidation, particularly in defence cooperation, selective strategic autonomy, and regional engagement.

THE EU'S NEW STRATEGIC REALITY: MARKETS, INSTITUTIONS, AND MILITARY READINESS

EU ECONOMY: CURRENT STATE AND FORWARD OUTLOOK

Mushtariy Usmonova¹

June 24, 2025

The current state of the European economy is characterized as stagnant overall, although there are significant differences in growth and performance indicators at the level of individual member states. Europe's economic trajectory in 2025–2026 reflects a phase of moderate but uneven regional growth, against a backdrop of steadily easing inflationary pressures and the gradual opening of structural investment channels.

According to forecasts, aggregate GDP growth for the 27 EU countries is expected to be around **1.1%** in 2025, accelerating to around **1.3%** in 2026. Similarly, in the euro area, growth rates will be **1.0%** and **1.2%**, respectively. Inflation in the eurozone is expected to return to the European Central Bank's target, stabilizing at around **2.0%** by 2026, while the unemployment rate will remain close to **6.2%**, with significant cross-country differentiation.

Central and Eastern Europe continues to outperform the European average, driven by growth in domestic consumption, expansion of industrial exports, and active investment in infrastructure and defence sectors. Inflation, which peaked in 2022–2023, is steadily declining, supported by tight monetary policy and stabilisation of energy markets.

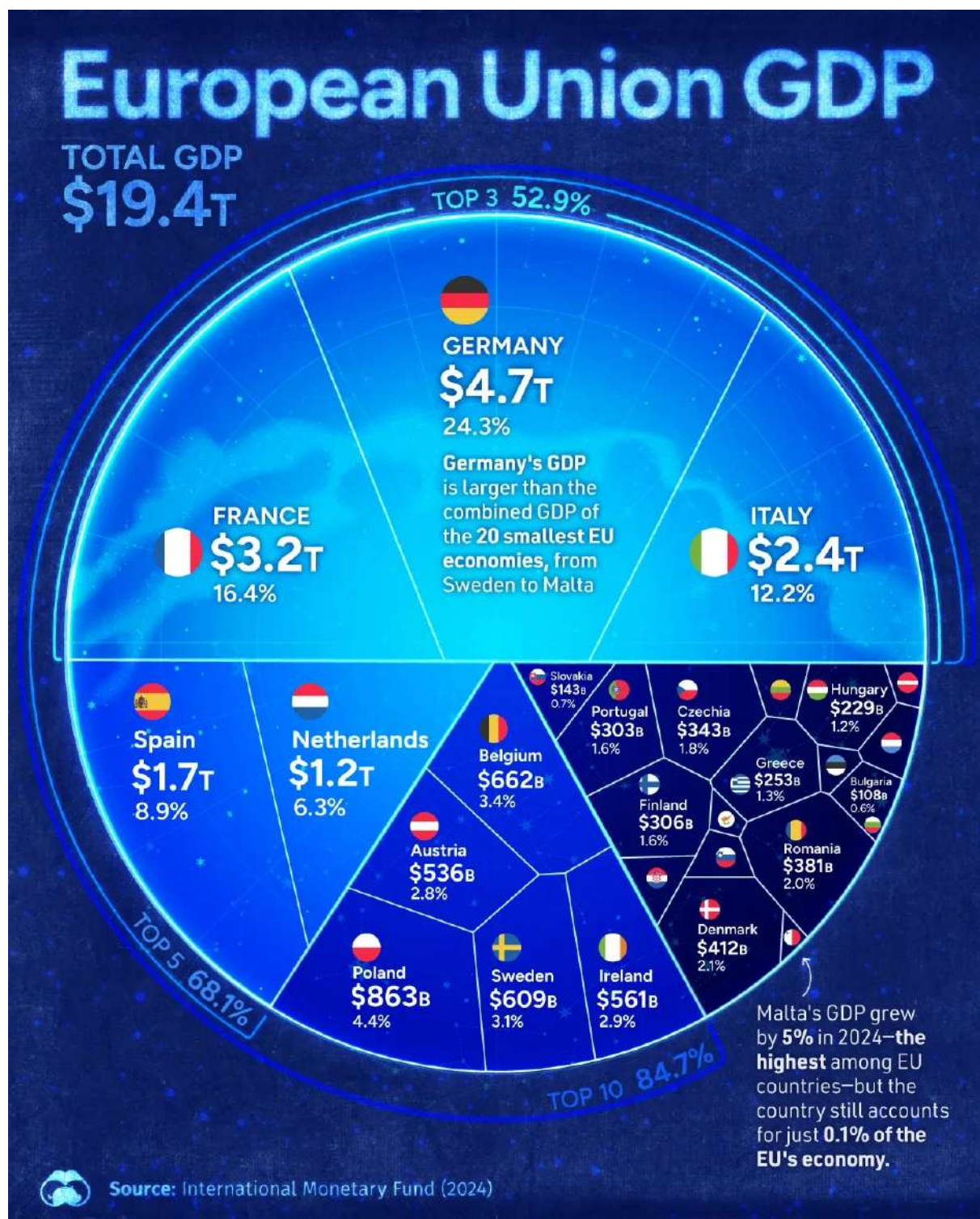
Dynamics at the Country Level

Although the euro area economy as a whole has grown rather slowly this year, some countries are showing resilience and growth. Western European countries are experiencing a moderate but stabilizing recovery. **Germany**, which is under pressure from industrial decline and weak foreign trade, can expect growth of around **0.9%** in 2025, followed by an improvement to **1.1%** in 2026.

France and **Italy** are showing similar dynamics with growth rates in the range of **0.8–1.0%**, against the backdrop of stable household spending and government stimulus. At the same

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time, the **UK** is showing growth of **1.2–1.6%** per year, allowing it to outperform Germany and France thanks to the stability of the services and finance sectors.



Against this backdrop, **Spain** stands out, showing the highest growth rates among the major economies: **2.8%** in 2025 and up to **3.1%** in 2026, driven by strong domestic demand, growth in tourism, and effective use of EU funds. **Portugal** and **Greece** are also showing steady

growth in the range of **2.0–2.5%**, with the latter seeing a significant decline in unemployment despite its relatively high level (**8.3%**).

In **Central and Eastern Europe**, **Poland** is showing the strongest growth, with a forecast of **3.2%** in 2025 and **3.1%** in 2026, with inflation falling from **4.3%** to below **3.5%**. The **Czech Republic** expects **2.4–2.6%**, and **Hungary** – from **2.4%** to **4.1%**, depending on the inflow of EU funds and the success of domestic reforms. **Romania**, **Slovakia**, and **Slovenia** also maintain steady growth rates within the range of **2–3%**, with improvements in foreign trade balances and industrial output.

In addition, Poland stands out as the leader of the European stock market, with its **WIG** stock index rising more than **28%** this year. Over the past two decades, Poland has achieved an impressive economic transformation, transitioning to high-income country status. The shift to a more investor-friendly government after the 2023 elections unlocked significant EU funding (**€21 billion**), which has positively impacted Poland's growth prospects. Its GDP per capita (adjusted for purchasing power) is projected to exceed that of Japan in 2026–2030 and reach **85%** of the EU average, which is about **€24,000**.

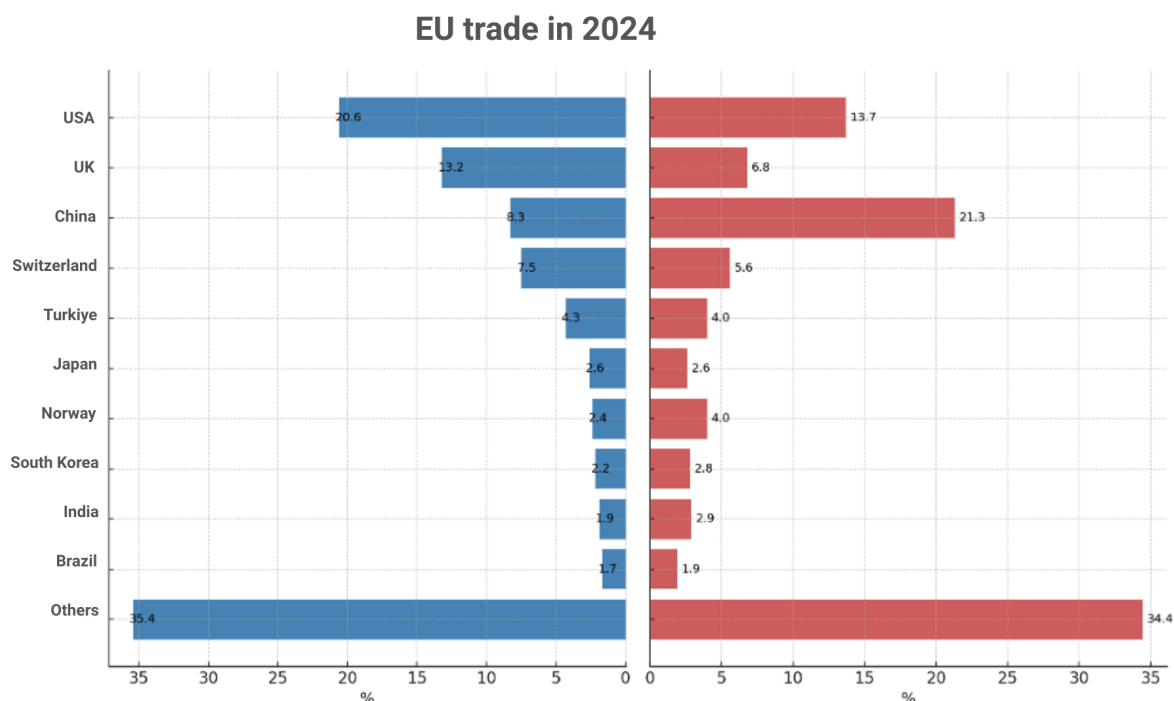
The **Baltic** countries are emerging from a period of stagnation. **Estonia** expects a recovery from **–0.5%** to **2.2%**, **Latvia** around **2.4%**, and **Lithuania** leads with **2.8%** growth, supported by digital services and institutional reforms.

Scandinavian countries are also showing signs of recovery: **Sweden** is growing at **2.2%** thanks to manufacturing, green technologies, and exports; **Finland** and **Denmark** are growing at **1.5–2.0%**, with low unemployment and a stable fiscal position.

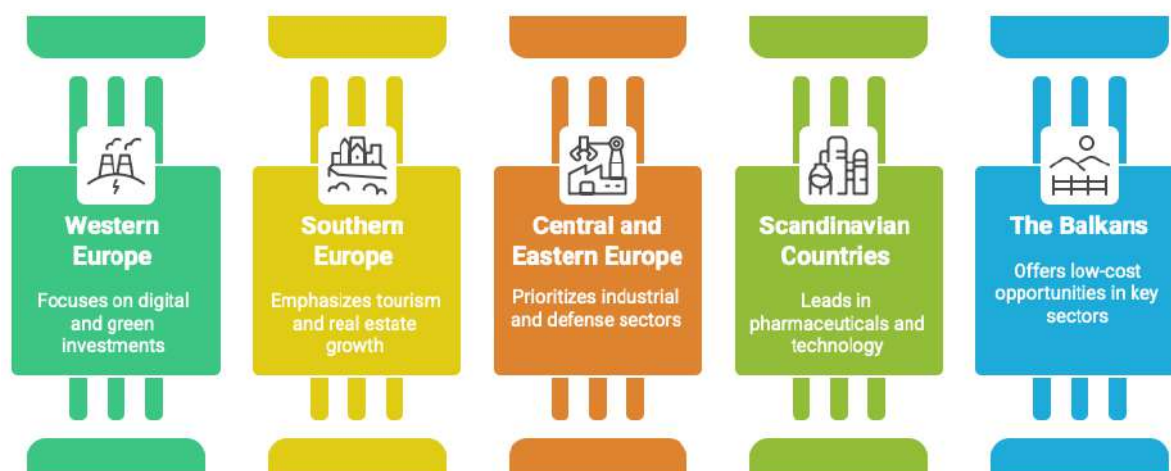
The countries of the **Western Balkans** (**Albania**, **North Macedonia**, **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, **Montenegro**, **Serbia**) are expected to grow in the range of **2–4%**, aided by EU pre-accession programs, demographic shifts, and regional infrastructure projects. Despite continuing institutional vulnerabilities, the region is gradually converging with EU standards in terms of productivity and trade integration.

Sectoral focuses and investment priorities. Public capital is being channelled through the EU's recovery plan worth more than **€800 billion**, as well as through national infrastructure programmes and defence budgets. Private investment is concentrated in inflation-linked segments.

Despite a **5%** decline in the number of announced projects involving foreign direct investment in 2024, investment activity will resume in 2025 in the following sectors: infrastructure and energy transition, defense technologies and dual-use (particular potential in **Poland**, the **Czech Republic**, and the **Baltic** states amid military spending growth to **3–5%** of GDP), digital infrastructure and AI, private lending and real assets, semiconductors, and supply chains for electric vehicles.



Growth Factors Vary by Region:



Thus, while the core of the eurozone remains stable but sluggish, the main dynamics are shifting to the periphery – Spain, Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans, where investment flows, institutional frameworks and competitive sectors are better aligned with global trends.

Risks and Structural Constraints

Despite the successes of individual countries, the EU is not represented among the 20 most valuable companies in the world, which indicates problems with the scale and global competitiveness of its corporations.

This is largely due to the fragmentation of the single market and strict antitrust rules.

In addition, the innovation deficit in scaling remains a chronic problem for Europe: despite its leadership in fundamental research and development, the EU lags behind the US and China in the commercialization of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital solutions.

The EU recognizes the need to adapt to the new geopolitical and economic reality. At present, several **key areas** determine its development prospects:

1. The revival of industrial policy and the creation of new “European champions”.

Since the financial capabilities of most EU countries are limited due to high public debt, large-scale Chinese-style subsidies are unlikely. Other measures, such as tariffs and import taxes, are more likely to be used to achieve this goal.

2. Adapting trade strategy to a bipolar world. The EU intends to expand its trade relations with other countries and blocs, for example by signing an agreement with MERCOSUR. At the same time, rethinking relations with China and Brussels' attempt to use it as insurance against US unpredictability is a dangerous illusion. The influx of cheap, subsidized goods threatens European manufacturers and could lead to a “China shock” in Europe. In addition, Chinese investment in the EU is shifting toward the creation of new factories, often without technology transfer to European partners.

3. Promoting the “green” transition. The transition to renewable energy is seen as a key factor in economic competitiveness (as the example of Spain shows) and an important part of decarbonization, even with the US administration's unfavourable position on the issue.

Overall, the prospects for European economic development depend largely on the EU's ability to implement its ambitious strategic programs in key sectors while protecting its democratic foundations. The US's departure from its traditional positions presents Europe with an unwelcome but potentially transformative challenge: the opportunity to become a more autonomous and influential player on the world stage.

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S DEFENCE ADAPTATION AND THE "READINESS 2030" FRAMEWORK

Mushtariy Usmonova

October 10, 2025

The European Union is currently navigating a period of profound adjustment in its security and defence policy. Developments over the past decade, and particularly since the early 2020s, have prompted European policymakers to reconsider long-standing assumptions about peace, stability, and the external guarantees upon which European security has traditionally relied. Within this evolving strategic environment, the European Commission's "Readiness 2030" initiative represents a structured attempt to strengthen the Union's overall defence preparedness and security resilience by the end of the current decade.

For much of the post–Cold War period, European states pursued a model of security based on reduced military expenditure, confidence in cooperative security arrangements, and the expectation that large-scale interstate conflict on the continent had become unlikely. Defence budgets were gradually reduced, armed forces were streamlined, and priority was given to economic integration, social development, and soft-power instruments. This approach was underpinned by a relatively benign security environment and by the continued presence of the United States as the principal guarantor of European security within NATO.

Over time, however, shifts in the international system began to expose the limitations of this model. Strategic competition between major powers intensified, technological change altered the character of warfare, and hybrid threats, ranging from cyber operations to disinformation and economic coercion, became more prominent. The prolonged conflict between Russia and Ukraine further accelerated these trends, reinforcing the perception among EU member states that Europe faces a more complex and less predictable security environment than at any point since the end of the Cold War.

Against this backdrop, EU institutions and national governments increasingly converged around the view that defence readiness and resilience could no longer be treated as secondary policy areas. The adoption of the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence and the Versailles Declaration in 2022 marked an important political signal: defence cooperation and capability development were elevated to a central place in the Union's strategic agenda. These documents framed security not only in military terms, but also as a multidimensional challenge

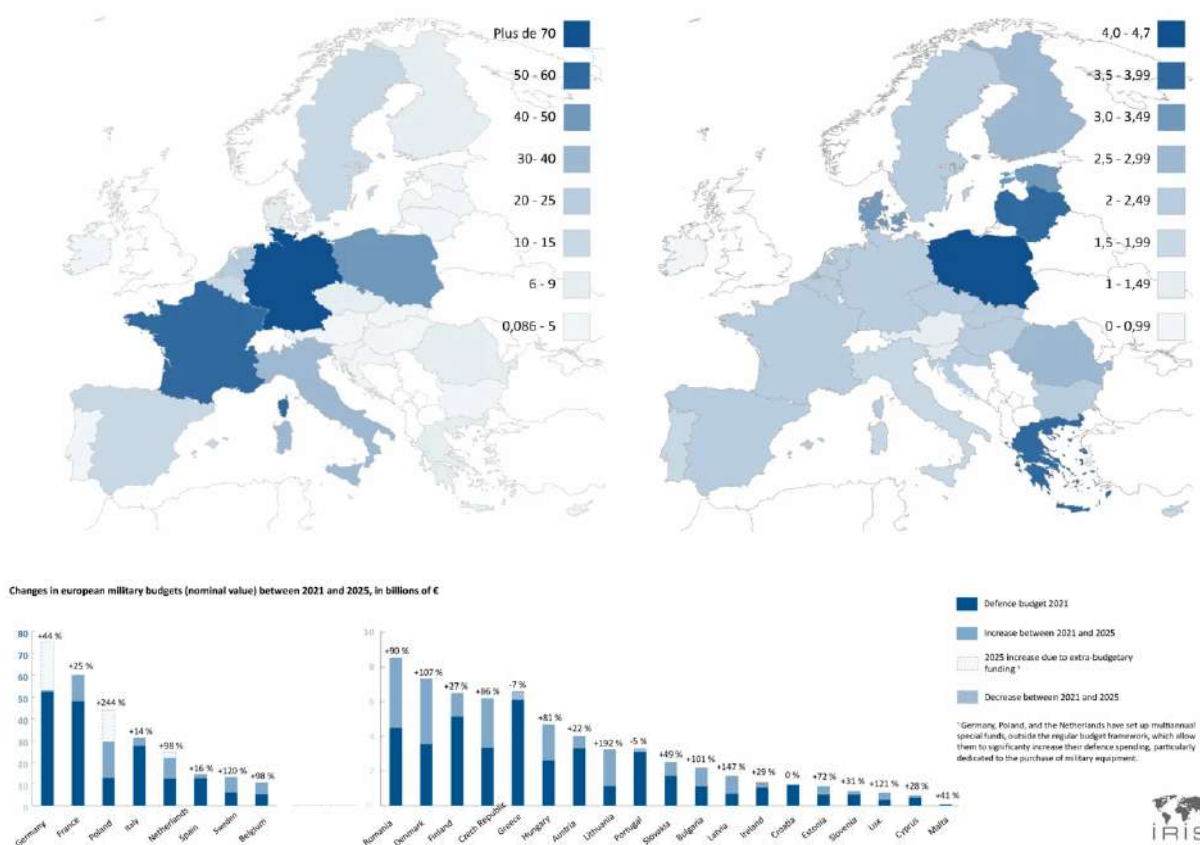
encompassing economic resilience, technological capacity, energy security, and societal preparedness.

The debate over defence adaptation has also been shaped by changes in the transatlantic context. While the United States remains Europe's most important security partner, discussions within Washington about burden-sharing, strategic priorities, and domestic constraints have encouraged European policymakers to reflect on the sustainability of existing arrangements. In response, a growing number of European states have increased defence spending, with many meeting or approaching the benchmark of allocating 2 per cent of GDP to defence. This trend reflects both national security concerns and a broader political commitment to strengthening Europe's contribution to collective defence.

Towards a massive increase in European military spending ?

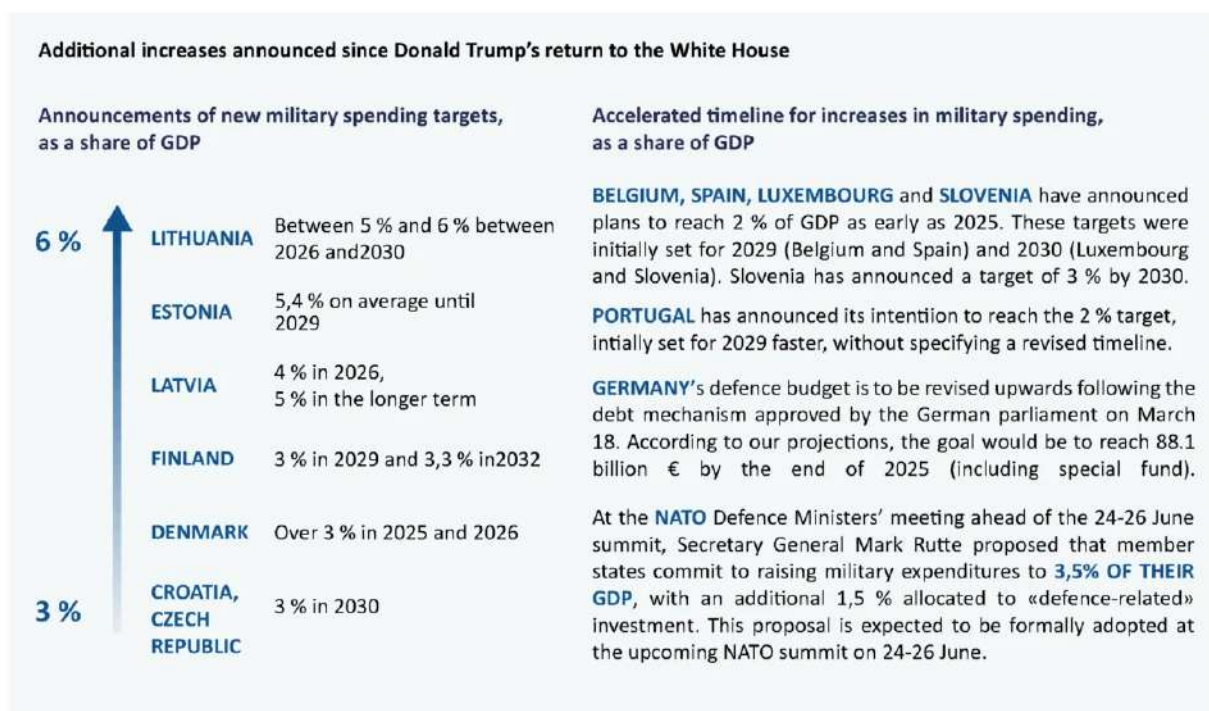
Estimated military expenditures of 2025, in billions of €

Share of GDP allocated to Defence, 2025 projection, in %



Regional dynamics within the EU have further influenced this process. Countries in Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe, which tend to perceive higher levels of risk due to geography and historical experience, have been particularly active in advocating stronger defence capabilities. At the same time, larger Western European states have also adjusted their

defence policies, recognising that long-term security requires credible capabilities, sustainable industrial capacity, and effective coordination at the EU level.



Analytical assessments by institutions such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute have played an important role in informing policy debates. Such analyses highlight global trends in military expenditure, defence industrial capacity, and long-term force planning, underscoring the need for Europe to adapt to a changing strategic balance. EU policy documents increasingly stress preparedness across a broad spectrum of challenges, including conventional deterrence, cyber security, space assets, and the protection of critical infrastructure.

Within this wider context, “Readiness 2030” is presented not as a single programme, but as a framework bringing together financial instruments, regulatory measures, industrial policy, and strategic coordination. Its core objective is to address long-standing capability gaps, reduce fragmentation among national defence systems, and enhance the EU’s ability to act collectively when required. Importantly, the initiative emphasises complementarity with existing alliances and partnerships rather than strategic separation.

A central pillar of the framework is the revitalisation of Europe’s defence-industrial base. Over previous decades, reduced demand and fragmented procurement led to declining production capacity and limited economies of scale. The current policy shift seeks to reverse this trend by encouraging joint procurement, harmonisation of standards, and cross-border industrial cooperation. Major European defence and aerospace companies—including Airbus,

Thales, Leonardo, Rheinmetall, and Saab—have already seen increased demand, reflecting both immediate needs and longer-term investment planning.



At the same time, European policymakers are aware that industrial expansion presents practical challenges. Scaling up production requires time, skilled labour, and stable investment conditions. Supply-chain vulnerabilities, workforce shortages, and regulatory complexity remain constraints. As a result, “Readiness 2030” places strong emphasis on coordination and predictability, aiming to provide industry with long-term signals that justify sustained investment.

Political support for the initiative is generally broad, but differences remain among member states. Variations in fiscal capacity, strategic culture, and public opinion shape national approaches to defence spending. In several Western European societies, strong traditions of pacifism and social-welfare priorities coexist with growing recognition of security challenges. Policymakers therefore face the task of balancing defence investment with commitments to social cohesion, climate policy, and economic competitiveness.

Financial sustainability represents another key issue. Mobilising large-scale resources over several years requires careful alignment with EU fiscal rules and national budgetary frameworks. While defence is increasingly recognised as a collective public good, concerns persist about rising debt levels and opportunity costs. The success of “Readiness 2030” will

therefore depend not only on political will, but also on effective governance and transparent prioritisation.

From a strategic perspective, the longer-term implications of the initiative are significant. A more capable and coordinated European defence posture could enhance the EU's credibility as a security actor and allow it to respond more effectively to crises in its neighbourhood. This aligns with broader debates about European strategic autonomy, understood not as isolation, but as the capacity to act responsibly in partnership with others.

For NATO and transatlantic relations, the potential effects are largely complementary. A stronger European contribution to defence can help distribute responsibilities more evenly within the Alliance and reinforce collective deterrence. At the same time, EU officials consistently stress that defence adaptation is intended to strengthen, not undermine, existing security arrangements.

Beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, enhanced European capabilities may also influence the EU's role in international security cooperation, crisis management, and support for partners. The EU presents its defence adaptation as part of a broader commitment to international stability, rule-based order, and conflict prevention. Military preparedness is framed as a means of reducing the likelihood of conflict rather than encouraging confrontation.

In conclusion, while it remains too early to assess the full outcomes of "Readiness 2030," the initiative clearly marks a turning point in European strategic thinking. It reflects a growing consensus that peace and stability require credible preparedness, industrial capacity, and political cohesion. By investing in cooperation and resilience, the European Union seeks to reduce strategic vulnerabilities and contribute to a more stable international environment, while maintaining its longstanding commitment to diplomacy, multilateralism, and peaceful conflict resolution.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES FACING THE EUROPEAN UNION: INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL PRESSURES, AND IDENTITY DYNAMICS

Mushtariy Usmonova

December 24, 2025

The European Union is currently facing a set of interrelated internal challenges that exert a significant influence on its political cohesion, policy effectiveness, and long-term strategic direction. These challenges are structural rather than episodic and reflect deeper transformations within European societies and governance systems. Among the most prominent issues are institutional tensions, growing social dissatisfaction, and ongoing debates surrounding European identity and shared values.

Institutional Governance and Trust Deficits

In recent years, divergences among EU member states on key political and strategic questions have become more visible, exposing limitations within the Union's governance mechanisms. One of the most debated institutional issues concerns the principle of unanimity in areas such as foreign and security policy. Critics argue that this rule enables individual states to block collective decisions through the use of veto power, thereby constraining the EU's ability to act decisively. As a result, proposals to limit unanimity and expand qualified majority voting have gained traction, though such reforms remain politically sensitive.

Political fragmentation has also intensified within the EU's major party families. Shifts inside the European Parliament reflect broader electoral and ideological changes across the Union. For example, during 2023–2024, the centre-right European People's Party moved closer to more nationally oriented conservative forces, partly under the influence of political developments in Italy led by Giorgia Meloni. This evolution generated concern among pro-integration actors regarding the long-term coherence of the EU's political centre.

Following the 2024 European Parliament elections (2024–2029), the traditional pro-European centrist coalition—comprising centre-right, social-democratic, and liberal forces—experienced a relative weakening. Although Eurosceptic and protest-oriented parties increased their representation, the anticipated surge of radical populism did not fully materialise. Nevertheless, a longer-term trend remains evident: support for anti-system, populist, and Eurosceptic movements continues to grow at both European and national levels.

These developments point to a broader erosion of mutual trust within the integration process. Disagreements over the future trajectory of the EU—whether toward deeper political integration or a looser intergovernmental model—periodically undermine the Union’s capacity to act as a unified political actor. At the same time, recent crises have demonstrated that the EU retains a substantial capacity for institutional adaptation. During the 2022 energy crisis, triggered by a sharp reduction in gas supplies from Russia, member states managed to coordinate responses through joint gas procurement and solidarity mechanisms, illustrating that crisis governance remains functional, even if decision-making is often slowed by competing national priorities.

Public confidence in supranational institutions represents another important indicator of institutional strain. According to recent surveys, 45% of respondents report low levels of trust in the European Union. In several member states—including Greece, France, and Slovakia—the share of citizens expressing distrust traditionally exceeds those expressing trust, reflecting accumulated historical grievances or persistent economic challenges. Critics frequently point to a perceived “democratic deficit,” arguing that decisions taken in Brussels remain distant from ordinary citizens.

At the same time, democratic engagement at the EU level has shown signs of resilience. In the June 2024 European Parliament elections, voter turnout again exceeded 50%, one of the highest levels recorded in recent decades. This suggests growing awareness of the relevance of EU institutions, even as protest voting becomes more prominent.

Environmental policy has emerged as an additional source of tension. The EU’s ambitious climate agenda has generated a phenomenon often described as “green backlash,” reflecting resistance among certain industries and social groups concerned about rising costs, competitiveness, and job security. In this context, environmental measures have become intertwined with broader criticism of perceived technocratic governance, globalisation, and the influence of “Brussels bureaucracy.”

Social Discontent and Political Polarisation

Social dissatisfaction linked to economic pressures, governance challenges, and cultural change has created fertile ground for the rise of political movements at both ends of the ideological spectrum. National-conservative, populist, and protest-oriented parties have been particularly effective in mobilising voters around issues such as migration, security, and

protection of “ordinary citizens” from perceived elite interests. Over the past two years, such parties have strengthened their electoral positions in nearly all major EU member states.

This trend does not necessarily indicate a wholesale rejection of European integration. Rather, it reflects growing demand for reform, responsiveness, and clearer accountability within the EU system. For many citizens, dissatisfaction is driven less by opposition to cooperation itself and more by concerns over social fairness, economic security, and democratic representation.

European Identity and Value Ambiguity

Beyond institutional and social challenges, the EU continues to grapple with debates over European identity and shared values. Historically, the Union has defined itself as a community grounded in democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and tolerance. Today, however, analysts increasingly speak of a “crisis of European identity,” reflecting the absence of a clear consensus on how these principles should be interpreted and implemented.

Differences between Western and Eastern member states are particularly evident in debates over minority rights, gender equality, religion, and social norms. In countries such as Poland and Hungary, political discourse since the mid-2010s has increasingly emphasised the protection of traditional values and national sovereignty, occasionally leading to institutional tensions with EU bodies.

These divisions are shaped by historical experience. More than two decades after the eastern enlargement, a sense of asymmetry persists between Western and Eastern Europe—not only economically, but also politically and symbolically. Eastern member states, shaped by the legacy of communism and post-transition reforms, often prioritise sovereignty and security more strongly, particularly in relation to Russia and the Soviet past. Poland and the Baltic states, for example, frame this issue as one of national security and identity, whereas some Western European societies historically adopted more pragmatic approaches.

As a result, “European identity” is understood in divergent ways. For some, it is associated with liberal values, cosmopolitanism, and openness; for others, it is linked to Christian heritage, cultural continuity, and the autonomy of nation-states. These interpretations coexist within the Union, complicating consensus-building.

Migration represents one of the most influential drivers of identity debates. Today, approximately 63 million residents of the EU are first-generation migrants, of whom around 71% originate from outside the EU. The largest migrant communities are concentrated in Germany,

France, Italy, and Spain. In Germany alone, the number of foreign-born residents has reached 17.4 million people, representing 20.9% of the population.

These demographic changes generate mixed reactions. Immigration contributes to addressing labour shortages, mitigating population ageing, and enriching cultural diversity. At the same time, a significant share of the population expresses concern about the pace of social change and the challenges of integration, particularly regarding Muslim communities. Projections by the Pew Research Center indicate that the share of the Muslim population in Europe (including Russia) could reach 7.4% by 2050 under a zero-migration scenario, and up to 14% under a high-migration scenario.

From a demographic perspective, migration remains essential. According to Eurostat, migration has become the only driver of population growth in Europe, underscoring the structural nature of the challenge. This creates a persistent dilemma: how to balance economic necessity with social cohesion. Many Europeans support controlled and selective migration, coupled with stronger integration policies.

Despite these tensions, a shared sense of belonging has not disappeared. Surveys show that 75% of EU citizens identify themselves as citizens of the European Union, the highest level recorded to date. Moreover, 41% of respondents associate the EU primarily with peace, followed by democracy and human rights. In the context of the war in Ukraine, this sense of solidarity has intensified: support for assisting Ukraine is endorsed by around 80% of EU citizens.

Implications for EU External Policy

Awareness of internal vulnerabilities has shaped the EU's external behaviour. The Union has adopted a more pragmatic and selective approach, prioritising partnerships with actors demonstrating willingness to reform and cooperate. Emphasis on sustainable development, transparent financing, and equal partnership has become a defining feature of EU external engagement.

In this context, Central Asia has gained importance as part of the EU's broader strategy to enhance economic security and strategic autonomy. The EU increasingly relies on soft power, trade, connectivity, and regulatory cooperation rather than confrontational approaches. For Uzbekistan and its regional neighbours, this shift offers new opportunities—including access to financing and alternative trade routes—while also requiring careful balancing between EU reform expectations and national development priorities.

BORDERS VS. BENCHMARKS: THE EU'S CLASH OVER HUMAN RIGHTS INTERPRETATION

Mushtariy Usmonova

May 26, 2025

The recent open letter² endorsed by nine European Union member states represents a significant challenge to the post-World War II human rights architecture that has underpinned the Council of Europe and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) since 1950. Spearheaded by Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her counterpart – Denmark's Mette Frederiksen, the signatories seek to recalibrate the Convention's interpretation to permit more expansive national discretion over migration controls. Their initiative underscores a broader trend within Europe, where concerns about migration flows and domestic political pressures have driven a coalition of governments to question whether supranational legal constraints unduly hamper sovereign decision-making.

At the heart of the nine governments' argument lies a perception that the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has, in recent decades, extended the Convention's scope beyond the original aspirations of its drafters. By invoking the need to "re-examine whether the Court has over-extended the scope of the Convention", the letter's authors effectively posit that shifts in judicial interpretation have upset the balance between collective human rights protections and the prerogatives of democratic states. This critique resonates strongly with electorates in several of the signatory countries, where anti-immigration parties have made substantial electoral gains by framing migration as an existential challenge to national identity and social cohesion.

Concretely, the letter proposes granting states broader latitude to expel foreign nationals who commit serious offences, to suspend certain procedural guarantees when deportation is not feasible, and to counter so-called "instrumentalization" of migrants by hostile external actors. Implicit in these recommendations is a redefinition of human rights obligations in the context of national security and public order. While the desire to deter criminal elements among migrant communities is understandable, the suggested measures risk undermining core Convention guarantees, such as the right to respect for private and family life and the prohibition of collective expulsion, both of which have been central to the ECtHR's jurisprudence.

² Governo Italiano. (2025, May 22). Lettera aperta dei capi di Stato e di Governo di nove Paesi europei alla Corte europea dei diritti dell'uomo. https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Lettera_aperta_22052025.pdf

Prime Minister Meloni’s call for a “political debate” on the Convention’s capacity to address contemporary issues highlights the tension between legal continuity and evolving policy needs. It reflects a longstanding debate within international law: to what extent should domestic political considerations shape the evolution of treaty obligations? By seeking to anchor the reinterpretation in an “open-minded conversation”, the signatories implicitly acknowledge that any recalibration of the Convention would require not only judicial but also political consensus — a prospect complicated by divergent national interests and the mandatory nature of the Court’s judgments for all 46 Council of Europe members.

The response³ from Council of Europe Secretary-General Alain Berset was swift and unequivocal. Emphasising that “no judiciary should face political pressure”, Berset underscored that undermining the ECtHR’s independence would erode the very foundations of the rule of law in Europe. His defence of the Court’s role, in particular its ongoing adjudication of human rights violations arising from Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, serves as a potent reminder of the Convention’s unique position as a bulwark against state excess, even in the most fraught geopolitical contexts.

Historical rulings provide a sobering illustration of the stakes involved. The Court’s decisions in cases such as the 2016 Lampedusa expulsions of Tunisian migrants and Denmark’s denial of family reunification to a Syrian refugee in 2021 reflect a commitment to protect individuals against collective enforcement measures and to uphold the right to family life. Meanwhile, pending litigation against the Baltic states and Poland over alleged pushbacks into Belarus highlights the Convention’s reach into situations where national border policies intersect with allegations of hybrid warfare tactics. Such jurisprudence not only safeguards individual rights but also establishes precedents that guide domestic policymaking.

The nine-nation initiative thus poses a dual risk. On one hand, it could diminish the ECtHR’s authority by inviting overt political interference in what must remain an independent judicial process. On the other, it could foster a fragmentation of rights protections across Europe if states begin to contest the binding nature of certain judgments. Either outcome would weaken the Convention’s ability to speak with one voice on matters of fundamental rights, eroding public confidence in the Court’s fairness and impartiality.

³ Council of Europe. (2025, May 24). Alain Berset on the joint letter challenging the European Court of Human Rights. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/alain-beret-on-the-joint-letter-challenging-the-european-court-of-human-rights>

From an institutional standpoint, the debate raises profound questions about the viability of multilayered governance in Europe. The ECHR system was designed precisely to mediate tensions between national sovereignty and supranational oversight, providing both a safety-net for individuals and a framework for shared values. Reversing or diluting key aspects of the Convention would undermine this delicate equilibrium, potentially dissuading citizens from seeking redress through the Strasbourg Court and limiting the Convention's capacity to function as a common yardstick of human rights.

Yet the signatories' concerns cannot be dismissed outright. Legitimate questions arise over whether the Convention adequately anticipates modern migration dynamics, transnational criminal networks, and asymmetric tactics by non-state and state actors alike. Any constructive reform must therefore reconcile the imperative of human rights protection with the pressing demands of democratic governance and security. This necessitates a measured dialogue that respects both the rule of law and the prerogatives of elected governments.

In navigating this impasse, European states should consider convening a formal consultative process under the auspices of the Council of Europe. Such a mechanism could bring together legal experts, judges, parliamentarians, civil society representatives, and migration authorities to explore targeted amendments or protocol revisions. By fostering transparency and broad stakeholder engagement, it would help ensure that any evolution of the Convention remains rooted in consensus rather than unilateral political manoeuvring. Only through such an inclusive approach can Europe safeguard both the rights of individuals and the integrity of its foundational human rights institutions.

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THE CONTEMPORARY TRANSATLANTIC PARTNERSHIP: TENSIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

ASSESSMENT OF PARIS'S RELATIONS WITH THE DONALD TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Mushtariy Usmonova

February 13, 2025

Fazliddin Djamalov⁴

Donald Trump's second presidential term constitutes a serious geopolitical challenge for France, whose ambitions for leadership within the European Union are increasingly constrained by turbulence in transatlantic relations. At a time when Paris seeks to consolidate its role as a central actor in European strategic and political processes, it simultaneously faces mounting economic pressures, domestic political fragmentation, and the imperative of maintaining a functional partnership with the United States—France's most important non-European trading partner.

During Trump's first presidency, French President Emmanuel Macron openly argued that Europe could no longer rely unconditionally on the United States for its security and advanced the idea of building a unified European defence capability. In 2017, Macron initially attempted to establish a pragmatic working relationship with Trump, notably by inviting him to the Bastille Day celebrations. However, as Washington's rhetoric and policies grew more confrontational, Paris progressively adopted a firmer stance. This shift was particularly evident following Trump's provocative statements regarding Greenland, when Macron publicly expressed France's solidarity with Denmark and underscored the inviolability of European territorial integrity. France's Foreign Minister, Jean-Noël Barrot, went as far as stating that Paris would be prepared to deploy forces to Greenland should circumstances require such action.

France also reacted cautiously to Trump's proposal to place the Gaza Strip under U.S. administration. Rather than issuing an immediate public response, Paris opted for diplomatic coordination. Following a telephone conversation with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Macron stressed that any forced displacement of Palestinians would be unacceptable, thereby reaffirming France's commitment to established international norms and its preference for multilateral approaches to conflict resolution.

At the same time, France's capacity for assertive foreign policy action is constrained by significant internal political challenges. The National Assembly remains deeply fragmented

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between the left-wing forces associated with Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the far-right led by Marine Le Pen, and Macron's centrist bloc. This persistent polarisation has effectively stalled key reforms and weakened executive authority. The successive changes of government following the collapse of Michel Barnier's cabinet in 2024 have further undermined France's international standing by projecting an image of political instability and limited policy continuity.

The rising popularity of Marine Le Pen, who is widely regarded as a potential successor to Macron in the 2027 presidential election, introduces an additional layer of uncertainty. Her nationalist discourse, centred on reducing France's dependence on the United States, risks complicating relations not only with Washington but also with France's partners within the EU. Le Pen has already argued that France should emulate Trump's hard-line approach towards third countries, including by reconsidering migration arrangements with Algeria in a manner comparable to Trump's use of pressure against Colombia. Such positions signal a possible shift towards a more transactional and confrontational foreign policy posture.

From an economic perspective, Paris is facing increasing pressure from Washington. Trump has demanded that NATO allies raise defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP—a target that would require France to allocate an additional €80 billion annually. He has also threatened to introduce new trade barriers and has insisted that Europe assume full financial responsibility for military assistance to Ukraine. These demands come at a particularly sensitive moment for the French economy.

France's macroeconomic indicators remain fragile. Public debt has reached approximately 115 per cent of GDP, while the budget deficit exceeds 6 per cent. According to forecasts by Goldman Sachs, economic growth in 2025 is expected to be limited to around 0.7 per cent. The United States, as France's fourth-largest trading partner, represents a crucial market for major French corporations such as L'Oréal, Airbus, LVMH, and TotalEnergies. Consequently, any deterioration in trade relations would have immediate and tangible consequences for key sectors of the French economy.

Should Trump impose a 10 per cent tariff on imports from the EU, French businesses would be among the most adversely affected. Such a move could trigger retaliatory measures from Paris and further escalate an already tense transatlantic trade environment. In parallel, Trump has threatened to introduce sanctions against companies maintaining close cooperation with China. In the context of intensifying U.S.–China rivalry, France would be forced to navigate

carefully between the two powers, risking deterioration of relations with one side regardless of its choices.

In response to these pressures, Macron stated at an informal meeting of EU leaders in early February that Europe must be prepared to defend its economic and strategic interests in the face of U.S. trade coercion. France's Minister of the Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu, similarly noted that Trump's policies could accelerate European awareness of the necessity for genuine strategic autonomy.

Following Trump's inauguration in 2025, Macron once again revived the idea of establishing a pan-European army. However, this initiative continues to face substantial obstacles. Germany remains reluctant to relinquish reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, while several Eastern European states fear that such a project would primarily serve to expand French influence rather than enhance collective security. Should Trump significantly reduce U.S. involvement in NATO or withdraw altogether, a Franco-German security core could emerge, yet this would also place additional strain on France's already pressured defence budget.

Competition between France and the United States has also intensified in the technological domain, particularly in artificial intelligence. This dynamic was highlighted during the recent AI Summit in Paris, where Macron announced plans to invest €109 billion in developing France's AI sector in order to reduce dependence on American and Chinese technologies. Nevertheless, the EU's heavily regulated approach to digital governance has drawn criticism from Washington. U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance described European regulation as excessive and detrimental to innovation, reflecting a broader divergence in strategic philosophy. While the Trump administration advocates minimal state intervention, the EU prioritises regulatory oversight, a gap that became especially visible after Washington refused to sign the summit's final declaration endorsed by more than 70 countries.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of Franco-American relations will depend on a complex interplay of factors, including Washington's strategic priorities, France's domestic political and economic conditions, and broader developments within the EU. Three principal scenarios can be envisaged.

The first scenario involves a gradual weakening of transatlantic ties. If Trump were to withdraw from NATO or drastically reduce U.S. engagement in European security, France would be compelled to assume a leadership role in EU defence. This would necessitate a substantial increase in military expenditure and confront Paris with a difficult choice: either significantly

expand national defence capabilities at the cost of worsening fiscal imbalances or attempt to construct new European coalitions whose effectiveness would remain uncertain.

The second scenario envisages a negotiated compromise between Paris and Washington. In this case, France might agree to a moderate increase in defence spending in exchange for concessions in trade and economic relations. Such an arrangement could help preserve France's export positions in the U.S. market and reduce the risk of a full-scale trade conflict, but it would require greater flexibility from Paris in its geopolitical positioning.

The third scenario would see France—and the EU more broadly—largely acquiescing to Trump's demands, accepting substantial increases in defence spending and deeper economic dependence on the United States. Under these conditions, Macron would be forced to scale back his vision of "European sovereignty," allowing American interests to dominate in trade, energy, and security. While this approach might avert open confrontation, it would significantly weaken France's strategic ambitions within the EU and globally. Domestically, such a shift could trigger a political crisis, as increased dependence on the United States is unlikely to be well received by a French electorate in which both far-right and radical left movements hold considerable influence.

In sum, the evolution of Franco-American relations during Trump's second presidential term will constitute a critical test not only for Paris but for the entire architecture of European security and economic stability. France faces the complex task of balancing the defence of its national interests with the preservation of alliance structures, while simultaneously adapting to an increasingly fragmented and competitive global order.

THE FUTURE OF EURO-AMERICAN RELATIONS AMID DEEPENING DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN BRUSSELS AND THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Mushtariy Usmonova
Fazliddin Djamalov

March 10, 2025

The return of Donald Trump to the White House has marked the beginning of a deep systemic crisis in transatlantic relations, one that may reasonably be described as the most severe since the creation of NATO. The revised foreign-policy course of Washington fundamentally challenges the durability of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, which for decades functioned on the assumption of sustained American strategic leadership and security guarantees for Europe. Under the new conditions, Brussels is compelled to reassess not only the concept of European strategic autonomy, but also the practical viability of existing mechanisms of collective defence. European leaders, in turn, are forced to search for political and institutional responses in an environment where long-standing assumptions about U.S. commitment to European security can no longer be taken for granted.

Immediately after taking office, Trump signalled unequivocally that the United States no longer intends to act as the principal guarantor of European security. U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth publicly stated that Washington expects European states to undertake a substantial increase in defence spending and to assume primary responsibility for their own security. This line was further reinforced by Vice President J.D. Vance during his address at the Munich Security Conference, where he argued that the main threat to Europe originates not from Russia, but from an internal political crisis driven by migration pressures and the policies of left-leaning elites. Such statements caused significant alarm in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and the Baltic states, which continue to regard the American military presence as the core deterrent against potential Russian aggression and as an irreplaceable pillar of their national security strategies.

At the same time, the Trump administration initiated direct diplomatic engagement with the Kremlin, deliberately excluding European leaders and representatives of Ukraine from the negotiation process. During talks held in Riyadh, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed the prospects for a ceasefire in Ukraine, with key parameters reportedly negotiated without European participation. These contacts have

intensified concerns in Brussels regarding a potential “Yalta 2.0” scenario, in which spheres of influence on the European continent could be redefined without due consideration of EU interests or Ukrainian sovereignty. For many European policymakers, such developments evoke historical precedents that underline Europe’s vulnerability when excluded from major power negotiations shaping its own security environment.

Defence and Security Dimension

The most disturbing signal for European capitals has been the prospect of a weakening or partial retraction of U.S. commitments to NATO. Trump has repeatedly criticised the Alliance, asserting that Washington “overpays” for European security. His demand that European allies raise defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP is widely viewed as unattainable for most NATO members. Nonetheless, the Trump administration is expected to reduce the U.S. military footprint in Europe, with discussions reportedly involving the withdrawal of up to 20,000 American troops and a reassessment of the U.S. military presence in Germany. From Washington’s perspective, the traditional model of transatlantic partnership has lost strategic relevance in an era increasingly defined by great-power competition with China, rendering extensive security commitments in Europe overly costly and strategically inefficient.

In response to these challenges, European states have begun actively exploring alternative approaches to ensuring their security. French President Emmanuel Macron has emerged as the most prominent advocate of European strategic autonomy, consistently arguing that Europe must be capable of defending itself independently if necessary. At the same time, the United Kingdom and Poland have discussed the possibility of establishing a separate European military contingent to support Ukraine without direct U.S. involvement. However, the current condition of European armed forces underscores the limits of such ambitions. Germany, France, and the UK face acute shortages of combat-ready units, modern weapons systems, ammunition stocks, and advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities.

According to estimates by the European Commission, effective deterrence against Russia without U.S. support would require European defence spending to rise to between 3.5 and 5 per cent of GDP, equivalent to approximately €450–500 billion annually. Macron has already stated that EU member states must increase defence expenditure to at least 3–3.5 per cent of GDP, significantly exceeding NATO’s current minimum benchmark of 2 per cent. Such figures highlight the scale of the financial and political challenge facing Europe should U.S. security guarantees be substantially reduced.

Within this framework, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented an €800 billion plan to rearm the European Union. This initiative received political backing from German CDU leader Friedrich Merz, who proposed the creation of a €500 billion special fund to finance defence infrastructure and increased military spending. However, the implementation of such plans is likely to generate internal political tensions and social resistance within EU member states, as they would require either a major reallocation of national budgetary priorities or the introduction of new mechanisms of joint European financing—both of which remain politically contentious.

At the same time, the EU itself is deeply divided on the question of strategic orientation. While Macron has gone as far as proposing the extension of France's nuclear deterrent to the entire continent as an additional security guarantee, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán continue to emphasise their commitment to traditional Atlanticism, advocating the preservation of a close strategic alliance between Europe and the United States. This divergence reflects a broader structural split within the EU regarding the balance between autonomy and reliance on transatlantic ties.

Trade and Economic Dimension

In the trade and economic sphere, the policies of the Trump administration also carry far-reaching consequences for Europe. Washington is actively considering the introduction of new tariffs on European goods, particularly in the automotive and agricultural sectors. In his address to Congress on 6 March, Trump announced the imposition of 25 per cent tariffs on EU products, scheduled to enter into force on 2 April 2025. According to Swedbank's chief economist Nerijus Mačiulis, these measures are justified by Washington as a response to perceived trade imbalances: the EU applies a 10 per cent import tariff on U.S. automobiles, while American tariffs on European vehicles stand at only 2.5 per cent.

Analytical assessments by the Centre for European Reform suggest that the introduction of tariffs across the full spectrum of EU exports could reduce European exports to the United States by approximately \$250 billion annually. Given the current fragility of the European economy, such a shock could act as a catalyst for recession across multiple EU member states. Beyond tariffs, the United States is demanding that the EU revise trade agreements involving strategic technologies and tighten controls over Chinese investment in Europe. This pressure is reflected in the EU's latest sanctions package adopted on 24 February, which once again included Chinese companies and individuals.

These demands place Brussels before a difficult strategic dilemma: whether to preserve autonomy in trade policy and technological governance, or to prioritise the maintenance of stable relations with Washington. In response, the EU is preparing firm countermeasures, raising the risk of a full-scale transatlantic trade war that could destabilise not only European economies but the global economic system.

The Ukrainian Dimension

On the Ukrainian issue, Brussels has largely avoided open criticism of Washington's decision to suspend military assistance to Kyiv, continuing to refer to the United States as an "ally." According to data from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, U.S. military aid to Ukraine has amounted to €64 billion, while total European assistance has reached €62 billion. Trump, commenting on the situation, stated that European countries "do not know how to end the conflict" and warned that failure to reach a settlement could lead to escalation into a third world war.

Under these conditions, the EU has accelerated its push towards strategic autonomy. At an emergency EU summit, plans were announced to establish a \$158 billion special fund aimed at boosting defence spending and supporting Ukraine, an initiative that reflects a growing recognition of the risks associated with excessive dependence on U.S. assistance.

Concern is generated by the potential disruption of economic ties in the sphere of critical raw materials. The United States is reportedly conducting negotiations with both Ukraine and Russia regarding possible joint control over key resources, a development that places Europe in a strategically vulnerable position and forces it to seek alternative sources of raw materials and energy. The Trump administration is also considering the possibility of easing sanctions against Russia, which could undermine the coherence of the EU's sanctions regime and weaken international coordination aimed at containing Moscow.

Germany, under the leadership of Friedrich Merz, has articulated a course towards "independence from the United States," although no concrete roadmap for achieving this objective has yet been presented. Poland, by contrast, continues to prioritise close ties with Washington, while France is actively working on the construction of a new European security format. Among the scenarios under discussion is the creation of independent nuclear forces based on French and British arsenals; however, such a project would require substantial financial investment and a level of political consensus that currently does not exist. Notably, the active involvement of the United Kingdom, five years after its withdrawal from the EU,

underscores the extent to which formal institutional frameworks that structured Western policy for decades are increasingly being replaced by ad hoc arrangements driven by immediate geopolitical pressures.

Conclusion

In the context of a deepening transatlantic crisis, Brussels faces the dual challenge of intensifying diplomatic engagement with Washington while simultaneously strengthening its own security institutions. Debates surrounding the creation of a unified European army and the potential use of frozen Russian assets to finance defence programmes and support Ukraine have once again moved to the forefront of the EU policy agenda. These issues are expected to be central to discussions at the upcoming EU summit scheduled for 20–21 March, where leaders will seek to define more concrete and operational responses. Failure to adapt rapidly to the evolving strategic environment risks further weakening Europe’s position in the global order and accelerating the rise of alternative centres of power, most notably China and Russia.

MELONI AND TRUMP: A CONSERVATIVE ALLIANCE IN AN ERA OF EUROPEAN TURBULENCE

Mushtariy Usmonova

April 19, 2025

Fazliddin Djamalov

Meloni's visit to Washington on April 17, despite the wariness of some European capitals and concerns about the erosion of EU unity, received formal support from the European Commission as a possible step toward de-escalating tensions in U.S.-EU trade relations. At the White House⁵, Meloni delivered an ideological manifesto in favor of “restoring the greatness of the West”, emphasizing the fight against “woke ideology” as a unifying platform between Europe and the United States. She stressed that she was not talking about geography, but about a “civilizational alliance” that must be strengthened.

Despite the encouraging backdrop, her mission was complicated by several factors at once, from Rome's limited foreign policy mandate to the growing distrust at home and among EU partners of Rome's independent actions on the international stage. Warnings from Paris about the risk of undermining pan-European consolidation in the face of growing external pressure were particularly critical.

The Italian prime minister faced a triple challenge: to defend Italy's economic interests, to soften the US confrontational course towards the EU and to preserve the unity of the transatlantic space. At the same time, she had to maneuver between loyalty to Trump, who sees her as a potential strategic ally, and the need to consider the interests and sensitivities of European partners who criticize Rome's unilateral actions.

Notably, Meloni was the only EU leader invited to Trump's inauguration⁶, and her meeting⁷ with Vice President J.D. Vance in Rome on April 18 serves as an indicator of the U.S. establishment's special attention to Italy. The content of her talks with Vance included discussions on the prospects for a bilateral trade deal and the search for an early resolution of

⁵ The White House. (2025, April 18). United States – Italy joint leaders' statement. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/04/united-states-italy-joint-leaders-statement/>

⁶ Popli, N. (2025, January 17). Here's who's attending Trump's inauguration, from foreign leaders to Big Tech executives. TIME. <https://time.com/7207709/trump-inauguration-guest-list-tech-executives-foreign-leaders-celebrities-politicians/>

⁷ Government of Italy. (2025, April 18). Meeting with the Vice President of the United States of America, JD Vance. <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/meeting-vice-president-united-states-america-jd-vance/28241>

the Russia-Ukraine conflict, reflecting the new administration's priorities for Southern Europe: an emphasis on pragmatic economic cooperation and a desire to reevaluate American involvement in European conflicts through the lens of U.S. national interests.

Vance, on his last visit⁸ to Europe in January, criticized the bloc, accusing its leaders of failing to uphold free speech or stop illegal migration. Now arriving at the Vatican⁹ on the eve of Easter, he also held talks with the Holy See's secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin. According to some observers, this could mean the strengthening of the "conservative axis" within the new transatlantic political alliance.

Given the \$126 billion in bilateral trade and the U.S. share in Italian exports (about 10% of the total), Italy remains one of the most dependent on the U.S. market in the EU. The projected decline in GDP by 0.4-0.6% in the next two years is accompanied by the risk of losing over 50,000 jobs. Pessimism is also increasing on the financial markets: the Italian stock index showed the worst dynamics among the developed Western economies immediately after April 2. This makes the situation particularly tense: interdependence, often referred to as the basis of an "unshakeable alliance", is turning into leverage – both for Trump and for Meloni herself.

With a public debt exceeding 136% of GDP, low growth rates and high dependence on European funding for the Recovery Plan that will end by 2026, Italy lacks sufficient economic autonomy to influence the parameters of transatlantic trade alone. An aging population, growing social spending commitments, and limited fiscal space further narrow the room for maneuver.

Meloni herself, a former representative of the far-right wing of Italian politics with roots in the neo-fascist movement, has managed to transform herself into a leader seeking international legitimacy and pragmatism without losing touch with radical right-wing rhetoric. This approach, dubbed "pragmatic radicalism" in expert circles, allows her to combine a nationalist agenda at the domestic level with a moderate foreign policy line emphasizing transatlanticism and military support for Ukraine.

Under these circumstances, Meloni is not so much imposing a "European line" on the United States as trying to convince Trump that a unified Europe can be a strategic asset for the United States rather than a threat. The concept of "zero tariffs" on manufactured goods could be not only a symbol of renewed cooperation, but also a pragmatic basis for restarting a negotiating

⁸ The White House. (2025, February 14). Vice President JD Vance delivers remarks at the Munich Security Conference [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCOsgfINdKg>

⁹ Vatican News. (2025, April 18). U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance visits Cardinal Parolin. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-04/us-vice-president-jd-vance-visits-cardinal-parolin.html>

architecture that would show the effectiveness of dialoguing with a single bloc rather than a multitude of national governments.

Although Meloni is not formally authorized to negotiate on behalf of the union, some European capitals view her mission as a tactical reconnaissance that could outline a framework for future dialogue. As Alberto Rizzi, a researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations, notes, Meloni could play the role of a “scout”, laying the groundwork for subsequent formal negotiations.

NATO IN THE AGE OF TRUMP: POWER, PERSONALITY, AND PRECEDENT

Mushtariy Usmonova

June 27, 2025

The 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague took place at a pivotal moment for the Euro-Atlantic community. Set against the backdrop of renewed geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, ongoing conflict in Ukraine, and rising concerns about long-term strategic cohesion within the alliance, the summit offered an important opportunity to reassess priorities and commitments. The presence of U.S. President Donald Trump was especially influential, shaping both the outcomes and the tone of the discussions, particularly on defense spending and transatlantic security arrangements.

Among the most consequential developments was the formal adoption¹⁰ of a new target of allocating 5% of GDP toward defense and related expenditures by 2035. This marked a substantial increase from the previous 2% guideline and appeared to reflect a convergence between longstanding American calls for greater burden-sharing and European recognition of an evolving security environment. Although framed as a collective response to persistent threats, the target also underscores ongoing disparities in capabilities and expectations among alliance members. President Trump, for his part, presented the agreement as a significant success for the United States and emphasized the importance of directing the additional resources toward military procurement, preferably through domestic production.

The U.S. airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, conducted shortly before the summit, drew considerable attention. While President Trump characterized the operation as a decisive strategic achievement, early assessments from intelligence sources and international partners were more cautious. Differing interpretations of the operation's effectiveness illustrated the challenges of aligning military actions with multilateral consensus. At the same time, the broader diplomatic implications of the Israel-Iran ceasefire remained unresolved, even as leaders expressed support for continued efforts to de-escalate tensions and re-engage in negotiation processes.

¹⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (2025). The Hague Summit Declaration (Official Text No. 236705). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm

The summit also reflected the role of personal diplomacy in alliance dynamics. Remarks made by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, including a moment of referring to Trump as a paternal figure in negotiations, were widely interpreted as part of a broader effort to maintain constructive engagement with the United States. While such gestures may have helped to reinforce cohesion during the summit, they also raised questions about the degree to which institutional decisions are increasingly shaped by the personalities and preferences of individual leaders.

Ukraine's position within NATO discussions remained highly prominent. President Volodymyr Zelensky offered a direct warning that Russia could target a NATO member state within the next five years, urging the alliance to accelerate its commitments. While NATO leaders reiterated their support for Ukraine, including increased defense assistance and industrial cooperation, the issue of formal membership remained unresolved. Diverging views, particularly from Hungary, highlighted the persistent ambivalence within the alliance over Ukraine's future integration and the broader question of enlargement.

The economic dimension of the summit was not ignored either. French President Emmanuel Macron expressed concern over the potential contradiction between increased defense spending and rising trade frictions across the Atlantic. His remarks reflected a growing awareness that military commitments must be supported by stable economic foundations and mutual trust among allies. Macron's intervention thus served as a reminder of the interdependence between strategic, political, and economic dimensions of transatlantic relations.

The Dutch role in hosting the summit further illustrated the importance of diplomatic symbolism. Through careful planning and a personalized approach to engagement, including high-level hospitality extended to President Trump, the Netherlands aimed to reinforce the alliance's unity and demonstrate its continued relevance. These efforts may have contributed to the relatively smooth adoption of summit declarations, even amid underlying tensions on key policy issues.

In sum, the 2025 NATO Summit demonstrated that while institutional commitments can be reaffirmed and policy goals realigned, the strategic autonomy of the alliance remains contested. NATO today is adjusting to a security landscape shaped as much by institutional priorities as by the personalities steering them. Whether this transformation strengthens or destabilizes the alliance in the long term remains an open question.

TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS: A CRISIS OF TRUST AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW STRATEGY

Mushtariy Usmonova

December 18, 2025

Ulugbek Ishankhodjaev¹¹

Rashid Ibragimov¹²

Almost a year into Donald Trump's presidency, U.S.–European relations are undergoing a severe stress test against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Confronted with sustained political and economic pressure from Washington, European leaders initially attempted to respond through familiar, time-tested methods: demonstrative courtesy, pledges to purchase American weapons, and promises to expand imports of U.S. liquefied natural gas. In many European capitals, there was an assumption that a combination of flattery and transactional deals could produce a workable *modus vivendi* with Trump and contain tensions within manageable limits.

Over time, however, U.S. pressure on Europe has not eased; rather, it has intensified signalling that the disputes are structural rather than episodic. The U.S. administration is advancing its own vision for resolving the Russia–Ukraine conflict, one that diverges markedly from the preferences and red lines of European allies. Meanwhile, the European Union is attempting to sustain support for Kyiv amid growing external constraints and internal political fatigue. It is telling that in the updated U.S. National Security Strategy, Europe is portrayed in sharply derogatory terms as a region of “economic decline” and “civilisational erasure” and that support is expressed for right-wing forces hostile to the European Union. In this context, Trump's criticism of Europeans, accusations of weakness and incapacity for decisive action, appears not as impulsive rhetoric, but as a strategically calibrated narrative.

Taken together, these signals point to the geo-economic priorities of the Trump administration: expanding regulatory freedom for American technology companies in Europe and pursuing a reset of economic relations with Russia, potentially at the expense of Ukraine and the EU itself. Europe thus enters a critical phase of negotiations, attempting simultaneously to

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prevent a peace arrangement that would disadvantage Kyiv and to overcome its own divisions over how to finance continued Ukrainian resilience. The core dilemma is that Europe's continuing dependence on the United States for security grants Washington considerable leverage. As a result, the EU finds itself reacting to an escalating crisis on its borders while the principal security guarantor demonstrates a willingness to negotiate a deal with the opposing side.

The U.S. Peace Plan and Divergences with Europe

Already in November of the current year, the Trump administration began promoting its own framework for peace arrangements outside allied coordination, provoking negative reactions in Kyiv and in multiple European capitals. According to the initial ideas circulating in Washington, Ukraine would be expected to accept major territorial concessions. Specifically, proposals reportedly included withdrawing Ukrainian forces from the parts of Donbas they controlled, effectively leaving those areas without protection, under the pretext of creating a special economic zone from which both Ukrainian and Russian forces would be removed, and in which American companies would be allowed to operate freely.

European observers were alarmed not merely by the substance of these ideas, but by what they perceived as the underlying logic. Behind the façade of diplomatic formulations, the approach was interpreted as a fundamentally commercial calculation. In European readings, Trump's agenda appeared less like a diplomatic architecture for peace and more like a corporate blueprint for the restructuring of a strategic region. This interpretation was reinforced by references to initiatives that extend far beyond Ukrainian stabilisation: the possible revival of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project; the return of Exxon to the Sakhalin gas project; acquisitions of distressed Russian energy assets, including companies such as Lukoil; and the expansion of Arctic gas and rare-earth projects.

The strategic expectation in Washington, as Europeans see it, is that normalisation with Russia would create a commercial space in which American firms could rapidly secure positions in sectors from which Europeans have been excluded by sanctions. In this reading, Trump's peace plan for Ukraine functions as a political instrument designed to unlock a cluster of highly profitable commercial deals while simultaneously weakening Russia's dependence on China. The political logic is inseparable from the geo-economic one: a settlement becomes valuable not solely as a security outcome, but as a mechanism to reshape markets, investment access, and the hierarchy of beneficiaries.

Despite these controversies, the negotiation process has intensified. During recent marathon talks between Trump's emissaries and Ukrainian officials in Berlin, the sides reportedly sought to narrow their differences. According to American sources, Washington believes that around 90% of the issues between Ukraine and Russia have already been resolved. The United States reportedly intends to convene working groups in which military officials will scrutinise maps in detail to settle the remaining territorial questions.

Ukraine, however, has firmly rejected any scheme in which it withdraws forces and then faces a scenario where Russia could, under any pretext, fill the resulting vacuum. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated publicly that territorial concessions without reliable security guarantees would inevitably trigger a political crisis and undermine the transatlantic security system. Attempts by Washington to push a settlement at the price of Ukrainian territory have therefore generated strong objections in Europe and have become an additional source of friction. Brussels fears that a rushed ceasefire on terms aligned with Moscow and Washington would threaten the very notion of a "just peace". European leaders also recognise that if Europe fails to demonstrate unity and firmness at its imminent summit, it would send a disastrous signal to Ukraine and deal a serious blow to the EU's reputation as a strategic actor.

Security Guarantees as an Alternative to NATO Membership

One indicator of a possible compromise has been a shift in Kyiv's position regarding NATO membership. Zelenskyy signalled readiness to drop the demand for Ukraine's accession to NATO if, in return, Ukraine receives credible security guarantees from the United States and firm commitments from European allies sufficient to deter renewed aggression.

In the Berlin consultations, American officials reportedly proposed to Ukraine guarantees comparable to those it would receive under NATO arrangements. This was described as the strongest and clearest security commitment the Trump administration had ever offered Ukraine, and the Ukrainian delegation was reportedly "pleasantly surprised" by the U.S. President's willingness to ratify such guarantees through Congress. Yet the offer is framed by a concealed ultimatum and, crucially, appears limited in duration, an element that substantially reduces perceived credibility in European strategic thinking, which is oriented toward long-term deterrence.

European leaders publicly welcomed this shift, attempting to maintain unity and political composure. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, alongside leaders of Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, and other states, praised "significant progress" in the talks. Privately, however, many in

Europe recognise that regardless of the wording of guarantees, without concrete decisions to strengthen Ukraine's defence capabilities, trust in the peace plan will remain low, particularly given the temporary nature of the American commitments.

European capitals proceed from the assumption that even with a peace agreement, Russia will remain a long-term threat. A major factor shaping this assessment is the accelerated militarisation of Russia's economy: military expenditures reportedly grew by approximately 30% year-on-year and reached \$149 billion in the first nine months of the current year, absorbing around 44% of federal tax revenues. In such conditions, abrupt demobilisation of the war economy could generate more severe political and social risks for the Kremlin than the continuation of a protracted conflict, because the most exposed groups would include key pillars of regime support: large business interests, security structures, and participants in the war itself.

This helps explain Europe's scepticism regarding Moscow's willingness to compromise and its tactical use of the "deal" narrative, one that appeals to Trump's political instincts while deepening U.S.–European disagreements. Against this backdrop, Washington's assumption that Russia may accept a peace agreement that includes, for instance, tolerance of Ukraine's EU accession is often perceived in Europe as excessively optimistic. Moscow's refusal to signal meaningful concessions, combined with the absence of substantive official commentary on new European initiatives, further deepens this scepticism. Parallel fears are growing that Russia could redeploy forces toward NATO's eastern flank even after a formal settlement, compelling frontline states to intensify defence coordination and accelerate readiness for rapid troop and equipment movements.

At the same time, European political and public consciousness is undergoing a striking psychological shift. A continent that for decades relied on the idea of peaceful integration and economic prosperity is confronting a return of military logic: the need to justify increased defence spending, and the awareness of low societal readiness to defend national territory. These tendencies are reinforced by assessments from European security services which interpret Russia's behaviour as a sustained "grey-zone" campaign combining sabotage, espionage, and pressure on NATO's economy and logistics. In aggregate, this has already contributed to sharp increases in military budgets and major rearmament programmes, including Germany's plans to develop the largest conventional armed forces in Europe.

In this context, the warnings of NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte that Europe risks returning to a mid-twentieth-century scale of war if Russia achieves its objectives in Ukraine, are viewed not merely as rhetorical alarmism but as reflecting a dominant threat perception among NATO's eastern members. Within this logic, the outcome of the war in Ukraine is increasingly seen as directly shaping the likelihood of broader military confrontation in Europe over the medium term. Consequently, traditional collective deterrence mechanisms are increasingly supplemented by bilateral and minilateral security formats designed to be less dependent on domestic political dynamics in Washington.

It is therefore significant that European security guarantees are increasingly being institutionalised through long-term agreements. Among these are the “Agreement on a Hundred-Year Partnership” between the United Kingdom and Ukraine signed in January of the current year, as well as a German-Ukrainian “military package” presented in Berlin in December. The latter shifts support for Kyiv into a more sustainable and “industrial” mode, emphasising joint ventures, R&D, cooperative procurement, and serial production of selected weapons systems. As EU-wide consensus becomes more difficult to sustain, such targeted but institutionally anchored bilateral arrangements between individual capitals and Kyiv are increasingly viewed as a more manageable and effective instrument for long-term security provision.

EU Financial Support and Frozen Russian Assets

Beyond diplomatic disputes over the terms of a settlement, a critically important arena has emerged around the financing of Ukraine. Following the effective suspension of U.S. assistance at the beginning of the year, European states were forced to urgently identify resources to compensate for the resulting deficit. In the first half of the year, the EU managed to partially fill the gap; by summer, however, the pace of new commitments fell sharply.

From July to September, the total volume of newly pledged allied assistance reportedly declined nearly by half—from €20 billion to €11.5 billion. Analysts warn that if this trend persists, Ukraine's financial reserves could be exhausted by spring 2026, significantly narrowing Kyiv's room for manoeuvre and raising the risk of forced, politically unacceptable compromises.

In response, the European Commission advanced an unprecedented proposal: to use the *доходы* (income) generated by frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine. Under EU sanctions jurisdiction, around €210 billion in assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation have accumulated, with the bulk held in the Belgian depository Euroclear. Brussels' plan envisages attracting borrowed funds against the collateral of these assets without formal

confiscation, and transferring the proceeds to Ukraine as a long-term, targeted credit facility. To minimise political risk and maintain legal continuity, all 27 EU member states agreed in December to extend the freeze of these assets for an indefinite period.

Yet precisely on this track, a less visible competition of strategies is intensifying within the transatlantic community. According to the information reflected in your text, Trump's negotiating team is revisiting the concept of frozen Russian assets—not as a source of financing for Ukraine's reconstruction, but as an investment resource for broader economic reintegration of Russia. The scenario under discussion suggests American companies could potentially use assets under European jurisdiction to acquire stakes or participate in joint ventures. These approaches were reportedly raised in contacts with the Russian side as part of a wider logic of bringing the Russian economy out of sanctions isolation.

Trump's desire to open Russia to American investment while keeping Europe accessible for U.S. business implies, in European eyes, pressure to weaken EU legal and institutional constraints. Yet it is precisely the EU that controls both the main volume of frozen assets and the critical legal and financial infrastructure required to manage the income generated by them. Without corresponding European decisions, implementation of American plans would be difficult, meaning that the EU possesses real levers of influence and must use them consciously to defend its own security interests.

Political Shifts and Fractures within the EU and the United States

The strengthening of right-populist and Eurosceptic forces across parts of the EU has significantly complicated consensus-building on Ukraine support and financial instruments. The cautious stance of Belgium's new government, the shift in Italy's position under economic pressures, and the continuing influence of pro-Russian leaders in Hungary and Slovakia reflect a deepening internal fracture. An additional factor is the Czech Republic, where the return of populist leadership reportedly coincided with a refusal to support the EU plan regarding frozen assets.

In this configuration, Europe's far-right forces increasingly function for the Trump administration not only as ideologically aligned partners but also as instruments of pressure on the EU. The opposing pole is represented by NATO's eastern flank states, which insist on scaling up assistance to Ukraine. However, a sharp imbalance in contributions ranging from 2.8–3.3% of GDP in the Baltic and Scandinavian states to less than 1% in some large economies intensifies

intra-European tensions. Parallel to this, alternative “right-wing” channels of political coordination are taking shape, including through direct contacts with the United States.

Additional strain is generated by conflict between the EU and major American technology corporations, which perceive European regulation as a threat to their business models. After the EU imposed a \$140 million fine on the platform “X” (Twitter), the rhetoric of the Trump administration towards Brussels reportedly hardened noticeably, and the EU is increasingly framed in Washington as a set of legal barriers to be dismantled.

Meanwhile, domestic politics in the United States remains unstable. A corruption scandal surrounding Trump and the resulting fractures inside the Republican Party have intensified pressure on the White House and narrowed the time window for decision-making. Under such conditions, the U.S. administration gains both stronger incentives for transactional arrangements with individual European capitals and additional motivation to accelerate closure of the Ukrainian issue in search of a foreign-policy achievement.

Against this background, the forthcoming EU summit on 18–19 December is presented as a critical test of the Union’s ability to preserve unity. Failure would strengthen Moscow’s position and further push the EU to the periphery of the negotiation process, where the key and possibly last lever of influence may be financial instruments. Where formal EU procedures are blocked, the most realistic response becomes coordination through an informal coalition of key states capable of producing a shared position outside paralysed institutional mechanisms.

In this environment, the financial track is no longer merely a question of assisting Kyiv; it has become a dispute over who sets the rules within the Western financial-and-sanctions architecture. The EU decision to fix the freeze of Russian assets for an indefinite period increases the sensitivity of relations with Washington. As a result, U.S.–EU relations are increasingly defined by a fundamental question: who, and at what scale, can convert political stances into deliveries, financing, and guarantees, and whether Europe can protect its own assets and institutions from being leveraged against it.

**BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND AUTONOMY:
NATIONAL POLICY TRAJECTORIES IN EUROPE**

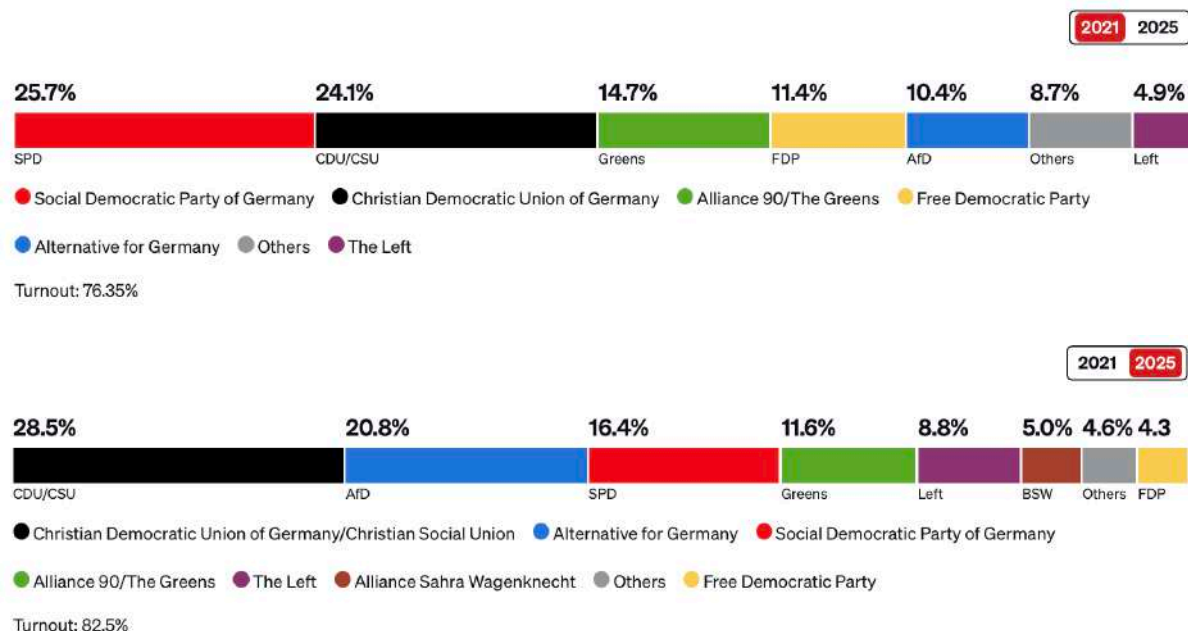
GERMANY'S NEW FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: POLITICAL RECONFIGURATION AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Mushtariy Usmonova

March 11, 2025

According to European analysts, the victory of Germany's conservative bloc – the Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) under the leadership of Friedrich Merz has brought an end to the period of left-liberal governance and has clearly reflected societal fatigue with the policies pursued by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Merz, who in the past positioned himself as one of the most outspoken critics of the political legacy of Angela Merkel, succeeded in leading the conservative bloc back to electoral victory. Nevertheless, this success proved more limited than many observers had anticipated.

The CDU/CSU secured 28.5% of the vote, a result that once again makes the formation of a coalition government unavoidable. Despite the significant electoral setback suffered by the Social Democrats—who received only 16.4%, their worst result in the party's history—the CDU has already entered coalition negotiations with the SPD.



Note: Without rounding, BSW's result stands at 4.972%, Source: Bundeswahlleiterin

Merz has publicly stated his intention to complete the formation of a new federal government by mid-April of the current year, underscoring the urgency he attaches to restoring political stability and decision-making capacity in Berlin.

An important enabling factor for the formation of a two-party coalition was the failure of the left-populist Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) to cross the 5% electoral threshold required for representation in the Bundestag. This outcome made it possible to construct a so-called “majority coalition” between the CDU/CSU and the SPD without the participation of the Greens, who nevertheless achieved 11.6% of the vote. The exclusion of the Greens simplifies coalition arithmetic and reduces ideological fragmentation within the prospective government.

A defining feature of the coalition talks has been Merz’s principled refusal to cooperate with the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which placed second in the election with 20.8% of the vote. This decision, while narrowing coalition options, is widely viewed as an attempt to preserve the democratic consensus and prevent the normalization of cooperation with extremist forces. At the same time, it creates a political environment in which the AfD becomes the largest opposition party in the Bundestag, strengthening anti-system sentiments and increasing pressure on the incoming government from the parliamentary opposition.

Observers emphasise that the decision to form a two-party coalition with the SPD reflects an overarching need to stabilise Germany’s political system. In contrast to the fragile “traffic-light” coalition led by Olaf Scholz (SPD–Greens–FDP), which ultimately collapsed in November of last year, a CDU/CSU–SPD alliance is expected to provide a more solid institutional foundation for strategic decision-making—particularly in the fields of defence and foreign policy. This expectation is reinforced by the likely continuation in office of Germany’s current defence minister, Boris Pistorius, a leading figure within the SPD.

Pistorius remains one of the most popular politicians in Germany and has consistently promoted initiatives aimed at expanding military assistance to Ukraine, including the controversial question of supplying Kyiv with long-range Taurus cruise missiles. In the context of growing pro-Russian sentiment among parts of the German electorate and the electoral rise of the AfD, experts argue that Pistorius’s presence in the new cabinet could prove decisive in maintaining Germany’s existing course of support for Ukraine and in resisting domestic pressure to scale back military engagement.

At the same time, significant policy differences remain between the CDU/CSU and the SPD. These include disputes over migration policy, social-welfare reform, and the so-called “debt brake”, the constitutional balanced-budget rule whose suspension or reform was one of the key factors behind the collapse of the previous coalition. On migration, the CDU advocates

the rejection of asylum seekers at Germany's borders, while the SPD considers such measures incompatible with German constitutional law and EU regulations. In the area of social policy, the CDU seeks a revision of the existing welfare system, whereas the SPD opposes dismantling current arrangements, viewing them as central to social cohesion.

On the international stage, Merz's electoral victory is widely perceived as a positive signal for Ukraine, particularly amid growing uncertainty in relations with the United States. Unlike Olaf Scholz, who was frequently criticised for hesitation and caution in decisions on military assistance, Merz has repeatedly stated that Germany must strengthen its support for Kyiv. He has called for increased arms deliveries and for accelerating Ukraine's integration into European political and institutional structures.

This position is especially significant against the backdrop of renewed tension in German-American relations following Donald Trump's return to the White House. During his election campaign, Merz repeatedly argued that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own security. He stated that it has become increasingly evident that the Trump administration is "largely indifferent to Europe's fate," a formulation that resonated strongly in German political debate.

Merz also publicly addressed the involvement of American entrepreneur Elon Musk in the German election campaign, describing it as an "unprecedented event." In one of his most widely cited remarks, Merz argued that "interference from Washington was no less sharp, aggressive, and ultimately outrageous than what we have seen from Moscow. We are under enormous pressure from both sides, which is why my top priority now is to build unity in Europe." This statement encapsulates Merz's broader strategic narrative, which frames Germany's domestic political consolidation as inseparable from the strengthening of European cohesion.

Only days after his electoral victory, Merz initiated consultations with French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Among other issues, these discussions focused on the prospects for establishing a new "European defence mechanism." In the military domain, Berlin is considering closer cooperation with Paris, London, Warsaw, and the Baltic states. Following talks with the British prime minister, Merz posed a question that has since become emblematic of the current strategic debate: "Will we continue to speak about NATO in its current form, or will we be forced to create independent European defence capabilities on an accelerated basis?"

At the same time, Germany remains interested in preserving the transatlantic partnership. Despite his criticism of Trump, Merz has emphasised that NATO is not merely a military alliance but a “political union based on shared values.” Accordingly, Berlin is expected to pursue a balancing strategy strengthening European defence capacities while maintaining alliance commitments with the United States.

A particularly serious challenge for the incoming German government will be the negotiations initiated by the Trump administration with Moscow on Ukraine without Ukrainian participation. Merz has made clear that Germany will not accept a settlement imposed “over the heads of the Ukrainians.” He stated that he had the impression that in recent days Russia and the United States were finding common ground without Ukraine and Europe, describing this as “an extremely critical situation” and underscoring the need for a German government capable of acting swiftly and decisively.

Overall, Merz’s victory signals a return of Germany to a more traditional conservative policy orientation, albeit under fundamentally new conditions. These include strong pressure from far-right forces, mounting economic challenges, and a fragmented transatlantic environment. The formation of a “grand coalition” with the SPD is intended to ensure domestic political stability and continuity in Berlin’s foreign-policy course. However, the durability of this arrangement will depend on the Merz government’s ability to adapt to emerging challenges and to assume greater responsibility for Europe’s defence at a time when American security guarantees appear increasingly uncertain.

FRANCE'S POSITION AND POLICY APPROACHES TOWARD THE UKRAINE ISSUE

Mushtariy Usmonova

March 12, 2025

Against the backdrop of rapidly shifting geopolitical dynamics, France is increasingly seeking to position itself as the leading European actor in efforts to address and shape the resolution of the Ukrainian crisis. President Emmanuel Macron appears acutely aware that the growing divisions within the European Union, combined with uncertainty in transatlantic relations, create a window of opportunity for Paris to consolidate its status as a key agenda-setter in European security and diplomacy. Through an active and highly visible foreign-policy strategy, France aims not only to retain influence over European initiatives in support of Kyiv, but also to advance the concept of a new security architecture in which Paris would occupy a central – If not dominant position.

As of today, France's humanitarian assistance to Ukraine has reached nearly €450 million, including projects implemented jointly with the United Nations and a range of non-governmental organisations. A flagship element of this effort has been Operation "Ship for Ukraine," which remains France's largest logistical operation in support of Kyiv. Within its framework, more than 1,000 tonnes of cargo have been delivered to Ukraine, addressing priority needs such as medical and food supplies, equipment for civil protection forces, and resources for emergency and rescue operations. These measures are designed not only to alleviate immediate humanitarian pressures, but also to reinforce France's image as a reliable and capable European partner.

Military support has become an increasingly prominent component of Paris's Ukraine policy. On 7 February of the current year, French Minister of the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu announced that the first French Mirage-2000 fighter jets pledged to Kyiv had arrived in Ukraine. Lecornu specified that the aircraft were accompanied by "Ukrainian pilots who had undergone several months of training in France," underlining the depth of operational cooperation between the two countries. More broadly, as part of France's military assistance programme implemented with support from Poland, around 10,000 Ukrainian servicemen have received training within the French armed forces. This level of engagement reflects Paris's willingness to

move beyond symbolic gestures and assume a more substantial role in strengthening Ukraine's military capabilities.

Behind this active support lie a set of clearly defined strategic interests. First, Macron seeks to enhance France's influence within NATO by demonstrating readiness for both military and diplomatic initiative. Second, Paris is using the Ukrainian conflict as a catalyst to justify increased defence spending and to strengthen its domestic military-industrial base, an especially important consideration amid intensifying competition in the global arms market. Third, sustained support for Ukraine allows France to present itself as a defender of European values, international law, and the established rules-based order. Ultimately, Paris's bid to seize leadership on the Ukraine issue is not merely a geopolitical necessity, but also an instrument for reinforcing the domestic and international standing of the French leadership at a time when it faces significant internal challenges, including a fragmented parliament divided between left-wing forces, the far right, and centrists.

Within this context, France is striving to ensure that any transition out of the acute phase of the conflict takes place with maximum consideration of Ukraine's interests. A notable diplomatic initiative in this regard was undertaken on 7 December 2024, when Macron hosted a trilateral meeting in Paris with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. According to U.S. sources, Trump proposed the deployment of European troops in Ukraine to monitor compliance with a future settlement and conveyed to Macron his opposition to Ukraine's accession to NATO. Macron used the meeting to highlight Europe's efforts on the Ukrainian track and to signal Paris's readiness to share responsibility with the United States for ensuring Ukraine's security on an equal footing.

Just days later, on 12 December 2024, Macron travelled to Poland with a proposal for a European peacekeeping mission intended, in his words, to "preserve Ukraine's sovereignty within the framework of a possible agreement between Trump and Putin." According to available information, the proposal envisaged a force of five brigades, totalling approximately 40,000 personnel. From Paris's perspective, such a mission would serve as a guarantee that Russia would not violate a future ceasefire agreement or the established demarcation line. While the initiative received support from Poland and the Baltic states, it was opposed by Germany, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Slovakia, and NATO's leadership illustrating the depth of intra-European disagreement over the appropriate level and form of engagement in Ukraine.

The Munich Security Conference, held on 14–16 February of the current year, further exposed the widening gap between Europe and the United States. Washington’s growing reluctance to act as the primary “security guarantor” for Europe cast doubt on France’s earlier assumptions and forced Paris to intensify efforts to consolidate a distinctly European response. Concerned that U.S.–Russian negotiations might further marginalise Europe, Macron called for an emergency EU leaders’ summit on Ukraine in Paris, which took place on 17 February, immediately after the Munich conference. However, the outcome fell short of expectations: the meeting failed to produce clear decisions and instead highlighted not only internal European divisions, but also the growing instability of transatlantic relations.

The summit revealed sharp disagreements over Ukraine’s security. The United Kingdom and Poland expressed readiness to discuss the possible deployment of peacekeepers to Ukraine following a peace agreement, while Germany and Italy categorically rejected this option. The absence of a unified stance on military presence in Ukraine and on defence spending emerged as a central stumbling block, limiting Paris’s ability to translate initiative into concrete outcomes.

Attention has been drawn to the meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Riyadh on 18 February. Conducted without the participation of Ukraine or European representatives, this format signalled an intention by Moscow and Washington to pursue bilateral arrangements that bypass European interests. For Paris, this represents a serious challenge: such an approach threatens not only to diminish France’s diplomatic influence, but also to undermine the broader European strategy of sustained support for Kyiv.

Despite the continued exclusion of the EU from prospective negotiations, Macron has consistently insisted on the inclusion of European representatives. This stance was reiterated during his meeting with Trump at the White House on 24 February, symbolically held on the third anniversary of the war. Yet despite the symbolism, tangible progress toward a shared approach remained elusive, as fundamental differences persist regarding the principles underpinning a future settlement. Macron stressed that “peace must not mean Ukraine’s capitulation,” arguing that any agreement must include international security mechanisms capable of preventing renewed Russian aggression. Trump, by contrast, avoided direct criticism of Vladimir Putin and signalled openness to a scenario in which Russia itself would act as a key guarantor, an approach that European capitals fear could legitimise new lines of division and effectively formalise Moscow’s territorial gains.

Trump also stated that he had already discussed with Putin the possibility of deploying European peacekeeping forces in Ukraine, claiming that the Russian leader did not object. Only days later, on 28 February, Zelenskyy travelled to Washington. What had been intended as an opportunity to reinforce U.S. support instead culminated in a diplomatic scandal that many analysts described as “one of the greatest diplomatic disasters in modern history.” The format and tone of the meeting underscored not only a shift in Washington’s priorities, but also a profound change in U.S. diplomatic thinking, where traditional support mechanisms for Ukraine were replaced by overt demands and implicit threats.

Macron’s response was both calibrated and demonstrative. He immediately issued a statement emphasising that there is an aggressor in this conflict – Russia, and a victim – Ukraine, thereby explicitly contrasting the European position with Trump’s refusal to assign responsibility for the war. Alongside other European leaders, Macron publicly expressed support for Zelenskyy, marking a growing political distance between Europe and the new U.S. administration.

At the subsequent summit in London on 1 March, France advanced a series of strategic proposals designed to place Europe, rather than the United States, at the centre of the Ukrainian track. A core idea was the introduction of a one-month, sector-specific ceasefire, limited to airspace, maritime operations, and energy infrastructure. Paris sought to create diplomatic breathing space while preserving the option of military deterrence. However, UK Defence Secretary Leo Docherty (or senior UK defence officials, depending on interpretation) signalled that London did not support this format, warning that Russia could use any pause to regroup. Germany and Central European states also reacted cautiously.

Despite the lack of consensus on ceasefire parameters, the London summit succeeded in consolidating European efforts around the broader objective of expanding support for Ukraine. France proposed launching a strategic dialogue on a new European security mechanism that would encompass not only continued arms deliveries, but also more active European participation in Ukraine’s defence. One option discussed was the deployment of a peacekeeping contingent of up to 50,000 personnel following a ceasefire agreement.

Macron went further still. As the leader of the EU’s only nuclear-armed state, he actively initiated debate on the creation of a European “nuclear shield” to compensate for the declining role of U.S. strategic deterrence in Europe. In his 5 March address to the nation, Macron announced the launch of “strategic debates on the use of France’s nuclear capabilities for the protection of France and all its European allies,” while stressing that “whatever happens, the

decision on its use will always remain with the President of the Republic.” He reiterated that a peace agreement on Ukraine “cannot be achieved at any price or under Russian diktat and cannot amount to Ukraine’s capitulation,” adding pointedly that “Europe’s future must not be decided in Washington and Moscow.”

In sum, France together with the United Kingdom has begun shaping an alternative European agenda on Ukraine. This reflects a growing awareness among European leaders that unless Europe asserts leadership, the future settlement of the conflict will be determined exclusively by Washington and Moscow, without meaningful consideration of Kyiv’s or Brussels’s interests.

THE UK IN SEARCH OF A NEW STRATEGIC IDENTITY

Mushtariy Usmonova

April 29, 2025

UK policy since the beginning of 2025 has entered a phase of adjusting strategic priorities against the backdrop of a changing global configuration. The focus is on strengthening defence and trade and economic cooperation with the EU. This not only marks a reset of relations after Brexit, but also represents a subtle diplomatic manoeuvre aimed at not severing ties with Washington, while strengthening the autonomy of the European vector of British foreign policy.

The leading trend here is the priority of defence cooperation¹³, which, in fact, becomes the entry point to a broader political and economic convergence. Support for Ukraine, the development of joint defence technologies and the participation of the British military-industrial complex in the mechanisms of the new EU defence fund (€150 billion) represent a pragmatic choice dictated by the need to adapt to the growing fragmentation of the transatlantic security architecture. It is particularly noteworthy that in the context of weakening US guarantees and an unstable global economy, it is security that becomes the basis for further integration steps.

London's statement on "shared values"¹⁴ becomes symbolic, which, although it does not mention Trump directly, actually opposes his approach to international affairs – unilateralism, tariff protectionism and deviation from climate commitments. The UK demonstrates its intention to act in unison with the EU in supporting Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders, protecting the global trading system and implementing the Paris Agreement. In doing so, it sends a clear message that the sustainability of the international order and multilateral engagement remain a priority.

However, such an active rapprochement with Brussels raises domestic and foreign policy dilemmas. Firstly, there is a risk of irritating Washington, especially if the incoming Trump administration again bets on a tough trade policy. Secondly, the British establishment must manoeuvre between the interests of British farmers, industrialists and hardline sovereignty

¹³ Macaskill, A., Smout, A., & Schomberg, W. (2025, April 24). UK PM Starmer nears EU defence pact in shadow of Trump trade talks. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-pm-starmer-nears-eu-defence-pact-shadow-trump-trade-talks-2025-04-24/>

¹⁴ Bayer, L. (2025, April 28). UK proposes statement of shared values with EU, document shows. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uk-proposes-statement-shared-values-with-eu-document-shows-2025-04-28/>

supporters, which limits the scope for deep regulatory integration with the EU. The fact that London has made clear its unwillingness to lower standards in the food and car industries suggests a desire to preserve autonomy in critically sensitive sectors while seeking US easing.

The complexity of the UK's position is further exacerbated by the fact that the country essentially acts as a bridge between two competing economic and political centres — the EU and the US. This gives London certain opportunities to mediate and strengthen its own role on the world stage but requires strategic consistency and diplomatic malleability. If the Starmer government manages to implement the outlined “defence cooperation – economic dialogue – climate solidarity” nexus, it could become a model for a new type of Europe+ relationship without membership, but with deep cooperation in key areas.

In conclusion, the current reset in UK-EU relations is not just a tactical choice, but a response to shifts in the system of international relations itself. With the erosion of US global leadership and growing instability in Eastern Europe, it is regional alliances based on values, security and pragmatism that are becoming points of resilience. The UK, after a painful break with the EU, could once again become one of the pillars of European stability, provided it manages to maintain a balance between the transatlantic and continental dimensions of its policy.

SLOVENIA'S PRINCIPLED SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE, MULTILATERAL ACTIVISM, AND DOMESTIC DEBATE

Mushtariy Usmonova

May 13, 2025

Since the onset of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the Republic of Slovenia has maintained a firm, unambiguous, and explicitly principled position in support of Ukraine. Ljubljana frames its policy through the fundamental pillars of international law, humanitarian responsibility, democratic values, and the concept of Europe’s collective obligation to uphold global security. Notably, at a moment when unity among leading Western powers has shown signs of strain, Slovenia serving as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (2024–2025) has sought to play an active role in shaping the political and humanitarian agenda surrounding the war, leveraging multilateral diplomacy to amplify both its voice and its normative message.

At the level of official doctrine, Slovenia’s leadership articulates its stance as an outright rejection of Russia’s actions and a clear recognition of Ukraine as the “victim of an unprovoked and unlawful attack.” In February 2025, marking the third anniversary of the start of the war, Slovenia’s Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Tanja Fajon stated that Russia had committed a grave violation of international law and that the only acceptable pathway toward resolution is a “just and lasting peace” grounded in Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of its borders. Importantly, she added a concrete political condition: Slovenia would not support any peace plan that imposes terms on Kyiv, and it insists on appropriate security guarantees for the Ukrainian state. This formulation is significant because it goes beyond general solidarity and explicitly sets limits on what Slovenia considers legitimate diplomacy, namely, that negotiations must not translate into coerced outcomes for Ukraine.

A further defining characteristic of Slovenia’s approach is the presence of an unusually broad internal political consensus. Support for Ukraine unites both the centre-left governing coalition led by Prime Minister Robert Golob and key opposition parties. Even former Prime Minister Janez Janša, known for his hard-right political profile and his past alignment with Donald Trump, has remained an active supporter of Ukrainian resistance. Janša, alongside leaders from Poland and the Czech Republic, was among the first European political figures to visit Kyiv after the outbreak of war—already in March 2022. He has since issued pointed warnings that any territorial concessions to Russia made without Ukraine’s consent would be unacceptable from

political, moral, and strategic standpoints. In analytical terms, this cross-party convergence reduces volatility in Slovenia's external posture and increases the predictability of its policy line, an attribute that carries diplomatic value for a small state operating within larger alliances.

In the broader setting of international instability, Slovenia's foreign policy posture is deliberately activist rather than reactive. After securing a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2023, Ljubljana began treating this mandate as an opportunity to increase its diplomatic weight and to position itself as a consistent advocate of a rules-based international order, founded on legal responsibility and the protection of sovereign equality. Within Security Council deliberations, Slovenia has repeatedly condemned attacks on Ukraine's civilian population and has called for accountability for war crimes.

Slovenia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, Undina Blokar Drobič, explicitly stated in one Security Council session that attacks on civilian infrastructure constitute a grave violation of international humanitarian law and must not go unpunished. Slovenia has also called for a full ceasefire, while emphasising readiness to support any peace initiative in which Ukraine participates as an equal party to negotiations, thereby aligning its diplomatic messaging with the principle of Ukrainian agency.

What distinguishes Slovenia's posture is that it is not confined to declaratory politics. From the earliest months of the war, Ljubljana provided Ukraine with approximately €15 million in humanitarian, medical, and post-conflict support. This package included funding for demining, rehabilitation of war victims, psychological assistance for children, support to the healthcare system, and aid for refugees.

In 2024, Slovenia additionally transferred €1 million through the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Health Organization, and it made contributions to projects of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the "Grain from Ukraine" initiative, and an OECD programme supporting Ukraine. This set of instruments suggests a deliberately diversified model of assistance: Slovenia channels support through both global humanitarian organisations and European institutional mechanisms, thereby reinforcing the multilateral character of its engagement while spreading political and administrative risk.

Slovenia has also played an active role in hosting displaced Ukrainians. As of 2024, the country had registered more than 10,000 individuals granted temporary protection. For a state of Slovenia's size, this figure is politically and administratively meaningful: it reflects a tangible

domestic commitment that complements foreign-policy messaging, while also placing long-term demands on social services, integration capacity, and public discourse.

Nevertheless, Slovenia's policy environment is not entirely insulated from debate. As the conflict has dragged on without a clear prospect of rapid resolution, a more cautious current has surfaced in parts of society. In February 2024, a group of former politicians and members of Slovenia's intellectual elite including former presidents Milan Kučan and Danilo Türk published an open letter calling for a "more pragmatic approach" to the conflict's settlement. The letter argued for a "balanced approach" and "serious negotiations between Russia and Ukraine." This intervention triggered a sharp backlash from segments of both the opposition and the governing coalition. Representatives of right-wing parties described the letter as amounting to "real support for Russian aggression," while the leader of the New Slovenia party, Matej Tonin, warned against a dangerous drift toward anti-NATO positioning.

Although the signatories are not members of the government, the very emergence of such a debate is analytically important. It indicates the presence within Slovenian society of a segment inclined toward de-escalation and geopolitical neutrality, an orientation that may not shape official policy today but could, under certain external pressures or domestic developments, become more influential. In this sense, Slovenia displays a familiar European pattern: strong institutional alignment with Ukraine and the EU mainstream, accompanied by a smaller but visible discourse advocating accommodationist or non-confrontational approaches.

Overall, Slovenia's stance on the Russia–Ukraine war rests on unwavering support for Ukraine as the victim of aggression, a consistent defence of international law, readiness to contribute to Ukraine's recovery and humanitarian needs, and a strategic use of its UN Security Council membership to promote the concept of a just peace. Despite isolated debates and dissenting voices, the country's political course remains firm, predictable, and broadly aligned with the pan-European position. In an environment where some larger powers demonstrate hesitation or pursue separate arrangements, Slovenia's approach stands out for its principled consistency and its emphasis on multilateral legitimacy.

BULGARIA ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE EURO: TRANSITION OR TURNING POINT?

Mushtariy Usmonova

June 11, 2025

The issue of Bulgaria's accession¹⁵ to the eurozone is not merely about meeting macroeconomic indicators or following institutional procedures. It represents a much deeper process – an effort to build trust, resilience, and a strategic identity within the European Union. Since joining the EU in 2007, Bulgaria has often been seen as a peripheral member of the integration project, a perception shaped by prolonged political instability, weak institutions, and susceptibility to external pressures. Yet in 2025, the country appears to have made a determined attempt to challenge this narrative – viewing the adoption of the euro not just as a technical step, but as a political and economic transformation with the potential to redirect its national development path.

On paper, Bulgaria has reason to be optimistic. Public debt¹⁶ stands at around 24% of GDP, the projected budget deficit for 2025¹⁷ remains within the permissible 3%, and inflation¹⁸ is stabilizing at 2.8% – well aligned with the targets set by the European Central Bank. The lev has long been pegged to the euro, first through a currency board and, since 2020, within the framework of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism II (ERM II)¹⁹. This has ensured exchange rate stability and helped prepare the country for a smoother transition. The Bulgarian Central Bank and government have been working steadily to strengthen fiscal discipline-cutting inefficient spending, tackling the informal economy, and improving tax administration.

However, the challenge lies not only in economic figures. Internal convergence is still far from complete. Issues such as low labor productivity and insufficient digital skills remain major

¹⁵ Deutsche Welle. (2025, June 5). EU gives green light for Bulgaria to join the euro. <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-gives-green-light-for-bulgaria-to-join-the-euro/a-72788487>

¹⁶ World Economics. (n.d.). Bulgaria debt-to-GDP ratio: 25.4%. Retrieved January 11, 2026, from <https://www.world-economics.com/GrossDomesticProduct/Debt-to-GDP-Ratio/Bulgaria.aspx>

¹⁷ European Commission. (2025). Economic forecast for Bulgaria. Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs. Retrieved January 11, 2026, from https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-economies/bulgaria/economic-forecast-bulgaria_en

¹⁸ National Statistical Institute. (2025, May 15). Inflation and consumer price indices — April 2025. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/press-release/inflation-and-consumer-price-indices-april-2025-7964>

¹⁹ European Commission. (n.d.). ERM II – EU's exchange rate mechanism. Retrieved January 11, 2026, from https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/euro/enlargement-euro-area/adoption-fixed-euro-conversion-rate/erm-ii-eus-exchange-rate-mechanism_en

obstacles. For instance, only about one-third of the population possesses basic digital competencies – well below the EU average. This points to a broader issue: without substantial educational and institutional reforms, the country may struggle to adapt to the financial and economic environment that comes with eurozone membership.

Another complicating factor is political instability. The new coalition government, led by Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov, has declared euro integration a top priority. However, the coalition includes parties with radically divergent views, including openly pro-Russian forces. In May 2025, President Rumen Radev proposed a referendum on euro adoption, signaling that even at the highest political level, unity is fragile. Parliament ultimately rejected the initiative, citing Bulgaria's obligations as an EU member state.

The potential benefits of adopting the euro are considerable – reduced transaction costs, the elimination of exchange rate risks, and access to the deeper financial markets of the eurozone. Over the long term, it could boost investor confidence and make it easier to attract capital into the Bulgarian economy. Domestically, increased competition could help lower prices and build consumer trust. Yet the risks should not be underestimated. A temporary spike in prices is a common side-effect of euro adoption, particularly if retailers engage in price rounding.

Public perception is another critical aspect. According to recent polls²⁰, around 70% of Bulgarians either oppose immediate euro adoption or wish to postpone it. Many fear rising prices, loss of economic sovereignty, and increased external influence. These concerns are amplified by disinformation, especially from pro-Russian parties like “Revival”, which actively circulate myths on social media about “confiscation of savings” and other alarmist scenarios. In response, the government has launched consultation processes, opened information centers, and initiated awareness campaigns, but these efforts remain insufficient.

Cultural dimensions must also be considered. For many Bulgarians, the lev is more than just a currency – it is a symbol of national independence. Abandoning it can feel like surrendering economic control to Brussels and the ECB. However, the experiences of other countries, such as the Baltic states and Croatia, suggest that with a well-planned communication strategy, the transition can be relatively smooth. In Croatia, which joined the eurozone in January 2023, inflation rose only moderately, while foreign investment increased.

²⁰ European Newsroom. (2025). Bulgarians deeply divided over their country's accession to the eurozone. European Newsroom. Retrieved January 11, 2026, from <https://europeannewsroom.com/bulgarians-deeply-divided-over-their-countrys-accession-to-the-eurozone/>

Bulgaria's experience is also of relevance to Uzbekistan. Firstly, as Bulgaria becomes a more predictable partner in terms of institutions, macroeconomic governance, and regulatory transparency, it opens promising avenues for deeper cooperation, especially in pharmaceuticals, agri-processing, IT, and light industry. Secondly, Bulgaria could serve as a gateway for Uzbekistan to access the eurozone market through joint ventures, trade offices, and integration into European logistics chains. And thirdly, Bulgaria's evolving relationship with the ECB offers valuable lessons for Uzbekistan, should it choose to engage more deeply with global financial institutions in the future.

STRUCTURAL REFORMS IN THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF UKRAINE: CENTRAL ASIA AS A NEW VECTOR

Mushtariy Usmonova

July 29, 2025

Dinara Ishbaeva²¹

On 8 July, Ukraine's Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrii Sybiha announced a comprehensive restructuring of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), outlining the reform on his official Facebook page. The stated objective of these changes is to ensure that the ministry "corresponds to the realities of war and to the best European and diplomatic practices." In substantive terms, this reform package reflects Kyiv's recognition that diplomacy under wartime conditions must be not only reactive but structurally transformed to remain effective, resilient, and strategically forward-looking.

The announced reforms include a broad digital transformation of the MFA, signalling an effort to modernise administrative processes, improve coordination, and enhance the speed and flexibility of diplomatic decision-making. Institutionally, several new specialised units are being created: a dedicated NATO Directorate, separate departments for the United States and Canada, for Global Ukrainian Affairs and Humanitarian Cooperation, as well as a new division dealing with so-called "unfriendly states" (Russia, Belarus, and North Korea), whose mandate is explicitly defined as "countering threats." Taken together, these changes point to a reconfiguration of Ukrainian diplomacy around security priorities, alliance management, and threat perception rather than traditional geographic or ceremonial logic.

The new strategic orientation is also reflected in the decisions. Sixteen new ambassadors have been appointed, including a new ambassador to Uzbekistan, an appointment of relevance for Central Asia. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is personally overseeing the reform process within the diplomatic service, issuing direct instructions aimed at accelerating Ukraine's integration with the West and strengthening relations with a broader range of international partners. This level of presidential involvement underscores the political importance attached to diplomacy as a frontline instrument of national survival and long-term repositioning.

²¹ Former intern at the Center for European Studies (IAIS).

For Uzbekistan and the wider Central Asian region, the most consequential element of the reform is the decision to establish a separate Central Asia Directorate within the Ukrainian MFA. This move should be interpreted as part of a broader strategic reorientation of Ukrainian foreign policy, driven not only by the war with Russia but also by Kyiv's effort to adapt to emerging geopolitical realities. As the armed conflict becomes protracted, traditional economic ties within the post-Soviet space, particularly through the CIS, have been severely disrupted or rendered politically untenable. In parallel, Ukraine is actively searching for alternative partners, routes, and political coalitions. Against this backdrop, Central Asia is emerging for Kyiv not merely as a venue for episodic diplomatic engagement, but as an area of systemic and long-term interest.

This decision appears to be motivated by three interlinked strategic logics

First, from a security and geopolitical perspective, Ukraine increasingly views Central Asia as a competitive arena where influence is contested among Russia, China, Türkiye, and the West. Within this context, Kyiv seeks to demonstrate its international subjectivity, not as an actor imposing its agenda, but as an active participant capable of building diplomatic alliances and coalitions based on the logic of “friends against common threats.” Importantly, this is not an attempt to construct classic bilateral partnerships in the traditional sense.

Rather, Ukraine appears to be working toward the creation of an anti-crisis diplomatic network – flexible, situational, and issue-driven, capable of responding to challenges linked to Russia's continued efforts to preserve influence. By engaging Central Asian states, Kyiv offers an alternative platform for interaction that is relatively free from direct pressure by Moscow or Beijing. At the same time, Ukraine intends to pursue the goal of what it defines as the “just punishment of Russia” through legal and institutional mechanisms within international organisations, where Central Asian votes and positions can carry growing weight.

Second, there is a clear economic and logistical rationale. The war has disrupted or entirely blocked Ukraine's traditional trade and transit routes through Russian territory. As a result, Kyiv is actively seeking alternative pathways for exports and for the import of strategically important resources. Central Asia with its energy reserves, uranium and metallurgical sectors, agricultural output, and fertiliser production naturally attracts Ukrainian attention. Moreover, through the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, and within the framework of the Middle Corridor, Ukraine can theoretically access Central Asian markets while bypassing Russia. Although this route presents technical, financial, and infrastructural challenges, it is politically

justified and strategically promising. The establishment of a dedicated Central Asia unit within the MFA thus represents an institutional response to a growing need to address these issues systematically rather than on an ad hoc basis.

Third, there is a symbolic and ideological dimension. Ukraine is actively seeking to dismantle Moscow's long-standing monopoly over the interpretation of the "post-Soviet space." Central Asia has traditionally been framed by the Kremlin as Russia's "backyard." However, in recent years and especially following the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine, Central Asian states have increasingly demonstrated political autonomy, distancing themselves from Russian narratives and pursuing more proactive, diversified foreign policies. Ukraine, in turn, offers a moral and political discourse centred on the right to sovereignty, self-determination, independent foreign policy, and resistance to neo-imperial projects. This narrative resonates with Central Asian elites, particularly in the context of heightened sanctions risks and Russia's growing international isolation. In this sense, Ukraine can emerge as an informal ally in legitimising these regional trends.

Against this backdrop, it is reasonable to ask why a Central Asia Directorate did not exist within Ukraine's MFA until now. One explanation lies in Ukraine's post-independence foreign policy focus, which prioritised partners that adopted a firm stance vis-à-vis Moscow. Despite brief periods of rapprochement with Russia, Kyiv consistently pursued a pro-Western orientation, viewing it as the primary guarantee of development independent from Russian influence. Central Asia, by contrast, was often perceived as politically distant and structurally embedded within Russia-centred frameworks.

It is also plausible that the decision to establish a Central Asia Directorate reflects not only internal Ukrainian initiative but also a degree of encouragement, or at least alignment with the European Union. The EU has demonstrated growing interest in Central Asia and increasingly requires partners with a deeper, historically grounded understanding of the region's political dynamics, elite structures, and socio-cultural specificities. In this context, Ukraine sharing a post-Soviet legacy yet firmly oriented toward Europe can play the role of an intermediary or even an "internal expert" for the EU on Central Asian affairs. By doing so, Kyiv not only strengthens its own diplomatic footprint but also contributes to the implementation of Brussels' external priorities, which may prove advantageous in terms of EU accession prospects and deeper integration.

The timing of these reforms is equally significant. On the one hand, it has become clear that the war with Russia has entered a prolonged phase, requiring Ukraine to reinforce its foreign-policy positions beyond the immediate military theatre. On the other hand, Central Asia itself is undergoing a period of profound transformation – economic, political, and geopolitical. Large-scale reforms in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan’s recalibrated foreign policy, and the cautious distancing of other regional states from Moscow alongside closer engagement with European partners have created a window of opportunity for building a new architecture of interaction.

For Central Asian states, cooperation with Ukraine can offer multiple benefits. Beyond expanding diplomatic manoeuvring space, it opens access to alternative multilateral formats, including those involving the EU and Eastern European countries, where Ukraine can function as a connecting node. This diversification is particularly valuable in an international environment marked by heightened great-power competition and growing pressure to choose sides.

In sum, the establishment of a dedicated Central Asia division within Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs should not be seen as a purely technical or administrative reform. It is a strategic signal that Kyiv seeks not only to endure the current crisis, but to construct its own regional policy based on pragmatism, mutual benefit, and a shared commitment to sovereignty. It is also an invitation to dialogue—one that, under conditions of ongoing reconfiguration of the Eurasian space, could evolve into a durable and meaningful partnership.

SERBIA'S MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY IN RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Mushtariy Usmonova

October 4, 2025

Serbia, which has held the status of a candidate country for accession to the European Union since 2012, has found itself in an increasingly complex foreign-policy environment amid the prolonged stagnation of the EU enlargement process and the gradual decline of the Union's attractiveness for candidate states. The phenomenon commonly described as "enlargement fatigue," compounded by Brexit, recurring economic crises, geopolitical fragmentation, and rising public scepticism within the EU itself, has weakened the Union's image as a clear model for political and economic transformation.

In response to these trends, official Belgrade continues to formally reaffirm its commitment to the European course while simultaneously deepening partnerships with Russia, China, the United States, and other centres of power. From the perspective of Serbia's leadership, this multi-vector approach allows the country to defend its national interests with maximum flexibility. At the same time, such a strategy has generated growing concern in European capitals and has increasingly called into question the credibility and feasibility of Serbia's long-term accession to the EU.

The process of Serbia's rapprochement with the EU has visibly slowed. More than a decade after obtaining candidate status, only 22 out of 35 negotiation chapters have been opened, and merely two chapters have been provisionally closed. Reform momentum has weakened, while progress on political criteria remains limited. Moreover, the EU's most recent strategy for the Western Balkans does not contain clear accession timelines, undermining public confidence in Serbia. A widespread perception has taken hold that Brussels offers distant and uncertain benefits in exchange for demanding and politically sensitive conditions.

Public opinion data reflect this growing disenchantment. According to surveys, only 46% of Serbian citizens would currently vote in favour of EU membership, while 44% would vote against it. At the same time, approximately 60% of respondents expressed support for Serbia's potential accession to the BRICS grouping. Another poll showed that 59% of the population does

not believe Serbia will ever join the EU. Taken together, these figures illustrate not only rising Euroscepticism but also the increasing appeal of alternative geopolitical orientations.

An additional factor slowing integration is Serbia's reluctance to align fully with Brussels' foreign-policy positions. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, pressure on Belgrade from the EU intensified sharply. The EU, with Germany playing a particularly prominent role, effectively presented Serbia with an ultimatum: to align with sanctions against Russia and to normalise relations with Kosovo, up to and including mutual recognition, as a prerequisite for further progress on the European path. Belgrade, however, has avoided imposing anti-Russian sanctions, citing national interests. As a result, Serbia's alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy has fallen to 45%, one of the lowest levels among candidate countries.

The European Parliament, in its 2023 resolution, explicitly linked potential progress in accession negotiations to Serbia's position on sanctions, calling for the blocking of positive movement until Belgrade changes course. Similarly, the unresolved status of Kosovo remains a central stumbling block: several influential EU member states have signalled that without a final settlement between Belgrade and Pristina, EU membership will remain unattainable for Serbia.

Against this background, Serbia has since the early 2010s developed a strategy of balancing among multiple centres of power, commonly described as the policy of the "four pillars."

The European Union

The EU is officially recognised by Belgrade as Serbia's main strategic priority and its largest economic partner. The Union accounts for approximately 65% of Serbia's total trade turnover, and cumulative investments by European companies amount to billions of euros annually. German business plays a particularly significant role: around 77,000 Serbian citizens are employed by companies with German capital. Brussels is also Serbia's largest donor: between 2007 and 2020, Serbia received more than €3.6 billion in development assistance.

Belgrade formally declares its commitment to reforms required to meet the Copenhagen criteria. In practice, however, progress remains limited. European partners increasingly warn that continued delays in reforms and persistent ambiguity in foreign-policy orientation jeopardise the very prospect of membership. At the same time, Serbia has sought to use its candidate status tactically, demonstrating selective progress in technical chapters in order to prevent the accession process from being formally frozen or terminated.

Russia

Historically and culturally, Russia is perceived in Serbia as a close ally. Moscow's consistent support for Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo on the international stage is of critical importance for Belgrade. Russia is also Serbia's key energy supplier: more than 85% of the gas consumed in Serbia is supplied by Gazprom. Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions ensures uninterrupted gas deliveries at preferential prices and sustains political trust with Moscow. In 2019, Serbia concluded a free-trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, signalling readiness to deepen trade ties with Russia and its partners.

Belgrade also maintains a position of military neutrality. Without joining NATO, Serbia periodically conducts joint exercises both with Western forces and with Russia, reinforcing its image as a state seeking strategic autonomy in security affairs.

China

Over the past decade, China has emerged as one of Serbia's most important non-European partners. Since 2009, the two countries have maintained a strategic partnership, and the volume of Chinese investment in Serbia exceeds €5.5 billion. Chinese capital is concentrated primarily in the Belgrade–Budapest high-speed railway project and in the mining sector. In 2024, a free-trade agreement between Serbia and China entered into force, abolishing tariffs on 60% of goods.

Beijing uses Serbia as a gateway for strengthening its influence in Europe, including within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Beyond economics, military-technical cooperation has also expanded: Serbia became the first European country to purchase Chinese air-defence systems and drones. In 2025, joint Serbian-Chinese military exercises were announced, triggering concern in Brussels. Unlike the EU, China does not link investment to demands for democratic reforms or human-rights conditionality, which makes it a particularly attractive partner for Serbian authorities amid stringent European requirements.

The United States and Other Partners

Relations between Serbia and the United States remain complex but pragmatic. On the one hand, the memory of NATO's 1999 bombing remains vivid in Serbian public consciousness. On the other, Washington remains a key actor in the Balkans and a central ally of the EU. Belgrade maintains working relations with the United States, recognising its role in mediation between Serbia and Kosovo and its broader importance for regional security.

In 2020, with U.S. mediation, Serbia signed the Washington Agreement on economic normalisation with Pristina, demonstrating Belgrade's willingness to compromise under American auspices. Although U.S. trade and investment volumes are not comparable to European levels, Washington is perceived as an important balancing actor, particularly in the security sphere.

Beyond these four pillars, Serbia cultivates friendly ties with several non-NATO European states and with countries of the Persian Gulf, drawing on the legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement, of which Yugoslav Belgrade was one of the founders. President Aleksandar Vučić actively exploits heightened geopolitical competition, seeking to “offer something to everyone, but not give too much to anyone.” This strategy provides Belgrade with tactical room for manoeuvre, allowing it to minimise risks while extracting maximum benefits from each partner.

The advantages of this approach are tangible. Economic diversification has enabled Serbia to attract substantial foreign investment from multiple sources. Alongside European capital in industry and services, Serbia has secured Chinese loans and infrastructure investments, favourable oil and gas arrangements with Russia, and financial support from international institutions. These resources underpin large-scale infrastructure projects and enhance Serbia's transit potential.

Multi-vectorism has also increased Serbia's strategic flexibility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Belgrade procured vaccines from Western companies as well as from Russia and China, enabling faster immunisation than in many neighbouring countries, an outcome frequently cited as a success of balancing diplomacy. Alternative partnerships have also strengthened Serbia's diplomatic leverage, including Russia's support in the UN on Kosovo and closer ties with China as a rising global power.

Over time, however, the risks of this strategy have become increasingly evident. First, the attempt to pursue parallel rapprochement with mutually antagonistic blocs has stalled EU integration. European leaders and experts now increasingly interpret Belgrade's policy not as neutral balancing, but as an absence of strategic choice. In effect, Serbia's multi-vector approach has pushed the country into a foreign-policy deadlock.

Second, this strategy entails domestic costs. Reliance on support from non-democratic partners has reduced the government's sensitivity to demands for democratic reforms. As a result, institutional erosion and authoritarian tendencies have intensified. For more than a year, Belgrade has witnessed mass protests corruption, censorship, and the concentration of power

in the ruling party, developments partly fuelled by stagnating European integration and a broader sense of political inertia. By providing alternative sources of legitimacy and resources, multi-vectorism has weakened the EU's transformative leverage. Strong socio-political institutions, transparency, and accountability remain essential safeguards against dependency and stagnation.

Third, balancing between strategic rivals has damaged Serbia's regional image. According to opinion polls, more than half of the populations of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina view Serbia's policy as destabilising for the region. This perception complicates regional cooperation and risks isolating Belgrade within its Balkan neighbourhood.

It is important to stress that multi-vector diplomacy proved effective under conditions of relatively low global confrontation. As international polarisation deepens amid growing rivalry between the West, Russia, and China, the space for profitable pragmatic manoeuvres is narrowing. Serbia increasingly faces demands to choose, and its refusal to make a strategic decision is now seen less as a solution and more as a problem. Pressure from Brussels and Washington is intensifying, while Moscow and Beijing expect loyalty in return for support.

Overall, Serbia's experience demonstrates that multi-vector policy can serve as a useful instrument for safeguarding national interests in a turbulent environment, but it cannot resolve structural challenges. In Belgrade's case, this approach has been largely forced and situational. It has bought time and resources, yet for long-term effectiveness it cannot substitute for a clear foreign-policy priority.

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CENTRAL ASIA AS A STRATEGIC INTERFACE IN THE EU'S EURASIAN POLICY

EU-CA 2025 SUMMIT IN SAMARKAND: A NEW MILESTONE OF CO-OPERATION

Mushtariy Usmonova

April 4, 2025

Fazliddin Djamalov

Introduction

The EU-CA Summit, expected on 3-4 April in Samarkand, represents an important event in the context of international cooperation. It symbolises the desire of the European Union and the Central Asian countries to deepen cooperation in various fields, as strengthening ties between these regions is of particular importance in the context of global challenges. The EU Strategy for Central Asia (2019-2025) emphasises the growing strategic role of the region for EU interests, building on the positive achievements in regional cooperation.

The 2nd meeting of Central Asian Heads of State and the President of the European Council in Cholpan-Ata (Kyrgyzstan) in 2023 intensified joint efforts in the implementation of the Global Gateway strategy (the European alternative to China's One Belt, One Road initiative) and Team Europe initiatives on digitalisation, climate change, water resources, renewable energy development. The upcoming summit in Samarkand is expected to be a new milestone in co-operation, providing a platform to discuss strategic directions of the partnership and implement joint projects that will contribute to further economic growth and strengthen ties between the regions.

Historical context of EU-Central Asia relations

Historical contacts between Europe and Central Asia date back to the era of the Silk Road, which served as an important channel for the exchange of goods, technology and cultural achievements. The interaction that began in antiquity continued into the Middle Ages, when trade routes linked Europe with Central Asian regions, facilitating the mutual enrichment of cultures and economies. This period laid the foundations for further relations, which became more organised with the development of international trade and diplomacy.

Modern co-operation between the European Union and Central Asia began to take shape in the post-Soviet period, when the countries of the region became independent. In 1996, the EU initiated the TACIS programme to support economic reforms in Central Asia, an important step towards closer ties. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western policy towards Central Asia

has focused on expanding trade and economic relations, gaining access to the Central Asian states' hydrocarbon resources and organising reliable exports to foreign markets. With the launch of the EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2007, co-operation has strengthened, covering a wide range of issues such as economic development, the rule of law and improving education.

The current relationship between the EU and Central Asia, despite the successes achieved in co-operation, faces a number of challenges. These include the need to combat climate change, ensure sustainable economic growth and improve infrastructure. At the same time, these challenges offer new opportunities for partnership, such as the development of green energy, digitalisation and strengthening transport links.

Trade and investment: new opportunities

Ongoing trade between the European Union and Central Asia is showing steady growth, reflecting the significant economic potential of the region. At the end of 2024, total trade between the two sides will exceed €54 billion, underlining the importance of Central Asia as a trading partner for the EU. The region's main exports are raw materials, including oil, gas and metals, while the EU supplies the region with high-tech equipment, cars and pharmaceuticals. These data point to significant trade complementarities between the EU and Central Asia, providing a basis for further deepening of economic ties.

The European Union is one of the largest investors in Central Asia, with total foreign direct investment exceeding 15 billion euros. These funds are spread across the energy, transport, agriculture and information and communication technology sectors. Central Asia, with its rich natural resources and strategic geographical location, offers significant opportunities for European investors. It is noted that economic growth is based on exports of natural resources and remittances, but the structure of Central Asian economies is monolithic. Investment can help modernise infrastructure, create jobs and develop technology in the region, enhancing economic stability and promoting sustainable development, which in turn opens up new horizons for further cooperation.

Economic cooperation between the European Union and Central Asia covers a wide range of areas, but in order to maximise the impact, key sectors with high potential need to be highlighted. These include energy, agribusiness, information technology and infrastructure projects. These areas not only correspond to the strategic interests of both sides, but also have significant potential for sustainable growth and mutually beneficial co-operation.

Central Asia's rich reserves of hydrocarbons and rare earth metals provide the basis for energy partnership. The region has significant reserves of oil, gas and other natural resources, making it a strategically important partner for Europe in the global energy transition. At the same time, the European Union is actively promoting the development of renewable energy sources, allocating significant funds for projects in this area. For example, under the Horizon programme, the EU has invested more than €1 billion in solar and wind energy development in Central Asia.

On 13 March 2025, a €3 million contract was signed in Astana as part of a major tour of five Central Asian countries by European Commissioner for International Partnership Josef Sicken from 12 to 18 March to promote cooperation in critical raw materials between the EU and Central Asian countries. "The document will help identify joint projects and promote international best practices to create sustainable and responsible supply chains in the critical raw materials sector", the press release said.

Energy is also one of the key sectors for co-operation between the EU and Central Asia under the Global Gateway strategy. On 14 March, a signing ceremony was held in Dushanbe with the partners of Team Europe, which includes EU countries, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). According to the document, the EBRD will provide Tajikistan with a €20 million investment grant to modernise the power grid, reduce energy losses and prepare for investments in renewable energy sources (RES).

In turn, the region's burgeoning IT sector opens up new horizons for digitalisation and technological exchange. At the end of Josef Sicken's visit, a signing ceremony for the European Satellite Internet Programme for Central Asia (TEI Digital Connectivity) took place in Tashkent on 18 March. The parties to the agreements were the European Union, the international technical co-operation agency Expertise France, the European provider SES and the EIB.

The agreement concerned infrastructure development between the European Investment Bank and SES. Thanks to a grant from the European Union and a loan from the EIB, SES will deploy satellite technology and ground terminals to connect remote regions of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the Internet. Thus, identifying and developing these key sectors is an important step to strengthen economic ties.

The role of infrastructure projects in strengthening connectivity

For Central Asia, which has significant geographical potential as a transit region between Europe and Asia in light of the geopolitical shifts of recent years, infrastructure development is a

crucial factor for integration into the world economy. The European Union, aware of the strategic importance of the region, actively supports initiatives aimed at building and modernising transport and energy corridors.

Europeans are most closely focused on the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor. Looking for alternative routes that bypass Russian territory, the EU has pledged to invest €10 billion in the route, as European Commission Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis announced at an investment forum in Brussels on 29 January 2025. In total, the European Union, its countries and development banks aim to mobilise up to 300 billion euros of public and private investment to improve Central Asia's transport systems between now and 2027. Despite significant progress, infrastructure co-operation between the EU and Central Asia faces a number of challenges. One of them is the need for coordination between the different countries in the region, each with its own priorities and interests.

In addition, geopolitical rivalries between the major powers in the region make it difficult to coordinate international efforts aimed at developing a trusting partnership. Sanctions against Russia have a negative impact on the economies of Central Asian countries, as the EU insists on preventing their bypass through the region. At the same time, the EU's current policy towards the region can no longer be seen as "benevolent indifference", as it is shaped in the context of confrontation with Russia and hedging the risks associated with China.

Cultural exchanges and humanitarian co-operation

Exchange programmes play a key role in enhancing intercultural dialogue by promoting mutual understanding and tolerance between peoples. They provide participants with a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in a different cultural environment, which contributes to a better understanding of cultural backgrounds and values. The interaction between students, teachers and professionals from different countries breaks down stereotypes and creates a deeper awareness of common interests and goals.

One of the best examples of successful exchange programmes is Erasmus+. In 2022, according to the European Commission, about 15,000 students from Central Asia took advantage of the Erasmus+ programme, which allocated about 130 million euros, to study in EU countries. The programme not only promotes the personal development of participants, but also strengthens mutual understanding between the regions. Erasmus+ opens doors for academic mobility, co-operation between higher education institutions and improving the quality of

education in Central Asia. Also, a significant achievement is the student and scholar exchange programme launched in 2017, which has allocated more than €50 million to support educational projects aimed at developing science and education in Central Asia.

The development of language and cultural education is an important aspect of strengthening ties between the EU and Central Asia. In 2023, more than 50 new EU-supported language centres for learning European languages were opened in Uzbekistan. These centres promote better mutual understanding and cultural exchange, which plays a significant role in laying the foundations for long-term cooperation. Learning languages and cultural backgrounds helps to break down barriers and build mutual respect.

In turn, the organisation of cultural events plays a key role in fostering mutual understanding and improving perceptions between the peoples of the EU and Central Asia. Events such as exhibitions, festivals and seminars provide a platform for the exchange of cultural values and traditions, promote a positive image and build trust. For example, in 2019, the European Union organised more than 50 cultural events in Central Asian countries, allowing people in the region to get to know European art, music and literature better.

Media fulfil the role of promoting cultural initiatives as they are able to bring information about cultural events to a wider audience. The use of modern technologies and social media allows to spread information about cultural exchanges, attracting more participants and viewers. Studies show that 70% of participants in cultural exchange programmes report an improved understanding of cultural differences, which confirms the effectiveness of media in shaping positive perceptions. Thus, media is becoming an indispensable tool in strengthening cultural ties between the EU and Central Asia.

Conclusion

Thus, the upcoming summit represents an important milestone in strengthening ties between the regions. It will stimulate the development of infrastructure and innovative projects. The second conclusion concerns cultural and educational cooperation, which promotes mutual understanding and trust between peoples, also emphasising the importance of cultural, humanitarian and educational initiatives. The Summit symbolises the desire to deepen cooperation and strengthen mutual understanding. The agreements and initiatives reached will contribute to long-term development and stability in the region, moreover, will bring the region's relations with the European Union as one of the largest global players to a whole new level of enhanced and more targeted co-operation.

EU'S REVIVED CENTRAL ASIA VISION?

Mushtariy Usmonova

April 9, 2025

Islomkhon Gafarov²²

The recent speech²³ delivered by U.S. Vice President J. D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference calling for a fundamental reassessment of global and European security arrangements has catalysed a moment of reflection within Europe regarding its own strategic posture. European institutions, approaches, and value frameworks will retain their continuity; however, their future development will increasingly unfold with the prospect of limited or minimal, U.S. involvement in mind. In this context, a recalibration of Europe's approach towards China, India, Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus appears increasingly likely.

There is a particular interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia, which can play the role of a bridge between East and West. The geopolitical location of these regions makes them very attractive for the European Union, which was confirmed during the First European Union – Central Asia Summit, which ended on April 4 in Samarkand with the signing of the Joint Declaration²⁴.

Summit Outcomes

The comprehensive mobilisation of the EU's bureaucratic apparatus ensured that the summit's outcomes were elevated to a structured and systemic level of cooperation. A formalised framework for bilateral engagement was established, including regular meetings of foreign ministers, working groups, and high-level platforms.

Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to deepening economic and investment ties. The European Union currently stands as Central Asia's second-largest trading partner after China. As noted by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, trade turnover between the two regions

²² Former Head of the Center for Afghanistan and South Asian Studies at IAIS, PhD in International Relations.

²³ Wintour, P. (2025, February 15). JD Vance's Munich speech laid bare the collapse of the transatlantic alliance. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/15/jd-vance-munich-speech-laid-bare-collapse-transatlantic-alliance-us-europe>

²⁴ Council of the European Union. (2025, April 4). Joint Declaration following the first European Union-Central Asia summit. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/04/04/joint-declaration-following-the-first-european-union-central-asia-summit/>

reached €54 billion²⁵ in 2024. Significantly, an agreement was reached to establish a regional office of the European Investment Bank (EIB) in Uzbekistan, a move reflecting the substantial volume of European investments in regional initiatives, which already account for 40% of all foreign investment in Central Asia. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, also announced the launch of a new €12 billion²⁶ Global Gateway investment package, aimed at supporting cooperation in infrastructure, digital connectivity, water and energy sectors, and critical raw materials. The EU also reaffirmed its intention to continue implementing its 2019 Strategy for Central Asia in key areas such as the green transition, climate change mitigation, energy, and sustainable agriculture.

In addition, the EU expressed its readiness to continue its Global Strategy for Central Asia (2019) in key areas such as green transition, climate change, energy, sustainable agriculture, as well as increased support for education programs through Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Digital Education, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

In the domain of security, both sides outlined plans to intensify collaboration on counter-terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, and organised crime, while also advancing border and migration management through platforms such as LEICA and BOMCA.

The Eurasian Highway

The Summit reiterated the particular importance of developing a network of extensive logistics routes and supply chains against the backdrop of ever deepening global fragmentation and geopolitical instability in key transportation hubs of international trade. In this regard, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), better known as the Middle Corridor, connecting China with Europe via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, is of greatest interest to the EU.

European institutions have already pledged €10 billion²⁷ to support it during an investment forum in Brussels in January 2024. Global Gateway is therefore recognized as the main instrument of infrastructure cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. Thus, trade is no longer merely a pursuit of the shortest or least costly routes — it is an urgent quest for the

²⁵ Uzbekistan National News Agency. (2025, April 7). Uzbekistan at the center of the global agenda: Samarkand EU–Central Asia summit. https://uza.uz/ru/posts/uzbekistan-v-centre-globalnoy-povestki-samarkandskiy-sammit-es-ca_706420

²⁶ Council of the European Union. (2025, April 4). Joint press release following the first EU-Central Asia summit. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/04/04/joint-press-release-following-the-first-eu-central-asia-summit/>

²⁷ Polska, K. (2024, January 29). EU commits €10 billion to Trans-Caspian transport corridor. Deutsche Welle. <https://www.dw.com/ru/es-obazalsa-vlozit-10-mlrd-evro-v-transkaspiskij-transportnyj-koridor/a-68116053>

most reliable, resilient, and politically sustainable supply chains that can endure uncertainty and reinforce strategic autonomy.

Region-to-Region Cooperation

The summit further affirmed the EU's comprehensive support for regional integration in Central Asia. In recent years, Brussels has consistently advanced region-wide initiatives rather than focusing exclusively on bilateral channels. Alongside robust bilateral engagements that underpin effective collaboration, Central Asian states are also being encouraged to look beyond the C5+1 format and explore strategic partnerships with Azerbaijan. Such cooperation could pave the way for the EU to craft an alternative to its traditional Eastern Partnership, namely, a new Trans-Caspian Partnership.

This evolution necessitates more tailored engagement with subregions of Europe that play vital roles in transit and energy connectivity. Central Asia already maintains solid linkages with the Baltic states, which have proven themselves to be dynamic economic and investment partners. These established ties may serve as a foundation for expanding relations with the Nordic countries, thereby supporting external economic diversification and fostering a more multi-tiered political dialogue.

The Afghan Dilemma

In the broader context of global transformations, the European Union may soon revisit its policy towards Afghanistan. While the EU has exercised caution in dealing with Kabul, its strategic ally, the United States, has begun to signal a tentative re-engagement, evidenced by the informal visit to Afghanistan by former U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad²⁸ in March 2025. Nevertheless, Brussels remains wary of moving too quickly, for several reasons.

First, the EU is sensitive to reputational risks drawing criticism from the democratic world. Second, a renewed relationship with Kabul could lead to internal discourse shifts within the EU, given the electorate's profound divergence from the Taliban on matters of civil society and governance. Third, within Europe's current strategic calculus, Afghanistan is often perceived as peripheral to core continental interests. However, if Europe were to place greater emphasis on deeper cooperation with Central Asia, Afghanistan could acquire newfound relevance as a strategic node.

²⁸ Rai, A. (2025, March 26). Who is Zalmay Khalilzad, the would-be broker between the Taliban and Trump? The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/south-asia/trump-taliban-zalmay-khalilzad-afghanistan-american-hostages-b2720472.html>

In this regard, the EU may prefer a mediated approach, engaging Afghanistan indirectly through trusted regional partners. Uzbekistan stands out as a compelling intermediary. European policymakers recognise Tashkent's pivotal role in Afghan affairs, particularly in the shared interest of fostering Afghanistan's development through economic integration. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's proposal voiced²⁹ at the European Union – Central Asia Summit to involve Afghanistan in regional economic processes closely aligns with the EU's vision. Such initiatives may well draw the attention of European financial institutions towards investment opportunities in Afghanistan, representing a vital step towards enhancing the country's economic stability.

²⁹ President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2025, April 4). Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the first "Central Asia – European Union" Summit. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8023>

EU-CHINA RELATIONS AND THE POTENTIAL FOR COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

Mushtariy Usmonova

October 23, 2025

Abbos Bobokhonov³⁰

In recent years, competition between the European Union and China has entered a phase of marked escalation. Although there are objective structural reasons that could, in theory, encourage a measure of rapprochement, most notably the growing pressure exerted by the United States on both Europe and China, the EU–China summits in 2024–2025 did not deliver the anticipated “reset”. Instead, they highlighted a further deterioration of dialogue and the consolidation of what can increasingly be described as a systemic crisis in the relationship.

The 2025 leaders’ meeting, timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the EU and China, was moved to Beijing after Chinese leader Xi Jinping declined to travel to Brussels. In parallel, China shortened the previously planned summit duration from two days to one, while the agenda was narrowed to largely formal matters rather than the most pressing substantive disputes. For European observers, these protocol-level signals were not merely symbolic: they were interpreted as indicators of a relationship increasingly shaped by strategic mistrust, asymmetric leverage, and an absence of shared political incentives to engage in problem-solving.

European experts frequently characterise the contemporary state of EU–China relations as a period of “structural trust deficit.” On the European side, concern has grown about strategic dependency on the PRC. Since 2022, EU debate has increasingly centred on the notion of “de-risking” – reducing vulnerabilities associated with excessive reliance on China in critical sectors and supply chains. In practical terms, this has translated into a more assertive regulatory and trade posture. In 2024, the EU introduced high tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (45%), alongside strengthened investment screening and export controls on high-technology goods. The EU has also applied targeted sanctions against certain Chinese companies and banks for circumventing sanctions imposed on Russia.

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The EU's stance has hardened rhetorically as well: the leadership of the European Commission has openly stressed the “reality of risks” associated with China and the need for a collective European response.

However, the implementation of this approach faces internal contradictions. The EU's leading economies, Germany and France, retain deep commercial ties with Beijing. Many Eastern European states also resist overly stringent measures, fearing negative consequences for their own economies. As a result, the EU remains objectively divided on how far it should go in adopting a unified, restrictive China policy. This fragmentation matters because it affects the credibility of Brussels' strategic messaging and provides Beijing with opportunities to exploit differences in national preferences, industrial exposure, and political risk tolerance.

From the European perspective, several issues function as persistent irritants. EU policymakers point to the dominance of Chinese firms in a range of high-technology sectors and to competitive dynamics that, in European readings, increasingly displace EU producers. Concerns relating to cyber-espionage and suspicions of unfair competition have also contributed to efforts to restrict Chinese participation in strategic industries and public procurement. Brussels repeatedly highlights a chronic trade imbalance: EU imports from China exceed €500 billion, while EU exports to China are around €200 billion, paired with continued complaints about limited access for European companies to the Chinese market. This combination – large-scale dependence, unequal market access, and growing strategic anxiety, has become central to Europe's evolving China debate.

Chinese analysts, for their part, often emphasise an additional complicating factor sometimes described as a “Ukraine crisis trap,” which has worsened the climate in China–Europe relations. In this framing, Beijing presents itself as maintaining a neutral position and supporting dialogue, while stressing that it does not provide military support to Russia. Yet Europe continues to view China as a systemic competitor, and the circumvention of sanctions against Moscow is perceived in European capitals as a direct security concern. In practice, this dimension intensifies political distrust and makes it harder to isolate economic cooperation from broader geopolitical considerations.

Another significant source of friction relates to China's strict state control over exports of rare-earth minerals, which are essential for the EU's green transition and clean technologies. According to European Commission data cited in the text, 98% of the EU's supplies of rare-earth metals and magnets come from China. This degree of concentration has become a strategic

vulnerability in European policy discussions, as it links the pace and cost of the EU's green transformation to Chinese regulatory decisions and export management.

Beijing, meanwhile, is not portrayed by experts as prioritising compromise. Many assessments argue that China views the EU as comparatively weak and dependent on the United States, preferring bilateral arrangements with individual European states through a “divide and rule” logic rather than negotiating in ways that strengthen Brussels as a unified actor. In response to European demands, China tends to advance counter-conditions, such as insisting on the removal of anti-China sanctions, without offering meaningful concessions on issues considered core for the EU. In Beijing's perspective, financial sanctions against Chinese banks are framed as based on “fabricated accusations,” and China's Ministry of Commerce has warned that such measures will negatively affect trade relations and financial cooperation between China and the EU.

Beyond political disagreements, structural economic factors also obstruct de-escalation. China's export-oriented growth model conflicts with the EU's demand for trade rebalancing. A reallocation of resources toward domestic consumption often presented as necessary to reduce imbalances would, as noted by experts, undermine the existing model of Chinese development. This creates a situation where even if both sides recognise the costs of confrontation, their internal economic incentives push them toward policy paths that are difficult to reconcile.

Against this backdrop, European experts increasingly warn about the potential negative consequences of a further deterioration of EU–China relations. Heightened geopolitical tension could lead to destructive competition and the expanded use of sanctions mechanisms, limiting economic and technological cooperation. At the same time, Chinese official and expert discourse continues to suggest that finding “common ground” is still possible, particularly in areas where gains are mutually visible. The “green agenda” remains one of the few domains where dialogue has not been fully interrupted, and climate and sustainable development are presented as rare spaces where the EU and China can still pursue complementary cooperation.

Despite rising tension, both European and Chinese experts frequently converge on one notable point: Central Asia could serve as a “test platform of trust” between the EU and China. The region is steadily becoming a focal area for European strategies related to critical minerals and infrastructure. Yet the starting conditions are asymmetrical. The EU is currently absorbed by acute challenges—ongoing consequences of the Ukraine war, energy constraints, and political

and economic pressure from the United States, factors that consume attention and resources and shape internal cohesion. As a result, at present the EU substantially lags China in terms of investment presence in Central Asia.

In fact, the text argues that direct EU–China competition in Central Asia is limited, primarily because China has achieved near-dominance in transport infrastructure investment, while the EU reportedly trails by more than 40 times in investment volumes. The structure of the EU’s imports from the region is also narrowly concentrated: 80–90% consists of Kazakh oil, whereas China obtains a much broader range of raw materials. From this perspective, the EU could develop a more balanced relationship with Central Asia if it invests not only in extraction and transit but also in local processing and value-added capacity, thereby reducing the region’s role as a purely upstream supplier and creating deeper industrial interdependence.

Chinese experts also note that cooperation between the EU and China in Central Asia remains highly sensitive due to the broader geopolitical environment linked to the war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, the text identifies three directions where cooperation is still possible:

- climate and ecology;
- transport projects, including those associated with the Middle Corridor;
- business-level cooperation, provided that political “overloading” and excessive politicisation are minimised.

A key condition is that initiative should come primarily from the Central Asian states themselves, with participation potentially extending beyond the EU and China to include third actors such as Türkiye or the Gulf states. This approach aligns with the region’s multi-vector diplomacy and offers a potential pathway for synergy even amid intensifying global turbulence. In analytical terms, deeper regional integration and “internal regionalisation” would allow Central Asia to convert external powers’ interests into a development resource rather than a destabilising constraint. In this logic, regional states are encouraged to prioritise reducing geopolitical risks, stabilising economic conditions, and building durable partnerships.

Experts cited in the text recommend that Central Asian states pursue a three-level strategy to preserve autonomy: alongside multi-vector diplomacy, they should continue internal reforms and social consolidation, deepen regional interaction through formats such as “C5+1,” and expand transport and logistics corridors. This is presented not only as a foreign-policy toolkit, but as a resilience strategy: diversified partnerships are more effective when supported by institutional capacity, reform progress, and credible regional coordination.

The implications of EU–China rivalry for Central Asia are presented as dual in nature. On the one hand, escalating tensions create risks: pressure to “choose sides,” vulnerability to secondary sanctions linked to transit of sanctioned goods, and intensified competition for resources and influence. On the other hand, the region may gain opportunities to attract investment from both directions, develop as a transit and industrial hub, and strengthen its role in interregional economic networks.

At the corporate and infrastructural level, both European and Chinese companies reportedly show increasing interest in building logistics hubs in Central Asia. For China, the region also represents a window of opportunity: it enables the circumvention of certain Western restrictions and facilitates expanded interaction with Russia, Iran, and parts of Southwest Asia. The volume of Chinese cargo transported through Kazakhstan and neighbouring countries toward Europe has grown substantially; in 2021–2024, transit increased by approximately 2.5 times. The text anticipates that in the coming years investment in logistics will grow and cargo flows through the region will continue to expand.

Overall, the near-term prospects for resolving EU–China disagreements appear limited. Mutual dissatisfaction is rising, and structural contradictions are deepening. Yet the relationship remains characterised by high interdependence and dense economic ties, and the potential costs of a full rupture act as a strong constraint against a shift into outright confrontation. In this context, Central Asia stands out as a space where calibrated, interest-based cooperation might remain possible—less as a sign of strategic reconciliation between Brussels and Beijing, and more as a pragmatic exception shaped by regional agency, economic necessity, and the shared costs of uncontrolled escalation.

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COMPARATIVE DIGITAL STRATEGIES AND AI POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN EUROPE

THE PARIS AI ACTION SUMMIT: GLOBAL TRENDS, STRATEGIC DIVERGENCES, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Mushtariy Usmonova

February 12, 2025

On 10–11 February, Paris hosted the AI Action Summit, an international forum on artificial intelligence jointly organised by France and India. The summit brought together representatives from more than 100 countries, alongside international organisations, major technology companies, academic institutions, and civil society actors. Beyond serving as a platform for discussing the future of artificial intelligence, the event emerged as a revealing arena in which competing political, economic, and regulatory models of technology governance openly confronted one another.

The central formal outcome of the summit was the adoption of a Joint Declaration on “Inclusive and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence.” However, the refusal of the United States and the United Kingdom to endorse the document underscored the deepening strategic rift among leading powers on how artificial intelligence should be governed. While more than 70 countries supported the declaration, the absence of two key AI powers highlighted the fragmentation of the global AI governance landscape and the growing difficulty of establishing shared international norms.

Speeches by heads of state and senior representatives of the technology sector exposed the depth of divergence in approaches to AI regulation and deployment. French President Emmanuel Macron articulated Paris’s and the European Union’s core priorities: achieving technological sovereignty, supporting innovation, and reducing bureaucratic barriers without abandoning regulatory safeguards. Macron announced a large-scale investment programme, stating that €109 billion would be channelled into the development of France’s AI sector in the coming years. This initiative reflects a broader European objective not merely to strengthen domestic technological capacity, but also to reduce dependence on American and Chinese technological ecosystems.

At the same time, despite France’s efforts to attract private capital and streamline procedures, the overall European approach remains firmly anchored in strict regulatory frameworks. This tension between ambition to compete globally and commitment to

precautionary regulation runs through the entire European AI strategy and was clearly visible throughout the summit.

A central point of contention was the balance between innovation and state oversight. U.S. Vice President JD Vance, who led the American delegation, delivered a sharply critical assessment of Europe's regulatory model. He described European AI regulation as "excessive" and warned that it risks "suffocating a transformative industry." Vance emphasised that the administration of President Donald Trump is committed to minimal government interference in the high-technology sector and will not allow foreign governments to impose constraints on American companies. This uncompromising rhetoric was reinforced by Washington's decision not to sign the summit's final declaration, further deepening the visible strategic divide between the United States and the European Union.

Against this backdrop, China's decision to endorse the declaration proved unexpected. The Chinese delegation, led by Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing, signalled Beijing's readiness for international cooperation on AI governance and expressed support for open-source models and broader access to technology. This position was articulated despite long-standing tensions between China and Western states over technological policy and governance. The statement was made amid growing Western concern about China's expanding technological capabilities, particularly in relation to advanced AI models such as DeepSeek, often described as a Chinese analogue to ChatGPT. It is noteworthy that while China has long relied on strong state regulation to nurture its own technology champions, its support for the Paris declaration indicates a strategic effort to shape global AI governance from within multilateral frameworks rather than remain outside them.

The summit also introduced a strong humanitarian and developmental dimension through the intervention of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. He warned that the world is not adequately prepared for the AI-driven technological revolution and that digital inequality between countries continues to widen. In response, participants announced the establishment of an Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, tasked with assessing risks and opportunities associated with emerging technologies. Additionally, a Global Dialogue on AI Governance under UN auspices was launched, reflecting a growing push toward multilateral coordination in an increasingly fragmented technological environment.

Parallel to political debates, leading technology companies voiced concerns about the potential tightening of regulatory pressure. Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai cautioned that

excessive regulatory barriers could undermine the competitiveness of Europe's AI sector and called for a more business-friendly environment. Representatives of OpenAI, Microsoft, and Anthropic echoed these concerns, arguing that overly restrictive frameworks could slow innovation and reduce global competitiveness. In response, the European Commission represented by its President Ursula von der Leyen reiterated that the EU aims to combine strict safety standards with proactive investment support. She highlighted the InvestAI initiative, which envisages the mobilisation of €200 billion to support artificial intelligence development across Europe.

A distinct and increasingly prominent strand of discussion focused on sustainability and the energy footprint of AI. For the first time at such a high-level forum, the environmental impact of artificial intelligence was addressed in a systematic manner. As a result, an AI and Energy Observatory was launched under the auspices of the International Energy Agency, signalling a growing recognition that AI development is energy-intensive and may pose additional challenges for climate policy and energy security in the years ahead.

The Paris summit crystallised several key trends likely to shape the global AI agenda soon. First, it confirmed the emergence of three distinct blocs: the United States, advocating minimal regulatory constraints; the European Union, seeking a balance between innovation and control; and China, which, despite participating in multilateral initiatives, continues to advance its own state-driven model of technological dominance. Second, geopolitical competition in AI has clearly intensified. Whereas earlier debates centred primarily on safety and ethics, artificial intelligence is now increasingly viewed as a determinant of global economic power and strategic superiority.

The summit also highlighted a core European dilemma. While the EU is attempting to position itself as a global norm-setter in AI governance, its stringent regulatory approach risks slowing industrial development and weakening competitiveness vis-à-vis the United States and China. In response, France and Germany promoted a compromise solution in the form of the Current AI initiative—a platform aimed at developing socially significant AI with investments of \$2.5 billion. However, its practical effectiveness remains uncertain and will depend on implementation, coordination with existing frameworks, and private-sector engagement.

Overall, the Paris AI Action Summit demonstrated that artificial intelligence has moved far beyond the realm of a purely technological issue and has become a central element of geopolitical competition. Divergences among the United States, the European Union, and China

suggest that the world is moving toward a fragmented AI governance landscape, where the creation of unified international standards will be increasingly difficult. In the coming months, global attention will shift to follow-up events referenced in the joint declaration, including the summit in Kigali (Rwanda), the Third Global Forum on the Ethics of AI in Thailand, and the AI for Good conference. These platforms may play a decisive role in determining whether global AI governance evolves toward managed pluralism—or deeper fragmentation.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ESTONIA AND FINLAND'S DIGITALIZATION STRATEGIES

Parvina Kuchmurodova³¹

March 20, 2025

UK policy since the beginning of 2025 has entered a phase of adjusting strategic priorities against the backdrop of a changing global configuration. The focus is on strengthening defence and trade and economic cooperation with the EU. This not only marks a reset of relations after Brexit, but also represents a subtle diplomatic manoeuvre aimed at not severing ties with Washington, while strengthening the autonomy of the European vector of British foreign policy.

Estonia and Finland have emerged as global leaders in digitalization, demonstrating how technology can be effectively integrated into governance, business, and daily life. Their approaches, while distinct, share a commitment to innovation, accessibility, and efficiency in digital services.

Estonia: The Digital Republic

Estonia's digital transformation is widely celebrated for its early and far-reaching initiatives that turned a ex-Soviet country into one of the world's most advanced digital societies. Almost all public services are available online. Citizens use a state-issued electronic ID (e-ID) to securely access services — from filing taxes and voting via i-Voting to digital prescriptions and business registration. Estonia's digital government infrastructure is built around the innovative X-Road data exchange platform, which connects public and private databases securely and efficiently. This architecture has paved the way for groundbreaking programs such as e-Residency, allowing anyone worldwide to start and run an Estonian company online.



³¹ Former intern at the Center for European Studies (IAIS), undergraduate student at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy.

The government invested early in digital education (the “Tiger Leap” program) and set aside a 1 percent of GDP to fund IT developments in 1996. These measures enabled rapid digital infrastructure rollout and have set the country on a long-term digital agenda, as outlined in its Digital Agenda 2030. Moreover, Estonia not only uses its digital tools to improve citizens’ lives but also shares its expertise through initiatives like the e-Governance Academy, helping other countries to learn from its successes. This export of know-how has earned Estonia the moniker “e-Estonia,” a reference to its pioneering digital society.

Finland: A Leader in Digital Integration

Finland’s digitalization story is marked by robust infrastructure, proactive government policies, and a strong commitment to making digital services accessible for all citizens. Finland has achieved high rates of online engagement with digital public services. Recognized in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) for its efficient e-government, Finnish citizens benefit from seamless digital identity systems and portals such as “suomi.fi”. In fact, Finland was the first country in the world to enshrine broadband internet access as a legal right, ensuring that even rural communities can enjoy high-speed connectivity.

The country’s strong ICT sector is supported by a highly educated workforce and state-backed initiatives (for example, the Digital Finland Framework and AuroraAI) that promote innovation in areas like artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and 5G. Nearly one-fifth of the growth was traced to the manufacture of electronics. Finnish businesses, particularly SMEs, have embraced digital tools, leading to higher levels of digital intensity compared to the EU average. Under the guidance of institutions such as the Ministry of Transport and Communications, Finland has invested in both fixed and mobile broadband infrastructure, while also ensuring that digital security and environmental sustainability remain key priorities. This balanced approach helps maintain Finland’s reputation as one of Europe’s most digitally advanced nations.

Comparative Reflections

Both Estonia and Finland showcase how different national contexts can lead to similarly transformative digital outcomes:

Citizen-Centric Services. Estonia focuses on radical digitalization by moving almost every government function online, while Finland emphasizes high-quality public services supported by state-of-the-art infrastructure and legal frameworks.

Innovation and Global Outreach. Estonia's export of its digital expertise (through programs like e-Residency and the e-Governance Academy) contrasts with Finland's approach of cultivating innovation within its borders through competitive digital ecosystems and regulatory incentives.

Infrastructure and Inclusion. Finland's legal guarantee of broadband access and its comprehensive digital integration across business and public services complement Estonia's agile and scalable digital architecture, demonstrating that sustained digital growth depends on both technological prowess and inclusive policy measures. Estonia and Finland have both established themselves as leaders in digitalization, each with unique strategies and areas of focus.

Estonia: Pioneering Digital Public Services. Estonia has built a robust digital society by prioritizing the development of comprehensive e-government services. A cornerstone of this strategy is the X-Road data exchange layer, which facilitates secure connectivity and data transfers between various governmental and private databases. This infrastructure supports a wide array of online services, including digital identification, e-residency, and i-voting, making Estonia a frontrunner in digital public services.

Finland: Emphasizing Digital Skills and Business Integration. Finland's digitalization approach focuses on enhancing digital skills and integrating digital technologies across businesses and the public sector. The country boasts a high percentage of its population with at least basic digital skills and a significant proportion of ICT specialists in the workforce. Finland also leads in the integration of digital technology by businesses, with a substantial number of SMEs adopting advanced digital tools.

Collaborative Efforts

Both countries have engaged in cross-border digital cooperation, notably through the joint development of the X-Road infrastructure. This collaboration enhances interoperability and secure data exchange between their digital systems, exemplifying a commitment to shared digital advancement. Estonia focuses on delivering comprehensive digital public services, Finland emphasizes strengthening digital competencies and integrating digital technologies within its business sector. Their collaborative initiatives further underscore a mutual dedication to advancing digitalization.

In summary, Estonia and Finland represent two exemplary models of digital transformation in Europe. Estonia's pioneering e-government model has redefined public

service delivery and global engagement, while Finland's balanced emphasis on infrastructure, innovation, and legal rights has ensured that digitalization remains accessible, efficient, and secure for all citizens. These success stories offer valuable lessons for other nations looking to modernize their public sectors and stimulate economic growth through digitalization.

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