

# DGAP POLICY BRIEF

EUROPEAN  
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## European Cohesion for Security and Defense

### Unpacking the North-South Divide



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The practical response by European countries to Russia’s war on Ukraine has been uneven, with frontline states in the north and east showing much greater resolve. Disagreements about burden sharing for European security are putting a strain on the cohesion between European allies. What cultural, economic and historical factors explain these differences? And how can mutual understanding as well as tailored burden sharing contribute to a more unified approach to European security and support for Ukraine?

– A detailed understanding of diverging threat perceptions, defense priorities, and fiscal flexibility of European countries is necessary to prevent fragmentation between states across the continent.

– Practical elements of European security policy for strengthening cohesion and solidarity include tailored burden-sharing, focusing on allies’ common goals, and translating shared strategic aims into complementary national contributions.

– To sustain societal consensus and democratic legitimacy, governments should communicate potential trade-offs between welfare spending and defense investments more openly, highlighting the importance of collective security.

## INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has forced a profound reassessment of European defense. While both NATO and the EU, as well as their member states, pledged greater investment, deeper cooperation, and sustained support for Kyiv, the practical response has been uneven. Northern and Eastern Europe have moved rapidly to bolster deterrence and resilience. Southern and some parts of Central Europe have shown greater caution, with some countries either questioning the need for additional defense spending (Spain) or raising doubts about the sustainability of the long-term military support to Ukraine (Hungary, Slovakia). Other countries, most prominently Germany, sit between these poles: While they share a greater sense of urgency, they have not been as fast and committed as Northern or Eastern European countries when it comes to practical steps. The different directions European countries are taking could potentially lead to a multi-speed European Defense Union with avant-gardes as powerful drivers. However, they could also give rise to a prolonged and divisive intra-European burden-sharing debate, fuel fragmentation, and weaken much-needed solidarity and collective action.

We employ a five-variable pentagon map to assess European countries' varying responses. Each axis ranges from 0 (center) to 5 (outer edge) and is visualized as an arrow from the center to the edge – enabling simple, intuitive profiles that capture where each country sits on the key drivers of defense behavior. European countries traditionally face a security–affordability–popularity trilemma: Governments can have security, or enjoy popularity.<sup>1</sup> However, they can hardly maximize all three goals at once. For instance, if a government aims for strong defense and fiscal stability, it may face a popularity backlash. While analytically useful, such a trilemma cannot capture all relevant competing goals driving a government's defense behavior. We therefore slightly modify and expand this framework into a richer, multi-dimensional pentagon map that also includes structural, cultural, and institutional determinants. The five variables are:

- **Threat Perception (0–5).** How immediate and existential is the perceived security threat – primarily from Russia and related hybrid risks? A score of 0 indicates a remote or abstract threat; 5 denotes an existential, proximate danger that shapes almost every policy decision.<sup>2</sup>
- **Fiscal Flexibility (0–5).** The degree of budgetary room and macroeconomic capacity to increase defense spending without precipitating fiscal distress. 0 denotes severe constraints (high public debt); 5 indicates strong fiscal space and capacity to borrow or reallocate.<sup>3</sup>
- **Societal Consensus (0–5).** Depth and breadth of public and cross-party support for defense investment and for policies that sustain Ukraine (including military aid). 0 reflects polarized societies with antimilitarist majorities; 5 reflects broad, enduring consensus across the political spectrum.<sup>4</sup>
- **Strategic Culture (0–5).** The extent to which a country's political leadership, institutions, and society consider active hard-power policies and a proactive security posture appropriate. 0 reflects a preference for restraint and an adherence to pacifist norms; 5 indicates a strategic culture that is comfortable with robust defense commitments and assertive approaches to security and defense.<sup>5</sup>
- **Institutional Embeddedness & Alliance Leverage (0–5).** How strongly the country is integrated in NATO/EU defense structures, and the extent to which Alliance dynamics shape its security choices – including the coherence between a country's defense policy and NATO's broader posture. A score of 0 indicates weak embeddedness and a tendency toward other directions such as free-riding or divergent foreign policy; a score of 5 reflects deep integration, high influence within Alliance architectures, and strong alignment with collective security policies.<sup>6</sup>

1 Andrea Gilli and Walter Rauti, "The European Defense Spending Trilemma: Security, affordability, and domestic popularity: The case of Italy," Policy Brief No. 42, Institute for European Policy Making @ Bocconi University (May 19, 2025). For a broader discussion, see Alastair Smith, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James D. Morrow and Randolph M. Siverson, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

2 Stephn M. Walt, *The origins of alliance* (Ithaca, 1987); Philipp Genschel, "Conclusion – external threat and internal divisions: How the war in Ukraine shapes mass politics in the EU," *European Union Politics* 26, no. 2 (2025), pp. 442-450.

3 Francesco Bianchi, Renato Faccini, and Leonardo Melosi, "Monetary and Fiscal Policies in Times of Large Debt: Unity is Strength," NBER Working Paper 27112 (May 2020): <https://doi.org/10.3386/w27112>.

4 Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nonetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, 1993); Luigi Guiso, Paola Sapienza, and Luigi Zingales, "The Role of Social Capital in Financial Development," *American Economic Review* 94, no. 3 (2004), pp. 526–556; Smith, Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow and Siverson, *The Logic of Political Survival*.

5 Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (spring 1995), pp. 32-64; Paul Cornish and Geoffrey Edwards, "The strategic culture of the European Union: a progress report," *International Affairs* 81, no. 4 (July 2005), pp. 801–820.

6 Frank Schimmelfennig, *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric* (Cambridge, 2003); Alexandra Gechiu, *NATO in the "New Europe": The Politics of International Socialization After the Cold War* (Stanford, 2005); Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, 2022).

These five axes capture distinct but interdependent drivers of national defense policy. Threat perception pertains to strategic imperatives; fiscal flexibility defines what is possible from a budgetary perspective; societal consensus refers to domestic and democratic sustainability; strategic culture identifies the domain of what is considered appropriate or not in matters of the use of force and the provision of military assistance; institutional embeddedness helps position a country on the broader political Euro-Atlantic map. Together, these drivers help us understand how each country – or group of countries – handles the challenges related to the need to bolster defense investments.

They highlight where pressures are structural (fiscal constraints), normative (strategic culture), or contingent (leadership choices or Alliance incentives), and thus where different policy instruments may succeed: fiscal transfers and EU-level burden-sharing can ease Southern constraints; targeted Alliance reassurance can reduce Baltic anxieties while preserving deterrence; and political-communication strategies can help counter historically embedded narratives of restraint, as seen in Germany and Southern countries. By understanding how each country scores in the pentagon map, and thus its specific shape, policymakers can design credible pathways that reconcile security imperatives with economic realities and democratic legitimacy in Europe.

The following sections map three groups of European countries along the five axes (0–5), with concise evidentiary justification for each score. The juxtaposition of the Baltic and Southern European countries illustrates the North-South divide. Germany is treated in a separate section due to its hybrid position between Northern and Southern perspectives.

## THE BALTIC PERSPECTIVE: LITHUANIA

The Baltic States Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia sit on NATO's most exposed frontier, bordering Russia and Belarus. Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, they have accelerated defense reforms: expanding budgets, reinstating conscription, and developing total-defense models that integrate civilian resilience with military readiness. Their security rests on well-developed but limited national defense capabilities and NATO's collective guarantees.

Yet the Baltics remain conscious of an abandonment dilemma<sup>7</sup> concern that US strategic reorientation toward China or domestic isolationism could weaken transatlantic solidarity. Meanwhile, they continue to face hybrid threats ranging from cyber and disinformation operations to sabotage, weaponized migration, and drone intrusions. Despite limited fiscal capacity, societal consensus on support for defense, decisive political leadership, and alliance support enable these states to maintain ambitious defense commitments and credible deterrent postures.

### 1. Threat Perception (Score: 5)

Threat perception in the Baltics sits at the uppermost end of the spectrum. Russia is viewed not as a potential risk but as an immediate and existential danger. Lithuanian intelligence describes relations with Russia as a “grey zone between war and peace,” marked by espionage, sabotage, and disinformation intended to erode NATO cohesion and public confidence. The Kaliningrad military grouping remains a key flashpoint, capable of disrupting allied forces. Belarus functions as an extension of Russian coercion – facilitating illegal migration, detaining Baltic citizens, and allowing its airspace to serve Russian operations while China increasingly acts as a technological enabler of Russia's war economy.<sup>8</sup>

Across all three states, threat assessments converge on a consistent hierarchy: Russia as the central threat, Belarus as a tactical accomplice, and China as a systemic enabler. This acute perception underpins the Baltic strategic culture where deterrence and readiness are not abstract objectives but essential conditions for survival.

7 Glenn H. Snyder: “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” *World Politics* 36, no.2 (July 1984), pp.466-469.

8 State Security Department, Republic of Lithuania, and Defence Intelligence and Security Service under the Ministry of National Defence, *National Threat Assessment 2024*, (2025).

## 2. Fiscal Flexibility (Score: 2–3)

Despite limited fiscal space, due to small economic bases and modest borrowing capacity, the Baltic states are among the EU's most committed defense spenders. In 2026, the Baltic states plan a historically high level of defense investment, Estonia allocating 5.1 percent of GDP, Latvia 4.9 percent, and Lithuania 5.38 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Although public debt remains low, rapid defense expansion strains fiscal sustainability and risks crowding out other policy priorities. The EU's Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument, offering up to €150 billion in low-interest loans for defense, provides limited relief, but is unlikely to fully accommodate the scale of Baltic defense increases. The Baltics are also major contributors of military aid to Ukraine, each pledging at least 0.25 percent of GDP annually. This commitment, while central to their strategic identity, increases competition for domestic resources and may eventually test public tolerance if social spending appears constrained

## 3. Societal Consensus (Score: 4)

The precarious strategic environment has produced a rare alignment between governments and citizens around defense priorities. Russia's threat is perceived as existential, generating enduring public support for NATO and sustained military investment. 2024 polling results show that 54 percent of Latvians, 50 percent of Lithuanians and 41 percent of Estonians believe that their country should spend even more on defense.<sup>10</sup> Solidarity with Ukraine further reinforces this consensus. The Baltic states rank among Europe's largest donors to Ukraine relative to GDP,<sup>11</sup> combining material assistance with sustained public backing. In 2024, 76 percent of Lithuanians, 70 percent of Latvians and 63 percent of Estonians noted that the EU should be sending more military aid to Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Estonia's Government Office survey (Sept 2024) reports 60 percent

support for providing military aid to Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Latvia's picture is defined by durable backing for Ukraine and growing acceptance of related costs. A State Chancellery poll (fielded October–November 2024) shows 61.7 percent of residents support Ukraine “until it wins,” 64.2 percent believe helping Ukraine protects Latvia from war, and 48.2 percent say they are willing to tolerate price increases to stop the war.<sup>14</sup> Despite these high levels of consensus in 2024, it should be noted that the support is not unlimited. When the debate turned to a domestic jump to 5–6 percent of GDP for defense spending in Lithuania, a February 2025 nationally representative poll showed society split: 44 percent approve, 41.5 percent disapprove.<sup>15</sup>

## 4. Strategic Culture (Score: 5)

The Baltic states exhibit a strategic culture built on hard-power realism, Alliance dependency, and proactive leadership. Strategically, all three states stress a strong US presence as the linchpin of deterrence, with Lithuania often described as “super-Atlanticist.”<sup>16</sup> NATO membership remains the bedrock of this posture, complemented by close US relations and visible contributions to allied operations. Defense modernization, investment above the NATO benchmark of two percent of GDP, and readiness initiatives accelerated after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reflect leadership confidence in using hard power as a policy tool. Leadership across the three states rates at the top of the 0–5 scale for readiness. Policymakers view deterrence as an existential necessity, not a negotiable policy domain. Whole-of-society mobilization through institutions like Lithuania's Riflemen's Union, Latvia's National Guard, and Estonia's Defence League anchors this mindset, embedding civic participation in national security.

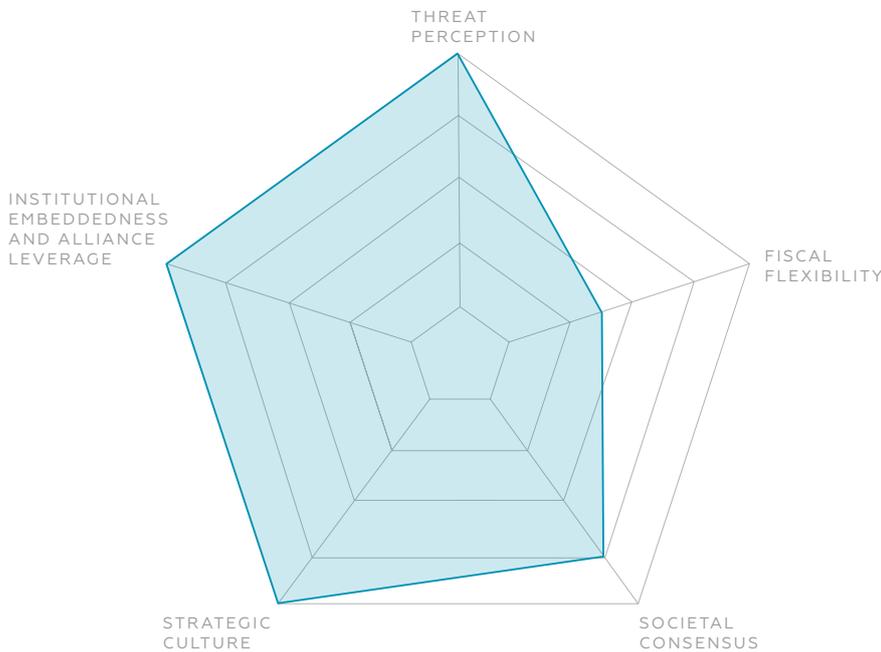
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- 9 Ministry of Finance of Estonia, 2026 Draft Budgetary Plan of Estonia (October 15, 2025): [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fc57ef36-04b1-4271-9734-bc0268b61fef\\_en?filename=2026\\_dbp\\_ee\\_en.pdf&prefLang=sk](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fc57ef36-04b1-4271-9734-bc0268b61fef_en?filename=2026_dbp_ee_en.pdf&prefLang=sk); Latvian Ministry of Defence, Defence budget (Dec. 4, 2025): <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/about-us/defence-budget>; Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania, Lithuania Approves the 2026 State Budget with Record-High Defence Spending at 5.38% of GDP (Dec. 11, 2025): <https://finmin.lrv.lt/en/news/lithuania-approves-the-2026-state-budget-with-record-high-defence-spending-at-538-of-gdp-ifBM/>.
- 10 NATO, Pre-Summit Polling Results (July 5, 2024): [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/7/pdf/240705-pre-summit-polling-results-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/7/pdf/240705-pre-summit-polling-results-en.pdf) (accessed Sept. 15, 2025).
- 11 Christoph Trebesch et al., “Ukraine Support After Three Years of War: Aid Remains Low but Steady – Shift Towards Weapons Procurement,” Kiel Institute for the World Economy (February 2025).
- 12 European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 102 (Autumn 2024): <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215>.
- 13 Republic of Estonia Government Office, “Public survey shows strong support for national defence amid economic concerns,” news release, (October 16, 2024): <https://www.riigikantselei.ee/en/news/public-survey-shows-strong-support-national-defence-amid-economic-concerns> (accessed Sept. 15, 2025).
- 14 LSM English (Latvian Public Media), “Survey suggests support for Ukraine remains strong in Latvia,” (January 28, 2025): <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/28.01.2025-survey-suggests-support-for-ukraine-remains-strong-in-latvia.a585468/> (accessed Sept. 15, 2025).
- 15 LRT English, “Public opinion split on Lithuania's higher military spending – survey,” (February 28, 2025): <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2500314/public-opinion-split-on-lithuania-s-higher-military-spending-survey?srsltid=AfmBOorm6UJJC5C5am61TVfP57hQhxZCArjJo7-YPN8Ltfu7RtG-B3s> (accessed Sept. 15, 2025).
- 16 Andris Banka, “Super Atlanticist in the EU? Vilnius Between Washington and Brussels,” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 28, no. 2 (2023), pp. 165–84: <https://doi.org/10.54648/eer2023009>.

**5. Institutional Embeddedness and Alliance Leverage (Score: 5)**

The Baltic states’ integration into NATO and the EU provides institutional depth that amplifies their influence and security. NATO is perceived not merely as a defense structure but as a civilizational and moral anchor. Surveys confirm overwhelming public trust: 77 percent of Lithuanians, 65 percent of Estonians, and 50 percent of Latvians regard NATO as “very important” for their national security.<sup>17</sup> Article 5 provides the core guarantee against Russia’s overwhelming military advantage,<sup>18</sup> while the Baltic states have reinforced national preparedness through active participation in international military operations.

This view underpins widespread approval of permanent NATO deployments, including the German-led Enhanced Forward Presence battalions.<sup>19</sup> Institutionally, the Baltics act as norm entrepreneurs within NATO and the EU advocating stronger deterrence, sanctions, and strategic communication against Russia. Their embeddedness also yields diplomatic leverage: by positioning themselves as indispensable “frontline democracies,” they gain visibility and voice disproportionate to their size. Yet this reliance also underscores vulnerability: any wavering in US or broader NATO commitment would create a security vacuum impossible to fill nationally.

**Security Pentagon: Lithuania**



Source: Authors own compilation

17 NATO, Pre-Summit Polling Results (July 5, 2024): <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/public-opinion/240705-pre-summit-polling-results-en.pdf> (accessed Sept. 9, 2025).

18 James Marson and Thomas Grove, “U.S., NATO Moves in Baltics Raise Russian Fears,” Wall Street Journal (June 14, 2019), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-nato-moves-in-baltics-raise-russian-fears-11560543426> (accessed Feb. 02, 2026)

19 LRT English, “Majority of Lithuanians back deployment of German brigade – survey,” (December 19, 2023): <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2153832/majority-of-lithuanians-back-deployment-of-german-brigade-survey> (accessed Sept.15, 2025).

## THE SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVE: ITALY

This section looks at the public support for defense spending in Southern European countries and their governments' main priorities in this realm. It focuses primarily on Italy, but Spain, Portugal and Greece are also considered. Despite their individual characteristics, these four countries share some cultural, social and security backgrounds that differentiate them from their EU and NATO allies.<sup>20</sup> This is particularly evident with respect to defense spending and support for Ukraine, which are complicated by a mix of limited budgetary space, unique electoral pressures and different geopolitical orientation.

### 1. Threat Perception (Score: 1-2)

Compared to the EU members analyzed above, the Southern European countries share a much less pronounced perception of the Russian threat. According to Eurobarometer 2024 data, the percentage of respondents in these countries who saw the war in Ukraine as the main danger for the EU was much lower than the European average (with the lowest peaks in Greece and Italy at 17 percent and 23 percent, respectively, compared to an average of 31 percent).<sup>21</sup> Due to their geographical location and specific historical and political backgrounds, Southern European countries have traditionally pursued foreign policy goals and interests not perfectly overlapping with Central or Northern Europe. Spain and Portugal, given their colonial past and geographic "proximity" to Latin America, tend to look West rather than East.<sup>22</sup> Greece, for historical reasons and due to territorial disputes related to Northern Cyprus and its exclusive economic zones (EEZs), is primarily focused on the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Italy has traditionally looked toward Northern Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans, perceiving these to be a higher threat due to illegal immigration, energy dependence, and terrorism.<sup>24</sup> In part, this explains why

Italy, together with Spain, has recently promoted within the EU the adoption of a broader concept of "defense."

### 2. Fiscal Flexibility (Score: 2)

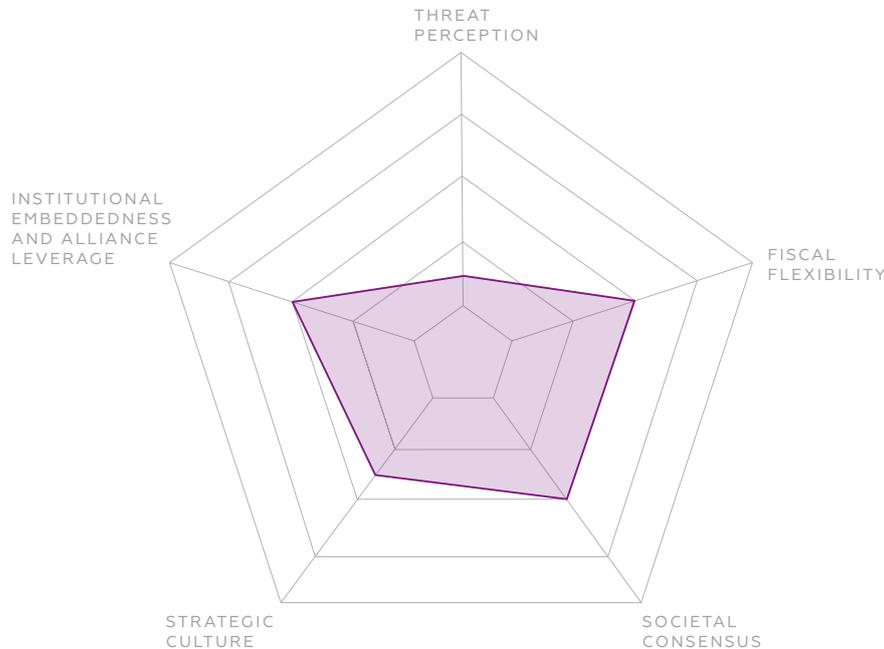
Southern European countries face enduring macroeconomic constraints, including high unemployment, substantial public debt, regional inequalities and recurring inefficiencies in public spending. These macroeconomic foundations, coupled with worsening demographic conditions, affect priority-setting for a large part of public welfare spending. Defense expenditure is seen as secondary or even redundant, compared to severe economic and social issues.<sup>25</sup> Under fiscal constraints, governments are forced to prioritize expenditures with immediate domestic visibility, such as personnel, over investments in equipment and technological capabilities that are strategically essential but less popular.<sup>26</sup> Italy's achievement of NATO's two percent benchmark, mainly through the inclusion of military pensions, exemplifies these dynamics. Addressing capability gaps requires expanding fiscal space, partly through EU instruments such as SAFE and the national escape clause (NEC), which provides temporary exemptions from fiscal rules. While the four Southern European countries examined have all applied for SAFE, access to the NEC for Italy and Spain remains limited by debt-related conditions or political considerations.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Societal Consensus (Score: 2)

The different threat perception and the economic context just described make Southern European countries, in general, much less inclined to support an increase in military expenditures. Compared to the other countries analyzed in this report, the 2024 polling results show much less support for increased defense spending. Only Portugal (50 percent) has a percentage similar to the Baltic countries and Germany, while public opinion in Spain (37 percent), Greece (33 percent), and Italy (31 percent) remains much less favorable.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, military support for Ukraine also finds much

- 20 Sophia A. Pérez, "A Europe of Creditor and Debtor States: Explaining the North/South Divide in the Eurozone," *West European Politics* 42, no. 5 (2017), pp. 989–1014.
- 21 European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 102 (Autumn 2024): <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3216>.
- 22 Federico Steinberg and Bruno Cardoso Reis, "Trump 2.0: transatlantic security, the European response, and the implications for Spain and Portugal," *ARI* 64 (April 30, 2025): <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/ari64-2025-steinberg-cardoso-trump-2-0-transatlantic-security-the-european-response-and-the-implications-for-spain-and-portugal.pdf> (accessed August 19).
- 23 In this sense, Athens' defense spending is closely linked to Turkey, reacting almost symmetrically to Ankara's military expenditures. Katsaitis Odysseus, Konstantine Kondylis, and George A. Zombanakis, "Concerns on the issue of defence expenditure in the post-crisis Greece," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2019), pp. 177–201: doi:10.35467/sdq/103408.
- 24 Laura Guazzone, "Threats from the South and the Security of Southern Europe," *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, no. 44 (1990), pp. 10–12: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai9044.pdf>.
- 25 European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 102 (Autumn 2024): <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3216>.
- 26 Jordan Becker, "The Correlates of Transatlantic Burden Sharing: Revising the Agenda for Theoretical and Policy Analysis," *Defense & Security Analysis* 33, no. 2 (2017), pp. 131–57: doi:10.1080/14751798.2017.1311039
- 27 Carlo Bastasin, "Europe's difficult trade-off between military and welfare spending: the Italian case," *Brookings* (September 2, 2025): <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/europes-difficult-trade-off-between-military-and-welfare-spending-the-italian-case/> (accessed December 4, 2025).
- 28 European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 102 (Autumn 2024).

## Security Pentagon: Italy



Source: Authors own compilation

less support than in the rest of Europe. In Southern Europe, except Portugal, public opinion tends to be much less favorable than the European average regarding financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> This skepticism also extends to the prospect of deploying troops in Ukraine as a peacekeeping and reassurance force, a possibility that most Southern European countries tend to exclude.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Strategic Culture (Score: 2-3)

Attitudes toward defense spending and posture are strongly influenced by the historical and cultural roots that characterized the twentieth century in these countries. Like Germany, these countries emerged

from authoritarian regimes, which left a legacy of skepticism toward military issues and hard power. Democratic transitions further strengthened antimilitarist attitudes, as prominent political and social movements, such as Catholic, socialist, and Eurocommunist, promoted internationalism and humanitarianism over national-interest-driven or hard-power approaches.<sup>31</sup> This was particularly visible in Italy, where Catholic and leftist traditions reinforced pacifist sentiment.<sup>32</sup> Although public attitudes began to shift in the 1990s, when armed forces increasingly engaged in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, the legacy of these ideological roots persists, revealing enduring skepticism toward increased military spending.<sup>33</sup>

29 Ibid.

30 Fabrizio Cotichia and Matteo Mazziotti Di Celso, "Italy: Transatlantic Loyalty First," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (November 11, 2025): <https://www.nupi.no/en/publications/cristin-pub/italy-transatlantic-loyalty-first> (accessed December 4, 2025); "Greece not ready to send troops to Ukraine, Mitsotakis says," Ekathimerini (March 27, 2025): <https://www.ekathimerini.com/politics/foreign-policy/1265297/greece-not-ready-to-send-troops-to-ukraine-mitsotakis-says/> (accessed December 4, 2025); "André Ventura refuses the deployment of Portuguese troops to the war in Ukraine," Portugal Pulse (November 24, 2025): <https://www.portugalpulse.com/andre-ventura-refuses-the-deployment-of-portuguese-troops-to-the-war-in-ukraine/> (accessed December 4, 2025).

31 Alessandro Marrone and Paola Tessari, "The Italian Debate on Defence Matters," Istituto Affari Internazionali (November 2013), p. 5: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai1307.pdf> (accessed August 19, 2025); Giuseppe Caforio, "The Cultural Gap Between the Military and Its Parent Society in Italy," in *Military Missions and their Implications Reconsidered: The Aftermath of September 11th*, eds. Giuseppe Caforio and Gerhard Kümmel (Leeds, 2015), pp. 127-149.

32 During the Cold War both of these traditions have played a large role in Italian politics, with the Democrazia Cristiana party (Christian Democracy) having been a constant presence in government for fifty years and the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) establishing itself as the largest communist party in Western Europe (with up to 34.4 percent of the vote in the 1976 elections).

33 Karolina Muti and Alessandro Marrone, "How Italians View Their Defence? Active, Security-oriented, Cooperative and Cheap," Istituto Affari Internazionali 39 (June 2019): <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom1939.pdf> (accessed August 18, 2025).

## 5. Institutional Embeddedness and Alliance Leverage (Score: 3)

Southern European states are deeply rooted in the Euro-Atlantic institutional framework. Italy is a founding member of both NATO and the European Economic Community, while Portugal signed the North Atlantic Treaty at its inception. Spain and Greece joined NATO relatively early and, along with Portugal, entered the European project in the 1980s following democratic transitions. Italy holds a particularly prominent position in NATO, hosting US nuclear weapons under the Alliance's nuclear-sharing arrangements and serving as the site of several key NATO commands and institutional centers.

Despite their long-standing membership, the role of these countries in the Alliance reflects the constraints outlined above. Antimilitarist traditions and limited fiscal capacity have kept them (Greece aside, due to its rivalry with Turkey) among NATO's lowest defense spenders.<sup>34</sup> Italy's significant contribution of personnel to NATO missions only partially compensates for its limited financial burden-sharing.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the different threat perception contributes, in a certain sense, to distancing Southern Europe from the concerns of the other allies. Since 2022, NATO has prioritized deterrence on its eastern flank, while Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece have called for greater attention to non-conventional challenges from the South.<sup>36</sup> This creates a partial divergence of interests, leaving Southern European states in the delicate position of maintaining strong ties with the United States, essential for their security umbrella, and promoting European integration and security while pursuing increasingly divergent national and regional priorities.<sup>37</sup>

## THE CENTRAL PERSPECTIVE: GERMANY

Germany occupies a distinctive position within the pentagon, combining characteristics of both Baltic and Southern European countries. It plays a central role in EU and NATO decision-making, underpinned by exceptional economic weight and fiscal space. At the same time, Germany's strategic culture and institutions are strongly shaped by the legacy of the 20th century.

Russia's war on Ukraine since 2022, compounded by US retrenchment and the volatility of foreign policy under the second Trump administration, has challenged several core dimensions of this culture. Faced with what then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz termed a *Zeitenwende* (watershed moment), Germany embarked on far-reaching policy shifts. The country has also moved closer to Nordic and Eastern European countries in terms of threat perception and public support for increased defense spending. Whether this convergence proves durable will depend on how persistently Russia is perceived as a threat, the salience of competing concerns, and the extent of future spending trade-offs.

### 1. Threat Perception (Score: 3-4)

The invasion of Ukraine fundamentally altered threat perceptions in Germany. Prior to 2022, only about one third of Germans viewed Russia as a threat to national or personal security.<sup>38</sup> Since then, roughly two thirds do – across regions, genders, and party lines, including voters of the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* and the left-conservative *Bündnis Sarah Wagenknecht*, albeit at slightly lower levels. According to an October 2025 survey, 48 percent of Germans consider a large-scale military attack by Russia on a NATO or European country within the next five years somewhat or very likely.<sup>39</sup> Germany's intelligence services have warned that such an attack could occur before 2029, while cautioning that the population has yet to fully grasp the magnitude of the threat, despite intensifying Russian

34 NATO Public Diplomacy Division, Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2024), press release (June 2024): [https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media\\_pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media_pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf) (accessed August 18, 2025).

35 Gabriele Natalizia and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso, "Beyond NATO's 2 percent threshold: How can Italy meet the challenge?" Atlantic Council (December 18, 2024): <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/beyond-natos-2-percent-threshold-how-can-italy-meet-the-challenge/> (accessed December 4, 2025).

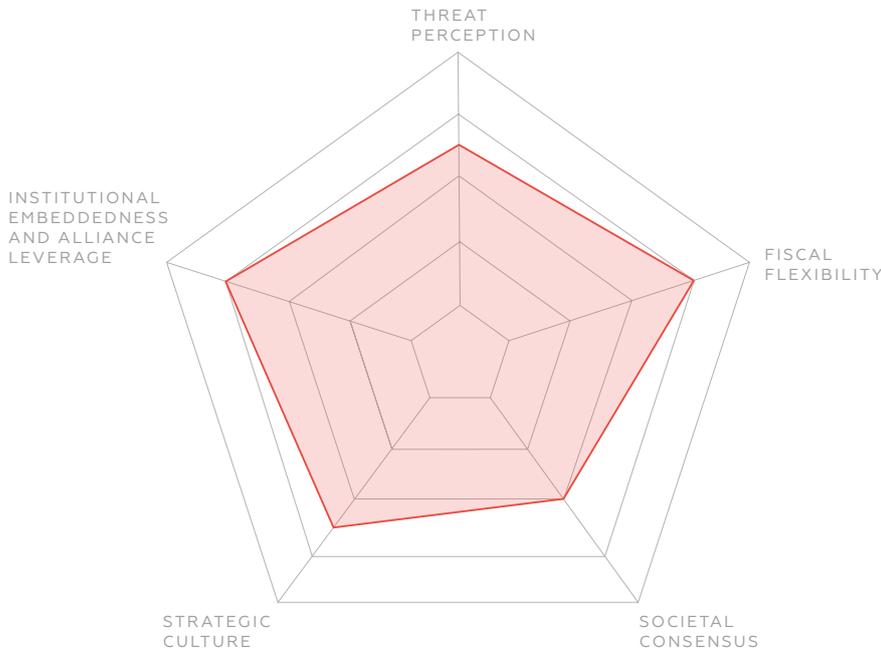
36 Juan C. Castilla, "Burden sharing: real solidarity or arbitrary mathematics in NATO and the EU?" Real Instituto Elcano (July 30, 2025): <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/burden-sharing-real-solidarity-or-arbitrary-mathematics-in-nato-and-the-eu/> (accessed December 4, 2025).

37 Elio Calcagno, "The Future of NATO Italy: A Committed but Divided Ally," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (June 2025), p. 4: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/22139.pdf>.

38 Timo Graf, "Deutschland in der militärischen Führungsrolle? Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2025," Forschungsbericht 139, Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr (July 10, 2025).

39 Tobias Bunde and Valentin Daur, "After the End of Certainties. A Snapshot of Public Opinion on the Zeitenwende," Munich Security Analysis 5, Munich Security Conference (December 2025): <https://doi.org/10.47342/XVVP5743>.

## Security Pentagon: Germany



Source: Authors own compilation

hybrid attacks.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the public’s threat hierarchy diverges markedly from that of Northern and Eastern Europeans. Military threats increasingly rank behind concerns about economic insecurity (inflation, poverty), migration, and organized crime.<sup>41</sup> This trend could accelerate in the event of a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine.

### 2. Fiscal Flexibility (Score: 4)

In response to the *Zeitenwende*, Germany has granted itself greater fiscal flexibility for defense. Three days after Russia’s invasion, then-Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a EUR 100-billion fund – exempted from the constitutional debt brake – to raise defense spending above two percent of GDP.<sup>42</sup> Following Donald Trump’s

reelection, Germany went further by loosening its constitutional debt brake for defense expenditure above one percent of GDP and pledging to meet NATO’s new five-percent target by 2029. Yet, it still lags behind its Northern and Eastern European partners in both defense spending and military support to Ukraine as a share of GDP.<sup>43</sup> Germany’s fiscal flexibility is underpinned by public support. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, approval of higher defense spending rose to almost 60 percent.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, majorities also support increased spending on internal security, pensions, healthcare, and education – and reject prioritizing defense over social programs.<sup>45</sup> So far, this tension has been masked by the government’s reliance on debt rather than budgetary reallocation.

40 Bianca Schwarz: “Die deutschen Geheimdienste warnen deutlich vor Russland,” *tagesschau.de* (October 13, 2025): <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/geheimdienste-parlamentarisches-kontrollgremium-100.html> (accessed Jan. 11, 2026).

41 Ipsos Meinungsumfragen, Stimmungslage in Deutschland – Sorgenbarometer (Dec. 23, 2025): <https://www.ipsos.com/de-de/meinungsumfragen/sorgenbarometer>.

42 Federal Government of Germany, Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag (Feb. 27, 2022).

43 Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Ukraine Support Tracker (Dec. 2025): <https://www.kielinstitut.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

44 Graf, “Deutschland in der militärischen Führungsrolle? Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2025,” (see note 38).

45 Ibid.; Chrístos Katsiulés et al, Security Radar 2025: Europe - Lost in Geopolitics, Friedrich Ebert-Foundation (Feb. 2025): <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/21865.pdf>

### 3. Societal consensus (Score: 3)

Germany lacks the deep and stable societal consensus on defense policy that characterizes some Nordic and Baltic states. Public attitudes toward operational solidarity with Eastern neighbors remain fragmented.<sup>46</sup> Roughly half of Germans support supplying weapons to Ukraine, while the remainder oppose it or feel indifferent. These divisions run along partisan and especially East-West lines. Overall, escalation fears remain strong: 41 percent worry that weapons deliveries to Ukraine could prolong the war or endanger German security.<sup>47</sup> This anxiety underpins controversies around the delivery of specific weapons systems, most notably the Taurus cruise missiles, which a majority still rejects. Weak consensus and lingering escalation fears leave Germany vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation.

### 4. Strategic Culture (Score: 3-4)

German strategic culture has long been marked by political and military restraint, a strong commitment to multilateralism, and a careful balance between Atlanticism and Europeanism.<sup>48</sup> These traits stem from the country's 20th-century experience: defeat in World War II, the crimes of the Nazi regime, and decades of division during the Cold War. Russia's war and US retrenchment have challenged these foundations, contributing to what some describe as a "foreign policy identity crisis."<sup>49</sup> The Merz government has pledged more decisive leadership on European defense but must operate within a society and political system where restraint remains deeply embedded. Divisions within the coalition – such as those over the possible reintroduction of conscription – illustrate how enduring historical instincts complicate leadership efforts.

### 5. Institutional Embeddedness and Alliance Leverage (Score: 4)

Germany is deeply embedded in NATO and the EU, and its economic size gives it substantial agenda-setting power. The Bundeswehr leads NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence battle group in Lithuania and plays a central role in the Alliance's deterrence posture. The

permanent stationing of the 45th Armored Brigade to Lithuania marks a historic commitment and signals a readiness to assume greater frontline responsibilities. As the EU's largest economy, Germany also wields substantial influence over EU decision-making. Yet it has not emerged as a driving force behind the Union's defense industrial initiatives. The need to rearm quickly, combined with pressure to invest in the domestic defense industry, is straining Berlin's traditional European reflex.<sup>50</sup> An October 2025 poll suggests that the public increasingly questions this reflex: Nearly two thirds believe that Germany pays excessive attention to other EU member states at the expense of its own interests.<sup>51</sup> As a result, allies hold mixed feelings: While many welcome Berlin's increased defense commitments, some question their durability, and others fear an overly dominant Germany pursuing defense industrial nationalism.

## DIFFERENT EQUILIBRIA, SHARED SECURITY: LEVERAGING EUROPE'S DEFENSE DIVERSITY

In this paper, we have developed an analytical framework (the pentagon) based on five variables – threat perception, fiscal flexibility, societal consensus, strategic culture, institutional embeddedness – to understand defense dynamics in Europe. Applied to the Baltics, Germany and Southern Europe, the pentagon paints a complex picture:

- The Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) typically score at or near the outer edge on threat perception, societal consensus, and institutional embeddedness, reflecting their existential proximity to Russia, strong public support for deterrence, and deep reliance on NATO and the United States. Fiscal flexibility is constrained by small economies, but strong political leadership and Alliance leverage allow ambitious defense commitments. In short: high threat perception, political will and Alliance backing compensate for limited fiscal space.

46 Graf, "Deutschland in der militärischen Führungsrolle? Sicherheits- und verteidigungspolitisches Meinungsbild in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2025."

47 Ibid.

48 Eva Gross, *The Europeanization of national foreign policy: continuity and change in European crisis management* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 5.

49 Tobias Bunde, "Zeitenwende as a foreign policy identity crisis: Germany and the travails of adaptation after Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 27, no. 4 (Jan. 16, 2025).

50 Nicole Koenig and Leonard Schütte, "Don't Dodge Dilemmas. Three Tests for German Leadership in European Defense," *Munich Security Analysis* 4, Munich Security Conference (December 2025): <https://securityconference.org/publikationen/analyses/dont-dodge-dilemmas-german-leadership-in-european-defense/>.

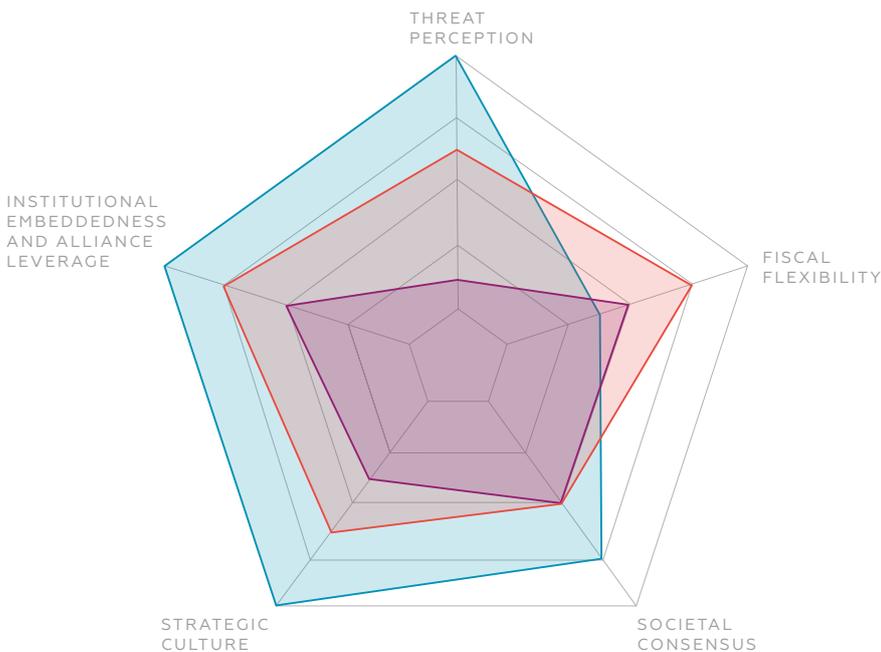
51 Tobias Bunde and Valentin Daur, "After the End of Certainties. A Snapshot of Public Opinion on the Zeitenwende," *Munich Security Analysis* 5, Munich Security Conference (December 2025): <https://doi.org/10.47342/XVVP5743>.

- Italy and the broader Southern bloc (Spain, Portugal, Greece) display a different pattern: lower threat perception with greater salience assigned to migration, energy vulnerability, and regional instability; limited fiscal flexibility due to higher public debt and demographic decline; fragmented societal consensus shaped by stronger antimilitarist currents and electoral sensitivity; and strategic caution at the elite level. Institutional embeddedness is mixed – NATO and EU membership provide frameworks for cooperation, but Alliance leverage is weaker in driving large domestic rearmament. The Southern European pentagon therefore shows constrained capacity to scale defense rapidly and politically durable resistance to re-prioritizing spending away from social needs.
- Germany is best characterized as a hybrid profile. Institutional embeddedness and fiscal flexibility are high, supported by the country’s deep integration into the EU and NATO and its comparatively low public debt. Threat perception has risen markedly since 2022, although elite assessments remain more

stable and coherent than those of the broader public. By contrast, societal consensus and strategic culture remain ambivalent – historical restraint, competing budgetary priorities, and contested political narratives generate only moderate scores. Germany’s pentagon thus reveals substantial structural capacity alongside persistent political and cultural constraints, shaping both the pace of its own rearmament and the speed and scope of its support to Ukraine.

Taken together, these different equilibria explain not only why the North–South divide persists but also point to practical levers for strengthening European cohesion and solidarity: aligning incentives, tailoring burden-sharing, and translating shared strategic aims into complementary national contributions. **At the same time, progress on defense investment will ultimately rest on political leadership at the national level.** European governments will need to show greater initiative and commit to higher defense spending, even when such choices carry domestic political costs and may prove unpopular with their own electorates.

### Lithuania, Italy and Germany in Comparison



Source: Authors own compilation

**The following policy implications stand out:**

- **Strategic empathy and differentiated burden-sharing.** Policymakers from EU and NATO countries as well as the institutions themselves should use the pentagon framework to foster strategic empathy, recognizing that diverging national responses reflect different structural constraints rather than a lack of solidarity. Policy coordination should institutionalize differentiated burden-sharing: aligning national contributions according to comparative strengths across capability development, force provision, hosting, financing, and critical enablers.
- **Operational solidarity on the eastern flank.** Reinforcing NATO's and the EU's eastern flank through expanded European capabilities is essential to reassure frontline states and mitigate the Baltic "abandonment dilemma," ensuring credible deterrence amid shifting transatlantic dynamics. NATO already practices this logic via Baltic Air Policing, Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) – including Germany's permanent Lithuania brigade – and Eastern Sentry's multi-domain rotations of jets and surveillance assets. Allies should now prioritize integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) to close critical capability gaps on the Alliance's eastern flank, through coordinated contributions, joint procurement, and pooled funding.
- **Resilience and critical infrastructure protection.** In response to Russia's intensifying hybrid campaign and acts of sabotage, EU and NATO countries should jointly invest in securing critical infrastructure (ports, rail lines, energy grids, and LNG terminals). Complementary measures should strengthen counter-hybrid toolkits, including coordinated maritime surveillance and the use of stronger economic anti-coercion instruments, to counter sabotage, weaponized migration, and sanctions evasion, along with measures to enhance societal resilience. Baltic and Nordic countries can share firsthand experience and best practices – including from large-scale joint exercises simulating cyber and physical attacks on energy grids, ports, and telecom networks.<sup>52</sup>
- **Institutionalized, sustained support to Ukraine.** EU and NATO countries should adopt binding, multi-annual frameworks for military, financial, and reconstruction assistance to Ukraine. The EU's agreement on a EUR 90-billion interest-free loan

for Ukraine was crucial to sustain Kyiv's war effort. It was also a sign that Germany was willing to compromise with southern and western neighbors in the interest of solidarity. The option of using Russian frozen assets to repay the loan should remain on the table. While legally and politically sensitive, it could enable sustained support to Ukraine without placing excessive strain on European fiscal flexibility. In parallel, member states should prepare a substantial multi-year funding package for Ukraine's defense and reconstruction within the next common budget (2028-2034).

- **Transparent communication of trade-offs.** Finally, to sustain societal consensus and democratic legitimacy, governments should communicate defense–economy–elections trade-offs more openly. Public messaging should highlight the tangible domestic benefits of defense investments such as job creation, dual-use innovation, and energy security, linking national resilience to collective security. They should also emphasize the added value of defense industrial cooperation in terms of bundling know-how and economies of scale arising from larger orders and lower unit costs.

52 Eitvydas Bajarūnas, "The Hybrid Threat Imperative: Deterring Russia Before it is Too Late," Center for European Policy Analysis (Dec. 2, 2025): <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/the-hybrid-threat-imperative-deterring-russia-before-it-is-too-late/>

## EUROPEAN ZEITENWENDE STRATEGY GROUP

This paper is part of a series of publications prepared in the framework of DGAP's "European Zeitenwende" Strategy Group, which seeks to help reconceptualize European security in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. Against the background of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, a strained transatlantic relationship, growing rivalry with China, and changing global and regional orders, Europe needs to strategically reposition itself if it wants actively shape security on the continent.

Europe's strategic reorientation should be inspired by those who – as direct neighbors to Russia and Ukraine – best understand the urgency to act. The strategy group therefore draws on in-depth analytical discussions with experts and stakeholders from Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, as well as the Nordic and Baltic states, where debates on security are arguably most advanced, to propel a "Zeitenwende" of security policy and thinking in Europe.

Chaired by the German Council on Foreign Relations, the group met regularly online and in-person over the course of 2025. Convinced of the need for a comprehensive approach, it considered different dimensions of resilience, including security and defense, economic security, institutional reform, and societal cohesion.

The present paper series represents the results of the group's analysis. It seeks to address questions and challenges that in the currently evolving security discourse remain conceptually and practically underdeveloped. By providing concrete analysis, definitions, and reflections to these open questions, the series aspires to add substance to the European Zeitenwende debate on security and defense. The ultimate question of all the papers is how to strengthen European agency in providing European security and in ensuring peace and stability in a new geopolitical context.

Members: **Robin Allers** (Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies), **Hiski Haukkala** (Finnish Institute of International Affairs), **Wilfried Jilge** (German Council on Foreign Relations), **Karl-Heinz Kamp** (German Council on Foreign Relations), **Pavlo Klimkin** (Center for National Resilience and Development), **Jana Kobzova** (European Council on Foreign Relations), **Nicole Koenig** (Munich Security Conference), **Stefan Meister** (German Council on Foreign Relations), **Carolina Vendil Pallin** (Swedish Defence Research Agency), **Katri Pynnöniemi** (University of Helsinki & Finnish National Defence University), **András Rácz** (German Council on Foreign Relations), **Kristi Raik** (International Centre for Defense and Security), **Toms Rostoks** (National Defence Academy Latvia), **George Scutaru** (New Strategy Center), **Margarita Šešelgyté** (Vilnius University, Institute of International Relations & Political Science), **Marcin Terlikowski** (Polish Institute of International Affairs)

The European Zeitenwende Strategy Group was established in the format of the project "In Together – Shaping a Common European Future," which is funded by Stiftung Mercator.

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*DGAP receives funding from the German Federal Foreign Office based on a resolution of the German Bundestag.*

**Publisher**  
Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Auswärtige Politik e.V.

ISSN 2198-5936

**Editing** Ellen Thalman

**Layout** Luise Rombach

**Design Concept** WeDo

**Author picture(s)**  
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