

# EUROPE DIPLOMATIC

MAGAZINE



**GRANT SHAPPS  
IN THE LINE  
OF FIRE**

**UK Army Chief  
confronts  
costly setback**



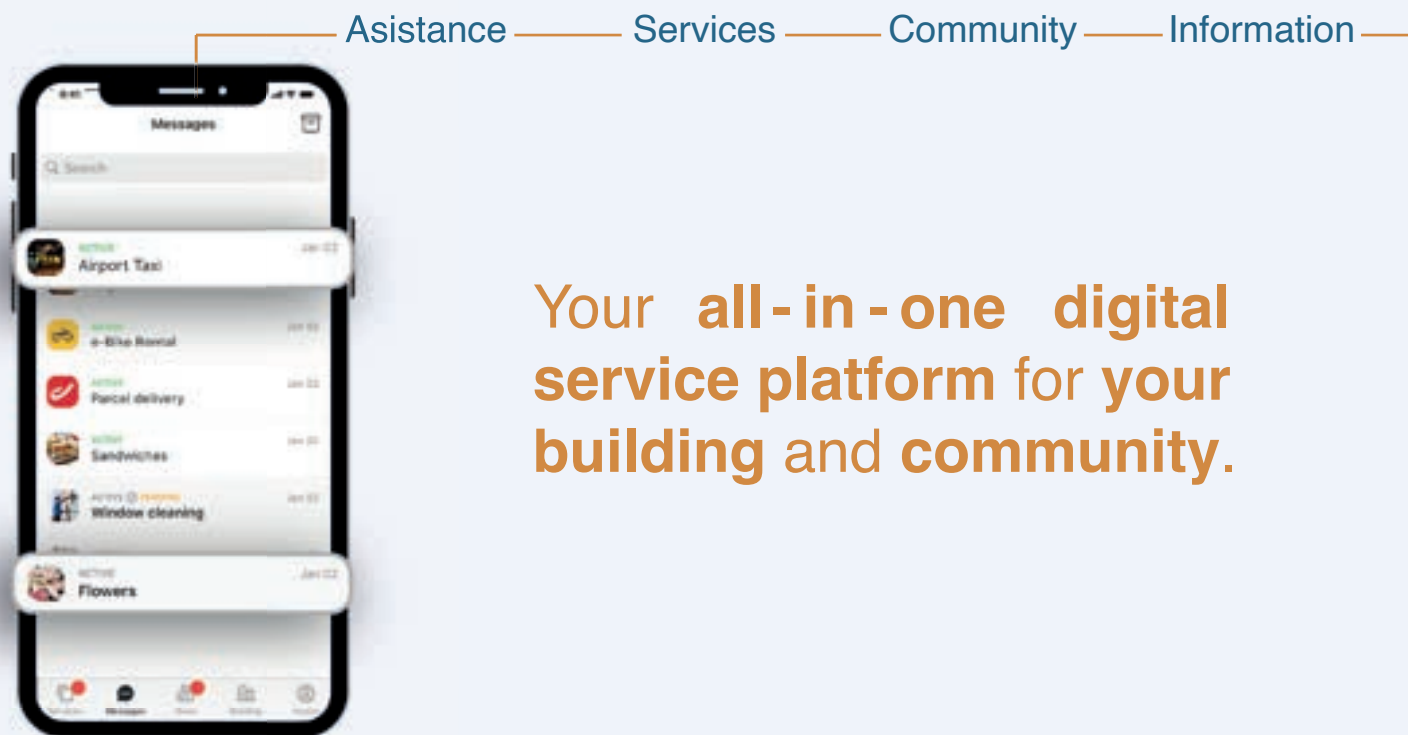
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# IN THIS ISSUE

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# Misinformation on vaccines prevents you from making healthy decisions



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Nikola Hendrickx



# GRANT SHAPPS IN THE LINE OF FIRE

**UK Army Chief  
confronts costly  
setback**





It was the great Roman poet, Horace, who wrote “Dulce et Decorum est pro patria mori”. It means that it is sweet and proper to die for one’s country, but the title was taken by the First World War poet Wilfred Owen for his own brilliant anti-war poem, describing the blood-soaked fields of Flanders and other First World War battlefields. Today, there are questions about Britain’s ability to defend itself and its friends at all. Perhaps a new version of the poem might carry the very opposite title: “non est dulce et decorum pro patria mori”. That’s especially the case when Britain seems to be underfunding its armed forces. After all, English King Edward III didn’t turn up to face an enemy army commanded by King Philip VI of France in 1346 and say: “Vivamus sagittis cursus ex” (We’ve run out of arrows) or “Satis gladios non attulimus” (We haven’t brought enough swords). Today, that seems to be becoming necessary, even if arrows and swords have been replaced by more up-to-date weapons. Well, a few anyway.

A plan to boost army numbers met with a very angry response from the Defence Secretary, Grant Shapps, however. He was said to be “furious” at a proposal by senior military commanders to relax the security clearance rules in order to meet the recruitment targets in terms of numbers. Shapps even told the Daily Telegraph newspaper that he was “ready to go to battle” over the issue. Well, it would make a change from him telling other people to go to battle. What’s more, it would be the sort of battle in which he wouldn’t face the risk of being shot or bombed. He also said he would block any moves to lower security clearance rules.



UK Defense Secretary Grant Shapps

The idea behind the proposal is to increase diversity within the armed services. Existing security rules keep out people of other ethnicities, especially in the intelligence services and officer corps, because it would give them access to sensitive material. The newspaper’s People and Politics correspondent, Nick Martin, has pointed out that despite a woeful shortage of ethnic minorities within the armed services, the proposal is not about tackling a problem so much as sending a message to voters. Shapps has held a number of posts in the current Conservative government, including Minister of State for Housing and Local Government, Minister of State for International Development, Transport Secretary and even Home Secretary (but only for six days). He stood down from the International Development role over his handling of bullying allegations. He is a supporter of Boris Johnson.

To return to the present, the British Army was, historically,

held in great respect, even by its rivals and enemies. It was a fearsome and well-armed body that won a lot of battles (it lost quite a few, too), often against the odds. The same was true of the Royal Navy, too, but that seems to be changing. British people still celebrate Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson’s famous victory over Napoleon’s navy at the Battle of Trafalgar.



HMS Queen Elizabeth

But things have changed. British people were proud to learn that the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, flagship of the British Royal Navy, was set to head the largest NATO exercise in Europe since the Cold War, involving more than 40 warships from 24 nations. It was with some disappointment and even anger, then, that they learned she couldn’t set sail after all because a problem had been spotted with a coupling in the vessel’s starboard propellor shaft. My grandfather, who was an engineering office in the Royal Navy back in the 1920s and 30s, would have been horrified at a British ship having to drop out of such a prestigious mission. Her place would be taken by Britain’s second largest aircraft carrier, HMS Prince of Wales; art least, in theory. However, before the vessel could set sail from Portsmouth, another propellor shaft problem was discovered and she had to be put into dry dock for repairs at the Scottish shipyard where she was built. It’s not the first time, either: a few years earlier, the ship had needed repairs to a propellor shaft that took nine months to complete after breaking down off the Isle of Wight and requiring a tow back to harbour. It seems a long way short of the ideals expressed by Sir Henry Newbolt in his famous patriotic (and rather jingoistic, if I’m honest) poem, Admirals All:

“Effingham, Grenville, Raleigh, Drake,  
Here’s to the bold and free!  
Benbow, Collingwood, Byron, Blake,  
Hail to the Kings of the Sea!  
Admirals all, for England’s sake,  
Honour be yours and fame!  
And honour, as long as waves shall break,  
To Nelson’s peerless name!”

At this point, I suppose I should wave a British flag and shout out “Rule Britannia!” But I won’t.

Because what happened to the Queen Elizabeth and the Prince of Wales (the ships, not the people) is not untypical in these straitened times. The British government is more concerned with economics, it seems, than with military standing. Or spending. According to the British government, defence spending with UK industry by the Ministry of Defence topped £25-billion in 2023 for the first time.

The government says that the 2022/23 statistics, published today, detail the money spent by the MOD with UK defence companies. The breadth of spending highlights the government’s commitment to continually improving the defence sector, while supporting the economy and creating hundreds of thousands of jobs across the country. The government specifically mentions the creation of new jobs in Wales and Northern Ireland and an average of £370 is being spent with the UK defence industry for every person resident in the UK. It sounds impressive, but if that’s all true, why do Britain’s flagship warships break down on exercise? The minister responsible, Defence Secretary Grant Shapps, has said that with threats increasing around the world “it’s crucial that investment in our Armed Forces matches that picture”. The media have warned the government of the need to increase defence spending and to make sure the money is spent wisely, but Schapps seems to be emulating Admiral Lord Nelson in Newbolt’s poem, when he is warned about the imminent approach of the Spanish fleet at Trafalgar: “He clapped his glass to his sightless eye and ‘I’m damned if I see it!’ he said.”



Rear-Admiral Sir Horatio Nelson, 1758-1805 by Lemuel “Francis” Abbott

## I Self-defence?

Shapps, however, claims to be determined to support Britain’s defence industry. “As threats

increase across the globe, it’s crucial that investment in our Armed Forces matches that picture,” he said. “That’s why we’re spending more than £50-billion (€58.77-billion) annually, helping, equip our military with cutting-edge capabilities, so they can continue to protect our freedoms around the clock. These statistics demonstrate,” he claimed, “how all parts of the UK are playing their part in that crucial work, delivering through our fantastic defence industry and boosting local prosperity.” Spending on defence is important for various reasons. Former US President (and possibly the next one) Donald Trump has warned at a rally that he would not come to the aid of a threatened NATO country that doesn’t spend enough on its defence. He has even said he would encourage Putin to attack countries that are not “paying their share”.



Launching of a HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) in Estonia



Latvian soldiers during a military exercise with Nato members in the Balkans

NATO members Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia plan to fortify their borders with Russia by building bunkers. Despite many of Western Europe’s member states not reaching their supposed 2-percent goals yet, there have been alarming statements reported from high-ranking officials in Denmark and Germany recently. Both the Danish defence minister Troels Lund Poulsen and Germany’s Inspector General of Armed Forces, Carsten Breuer have said they anticipate a war with Russia within the next few years. Let’s hope they’re being unduly pessimistic. It has spurred spending, though: two thirds of member states hope to reach that elusive 2% rate in 2024. It was back in 2014 that NATO members agreed a target of 2% of their GDP on defence spending. Only 11 out of 30 members have reached that goal at the moment of writing, but that’s about to change.

As things stand, Poland spends the next biggest proportion: 3.9%, but it has Russia as a neighbour, of course. The United States spends the next most, with 3.49% of GDP going on defence projects in 2023 and Greece comes after that with 3.01%. Next in the line are neighbours of Russia that still



fear Russian ambitions, such as Slovenia (2.07%), Romania (2.44%), Estonia (2.73%), Latvia (2.27%), (Finland (2.45%), Lithuania (2.54%). I won't give the full list because it can be misleading. But as you can see, it's those countries with most to fear from the Kremlin that are keenest to spend money on keeping Putin out. Apparently, he still believes he's popular and it's just Washington that opposes him. Meanwhile, Germany's largest arms manufacturer, Rheinmetall, has admitted that it is unable to match Ukraine's demand for munitions, which is expected to reach more than two million artillery and tank shells a year. In terms of outright spending on defence, the UK is second only to the United States. The US spent \$811-billion (€758-billion), while the much smaller UK managed to come up with \$73- billion (€68-billion).



A Rheinmetall "made in UK" British Army main battle tank Challenger 2

The UK has been criticising for not spending enough on defence, but it was cuts in previous defence budgets that largely funded the UK's welfare state. What this means is that the ongoing conflict in Ukraine will have an unwanted effect on the National Health Service, possibly knocking one percentage point off global GDP for last year (2023), equivalent to some \$760-billion (€709-billion). With rising inflation and soaring energy prices, it looks as if difficult times lie ahead. Nobody wants to see a return to the 1950s, when Britain spent almost 8% of its GDP on defence, that figure dropping to around 4% by 1980. The so-called "peace dividend" allowed Britain to spend more on the National Health Service.

## We're doing our best

Britain is, in reality, one of only a small group of NATO countries to have consistently met that 2% pledge, but if Russia decides in

favour of an all-out attack on NATO, things could change very quickly. Putin has already said that if Russia loses the war it launched in Ukraine he will bomb London. He blames the UK for the ongoing war because it has helped Ukraine, rather than simply letting Russia take the place by force. The Treasury is already struggling with inflation and may have to reduce or abandon its plan to step up defence spending, especially with many public sector workers looking for pay increases. So far, the amounts being requested have been fairly modest, but that could change if inflation leads to steep cost-of-living increases. Germany has been looking into increasing its defence expenditure, but if it does then Britain would be obliged to increase its own spending considerably to retain its position in the table of members' payments for defence. But health workers have been demanding increases because they are, in the main, quite poorly paid, and the UK can't afford to lose a lot of trainee doctors or nurses, just to save pennies. A new report, compiled on behalf of 14 trades unions representing more than a million health workers in England alone, makes clear that rebuilding the NHS workforce will be impossible without the fair, sustained wage rises central to recruiting and hanging on to staff. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has a difficult balancing act ahead of him which he appears ill-equipped to carry out.

Perhaps the biggest problem facing the leaders of Britain's armed services is, as senior officers believe, a shortage of recruits, hence the idea of lowering security requirements to attract more people from ethnic minorities. The United States faces similar problems with recruitment. Looking back to 2023, the aim was to recruit an extra 58,038 personnel for the US army. In fact only 43,634 were signed up. That may sound like quite a lot but it's only 75% of the numbers thought to be required. Things went slightly (only slightly) better in the case of the Navy, where of the required 34,543 new recruits, 79.11% joined up. That's 27,326 new sailors. Things went better still for the Marines, where recruitment figures actually exceeded the numbers sought: 24,910 against a target of 24,623. The Department of Defense described it as "the toughest recruitment year for the Military Services since the inception of the all-volunteer force". Britain, meanwhile, has seen a 30% decline in the recruitment of regular forces, with only the Gurkha regiments offering a little sunshine. That suggests that accepting more recruits from ethnic minority groups could work, although Shapps seems unlikely to agree.



UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak visiting Royal Air Force Valley on the island of Anglesey, Wales, UK



A 1915 Royal Navy recruiting poster

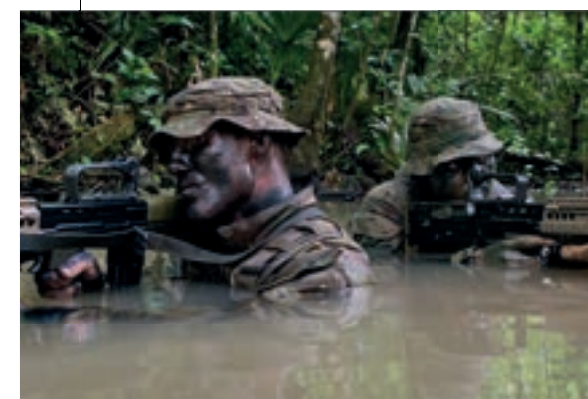
Overall, the strength of Britain's armed services fell by 3.3% between October 2021 and 2022. Only 5,090 people joined up, which represents a decrease of 29.8%. The UK government revealed that as at 1 October, 2022, the total strength of UK forces stood at 192,300, a drop of 6,640 over the preceding 12 months. Further decreases were reported for the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and Royal Air Force. Recruitment showed a big decline, with only 11,982 people signing up in the year from October 2021 to the end of September 2022, a decrease of 5,090 over the previous 12 months. Another problem is that the British forces are finding it harder to retain the forces it has.

Over that same twelve-month period, 12,650 people left the regular forces, a substantial drop compared with the previous year. The commonest reason for quitting a service is what the UK government calls "voluntary outflow" – basically, a personal decision to return to civilian life. That apparently accounts for 59.4% of the decisions to leave the services before the end of their agreed engagement or commission period. Voluntary outflow was highest in the Royal Navy and Royal Marines (6%), followed by the British Army (5.7%), and the Royal Airforce (5.3%).

## Uniform decline

Worryingly for the British government, the biggest drop has been in the reserve services. In 2020, it's said that only 3,720

joined, a decrease of 1,980, or 34.8%. As that becomes more widely known, I suppose we can expect to hear laughter from the Kremlin. Part of the problem for UK recruitment has been military pay. It is well short of keeping pace with soaring inflation and the cost of living. Looking at the period 2021-2022, only service personnel earning below £24,000 (€28,143) received a pay rise, and then of a measly £250 (€293). All other salaries were frozen. According to the Office for National Statistics, the growth of military pay was well below the growth of average earnings. Relative to the Consumer Price Index, military salaries fell by 3.7% during 2021-2022, while average UK earnings grew by 2.6%. According to the Bank of England, Britain's current inflation rate stands at 10.7%, well above the 2% target set by the government. The Bank of England also raised interest rates to 3.5%, the ninth consecutive increase in an attempt to curb inflation, which has slipped into an official recession. It's no wonder that the UK is finding it hard to recruit soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines these days. They can earn more in ordinary jobs.



Something clearly had to be done, and Last summer, the Armed Forces Recruiting Programme engaged with industry and issued a Contract Notice and Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ). The government has decided to put its faith in private recruitment companies to fill the growing gap. Following PQQ evaluation, the Programme has now selected four bidders to engage in Competitive Dialogue. They have chosen Capita Business Service Ltd, Randstad Sourceright LTD, Serco Ltd, and Shared Services Connected Ltd. They will choose the winning bidder once Competitive Dialogue is complete, with the contract being awarded in 2024 and the actual service beginning in April 2025. Britain's current government, despite previous disasters, has a touching faith in private enterprise to solve its problems. In other words, if you throw enough money at a problem, it may go away without you having to think deeply about it or consider the alternatives. The contract itself is



# YOU CHOOSE



“We have updated our appearance policy for service personnel, reflecting a diverse and modern workforce” claimed the MOD internet site in 2021. In a recent statement UK Defence Secretary Grant Shapps said that he was ‘furious about woke nonsense’ that he had requested a review of the MOD diversity policy

worth £1,000,000,000 (€1,171-million) to £1,750,000,000 (€2,050.78 million). It’s a good earner for somebody in a country that now seems to prize wealth about decency.

Meanwhile, the threat of war with Russia – as predicted by the Germans, the Danes, and others (including several well-placed Russian commentators) – continues to grow. It’s hardly surprising when Putin appoints to critical positions controversial people with provocative views. For instance, he has appointed Vladislav Surkov, a Kremlin ideologue, to look after matters in Ukraine. It’s an odd choice, to say the least, since Surkov says he doesn’t believe Ukraine exists, according to Mikhail Zygar in his brilliant book, War and Punishment.

Surkov is actually on record as saying: “There is no Ukraine. There is only Ukrainianism,” and he doesn’t leave it there, going on to claim: “That is, a specific mental disorder. A pathological obsession with ethnography and blood-soaked local lore.” Well, judging by that we must assume that he knows about “mental disorder”. I wonder if he’d repeat that claim in a crowded Kyiv bar on a busy Saturday evening? Yes, I realise that the man is, to put it kindly, controversial in his views, but remember that Putin knowingly appointed him, despite his claims.

## I New days, new weapons

Of course, these days the weaponry has changed, although the new kind are very expensive. A US-made GPS-guided artillery shell, for instance, costs around \$100,000 (€93,383.94), so it’s not something to use lightly. Such clever weapons are not as common as you might think from the media reports, which is why they’re being replaced by what are called “first-person view” (FPV) drones. They have been developed from radio-controlled racing helicopters and they carry explosives that can

be detonated by remote control. That way, the weapons only cost around \$400 (roughly €374), which is why the Ukraine war front is bristling with the things. Quick to seize upon a passing trend that might give Ukraine the advantage, President Volodymyr Zelensky has even created a new branch of Ukraine’s armed services, the Unmanned Systems Force (USF) to use the things most effectively. After all, a GPS-guided shell would be many times as expensive.



Vladislav Surkov

## Running low, not running away



An Ukrainian- made “Sirko” drone

Ukraine is reportedly getting short of conventional matériel, mainly because its armed services fire up to 3,000 shells every day. The experts who pilot the drones are not just there to deliver aerial bombs; the drones are also used for surveillance and reconnaissance. The other advantage of FPV attacks is that, unlike an artillery barrage, they don’t give enemy soldiers time to duck and seek shelter. One moment there not there, the next: BANG! By and large, they carry around 5 kilograms of high explosive, so it will be quite a big bang. Russia still possesses more firepower, of course, but its soldiers are just obeying orders, not fighting to save their country. Surkov may say (I’m not convinced that he actually believes) that Russian troops are just fighting a non-existent country and its determined “Ukrainiansim”, but the Ukrainian forces know very clearly what they are fighting against.

So far it would seem that FPVs are not 100% reliable, but that is changing. The pilots are getting better, for one thing, and they’re developing more effective tactics that can disable or destroy more Russian armour. Zelensky has said he wants to increase production of FPVs to around a million a year. Needless to say, Russia is producing and using FPVs of its own, too, while still blaming Washington for starting the war. Russia actually began with its unprovoked attack and blaming the UK for prolonging it. It’s surprising that Putin keeps on with what is obviously fiction, but he seems to have long abandoned truth or honesty. Now Eric Schmidt, a former CEO of Google and a frequent visitor to Ukraine, is putting money into Ukraine’s drone production.

He plans to make them more effective, too, whilst simultaneously driving down production costs. Recently, Ukraine has used FPVs to sink the 113m-long Caesar Kunikov Ropucha-class landing ship, with its crew of 90. A Ukrainian press statement said “It was in Ukrainian territorial waters near Alupka at the time of the hit.” Kyiv has struggled to overcome Russia’s dominance in the Black Sea and on this occasion, it used both drones and long-range missiles, including a Magura

V5 drone, which is water-borne and looks like a speedboat. Reports say it can reach 42 knots (78 kilometres per hour) and carries a payload of 320 kilos. Its destruction is a major loss for Moscow. NATO allies have begun to ramp up their spending on defence, aware of Moscow’s aggressive intentions. Germany and Denmark could well be right. Perhaps Shapps should look into the possibility of buying more FPVs, since they wouldn’t require visas or “look foreign”, unlike recruits from ethnic minorities.

According to a report on Al Jazeera, Russia has lately imposed sanctions on 18 British citizens including officials, academics, and Russia experts for what it describes as an attempt to “demonise Russia” and “fan the war in Ukraine”. They would seem to be relatively peace-loving, compared with Surkov, while Putin can hardly add Shapps to that list of war-mongers, although he undoubtedly will. The Russian Foreign Affairs ministry has accused British officials as being “Russophobic charged” and says they have been trying to discredit Russia’s constitutional system “and socio-political processes in our country”. The easy way to stop that would be to withdraw from Ukraine and to stop trying to take it over, perhaps even try real democracy, but Putin seemingly doesn’t favour that option. It’s very hard to see how he thinks it’s all London’s or Washington’s fault, but Putin and logic have long been strangers. I mean, you can’t argue that you are engaged in a justifiable war against a country you also say doesn’t exist. Perhaps one day we’ll look back on the whole affair and laugh, at least once we’ve finished mourning the dead.



Eric Schmidt

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# NEWS IN BRIEF

## 'AMIGDALA' - PLOTTING PATHWAYS TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION



**Integrated modelling informs decision-making to transform the European industry**

**Project received €7 million from the horizon Europe research and innovation programme**

A European consortium is implementing AMIGDALA, a new Horizon Europe research and innovation project that has kicked off in 2024. The project will explore pathways for the European industry to become not only sustainable, as mandated by the European Green Deal, but also to remain profitable and resilient.

### Decisions augmented by model projections

The consortium maps decision-making by governments and by industry. We combine this decision framework with our computer models of economy & trade, industrial production, energy consumption, material flows and land use.

This combination provides advanced foresight by projecting pathways of change from decision-based scenarios.

### Regulation and investments in tune

AMIGDALA aims to achieve impact through providing European legislators and industries insights into the interaction between regulatory action and the global industrial investment response. This innovative approach thus drives sustainability while it considers strategic positioning, global competitiveness and resilience.

### The consortium

Led by the research center TNO (The Netherlands), the AMIGDALA project is formed by BFI, the Catholic University of Leuven, DECHEMA, Deloitte, ENEA, European Research Services, GreenDecision, IIASA, SITECH, Sustainable Innovations, and VITO.

The AMIGDALA project has been programmed under the Process4Planet partnership and is supported by the European Union.

\* Funded by the European Union under the grant agreement 101138534. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the

European Union or European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HADEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

## THE WORLD'S FIRST AI BROTHEL NOW OPEN IN BERLIN

**Clients can enjoy sexual experiences with lifelike dolls and virtual reality instead of human sex workers**

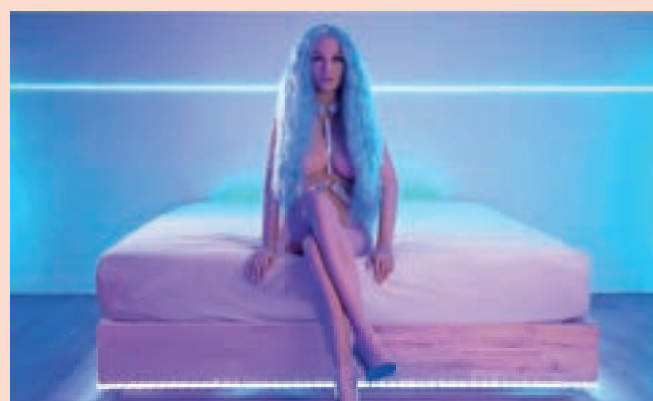
"At Cybrothel we believe that part of the future of love and sex lies in virtual reality. We believe the VR experience enables a new level of intimacy and pleasure. We look forward to accompanying you on this journey and sharing this exciting future with you" says Cybrothel's website.

The sex dolls have their own private rooms in Berlin where patrons can book some time to experience intimacy, sexual play, fantasy and fetish. The atmosphere is soft and futuristic complete with a home cinema, kitchen and bathroom. Patrons do not interact face to face with any humans.

Cybrothel is suggesting the following experiences:

VR – Experience - the first step into a virtual experience: The client uses a VR headset with all currently available VR films and have fun with two love dolls.

VRX – The world's first mixed reality sex game – The VR game from PolyBay in combination with a love doll merges reality and virtuality.



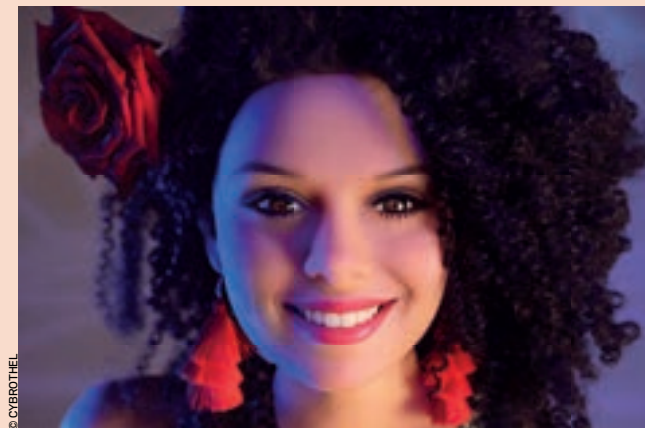
Quickly – Just two love dolls in love swings and unlimited erotic movies.

For Her – Not only for women, but also for all other genders. VR movies from the female perspective and some exciting toys.

Dolls cost from € 109 an hour to € 169 an hour depending on the condition of the doll.

The VRX MIXED REALITY SEX start at € 290 for one hour.

Audio and visual devices are connected to an external control room where a sex positive and empathetic operator is then able to hear and see the patron (only blindfold or full option), so the pleasure doll can interact in real time. This creates the illusion that the sex doll is 'alive' with a special character and personality. The dolls speak different languages.



Valentina, one of Cybrothel's dolls

## NEW RULES TO PROTECT YOUR RIGHTS AND ACTIVITY ONLINE IN THE EU



The EU's online environment is becoming a safer, fairer and more transparent place since 17 February, when its landmark rulebook, the Digital Services Act, fully came into force. This will see new responsibilities imposed on online platforms who have users in the EU, with the aim of better protecting those users and their rights.

The rules, which had already applied to a number of very large platforms and very large search engines since 2023, will start applying to all platforms and hosting services. This means they will all need to implement a number of different measures to empower users. This includes:

- countering illegal content, goods and services by providing users with the means to flag such illegal activity
- protecting minors, including a complete ban of targeting minors with ads based on profiling or on their personal data
- empowering users with information about advertisements they see, such as why the ads are being shown to them and on who paid for the advertisement
- banning advertisements that target users based on sensitive data, such as political or religious beliefs, sexual preferences, etc.
- make it easier to submit complaints and contact them

To help the Commission monitor and enforce obligations in this new law, responsible authorities will help ensure that platforms play by the rules in every EU country. Together with the Commission, they will form an advisory body to ensure that the rules are applied consistently, and that users across the EU enjoy the same rights.

In addition to online platforms, the Digital Services Act also applies to hosting services (e.g. cloud services or domain name systems, background services which connect users to requested website addresses), as well as to online intermediaries (e.g. internet service

providers, or domain). Hosting services and online intermediaries are subject to a subset of obligations under the DSA.

## HIGH VACCINATION COVERAGE KEY AGAINST EXPECTED INCREASE OF MEASLES CASES IN THE EU/EEA

Measles cases are expected to continue increasing in the EU/EEA in the coming months due to sub-optimal vaccination coverage for measles-containing vaccines (MCV) in a number of EU/EEA countries, the high probability of importation from areas experiencing high circulation and the fact that the coming months represent the seasonal peak of the virus.

ECDC (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control) data shows that in January and early February 2024, the number of EU/EEA countries reporting measles cases has increased. At least seven deaths have been reported from two countries.

Andrea Ammon, ECDC Director said:

"Nobody should die from measles. The increase in cases of measles, a highly contagious, but vaccine-preventable disease, is a stark reminder that all Member States should maximise efforts to achieve and maintain high vaccination coverage for all vaccine-preventable diseases. Vaccines are a safe and effective way to reduce the health burden of infectious diseases and avoid unnecessary loss of life."

Measles poses a threat to individuals of all age groups, which highlights the importance of maintaining high vaccination coverage across the entire population. The highest potential impact of measles, due to the high morbidity following infection, is for infants too young to be immunised (usually those under the age of 12 months, depending on national schedules). Unvaccinated children under five years old are also at increased risk, as measles can have several complications in this age group. Additionally, other groups such as the immunocompromised are at risk of severe outcomes from measles.

Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Stella Kyriakides added:



Andrea Ammon, ECDC Director

*"The rising trend in measles cases across Europe is worrying. This is an extremely contagious disease which can cause serious complications, particularly for children and vulnerable persons. The good news is that it is a disease which is preventable through vaccination and that there are plenty of safe and effective vaccines available in the EU. When we see measles outbreaks, we know there is a gap in vaccinations. I urge everyone to check their vaccination status and parents to make sure their children and young person's vaccines are up to date. Vaccination protects and saves lives, it is one of our strongest tools against measles and many other infectious diseases."*



Measles spreads very easily, therefore, high vaccination coverage, of 95% or higher of the population vaccinated with two doses of the vaccine, is essential to interrupt transmission in a country or community.

Efforts should be therefore intensified to identify and reach unvaccinated or partially vaccinated populations. Equity in access to immunisation should be ensured, especially for vulnerable populations like migrants, ethnic minorities, and those who live in crowded settings e.g. refugee camps.

High-quality surveillance systems are essential for early detection, response, and control of local measles outbreaks. In addition, enhanced laboratory diagnostic capacity facilitates to track virus genotypes and identify transmission chains.

Raising awareness on the measles situation among health professionals across various specialties is important, to ensure timely diagnosis, especially in older children and adults.

Efforts should be also made to identify the reasons for low vaccine uptake in communities and implement tailored interventions. These include risk communication and community-based initiatives, including towards underserved population groups.

## I NATO'S STEADFAST DEFENDER 2024

### An unprecedented Military Exercise to test the Alliance's defense abilities in Europe

NATO has declared its plan to carry out STEADFAST DEFENDER 2024 in the upcoming months, which is the biggest military exercise in Europe since the Cold War. With almost 90,000 soldiers from all 31 NATO Allies, along with partner Sweden, taking part, the exercise is ready to evaluate and improve NATO's defensive strategies for strengthening European defences against a similar foe.

The statement made by U.S. Army Gen. Christopher Cavoli, NATO's senior military commander and leader of U.S. European Command, has received a lot of attention. STEADFAST DEFENDER 2024 aims to offer vital information to enhance NATO's defence strategies, improve interoperability, efficiency, and resilience. This endeavour seeks to showcase NATO's dedication to collective defence and convey a strong statement on its preparedness to safeguard all Allies in light of growing threats.

The exercise is strategically situated in multiple important European countries, such as Finland, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Activities are scheduled to occur until May 31, 2024.

In the beginning stage the emphasis will be on strengthening maritime presence in the Atlantic and Arctic regions. The second stage will involve the utilisation of additional forces in various areas, ranging from the Arctic to the Eastern Flank.

STEADFAST DEFENDER 2024 is a comprehensive exercise

that includes operations in several domains such as land, air, sea, cyber, and space. It has been a significant area of concentration for doctrinal development at NATO Allied Command Transformation. It includes sending troops from North America and other areas of the Alliance to Europe. Over the course of several months, a series of intricate operations involving multiple domains will take place over vast distances, resulting in improved collaboration between civilian and military entities and strengthening national and collective resilience.



F-15C Eagles conducting aerial operations

NATO exercises, particularly of this magnitude, are scheduled well in advance and employ a fictional scenario with the goal of improving the Alliance's overall defence. Exercises have the double function of improving defensive strategies and discouraging possible aggression from rivals of similar strength.

STEADFAST DEFENDER 2024 represents a significant occasion for NATO, demonstrating the unity, power, and resolve of the transatlantic alliance in response to changing security concerns. Given the ongoing tensions in Eastern Europe, this exercise conveys a clear statement that NATO is ready to protect its members, its principles, and maintain collective security in the Euro-Atlantic region.

### IT'S A FIRST! NATO AWACS ALL-FEMALE AIRCREW COMPLETE SORTIE IN SUPPORT OF ENHANCED VIGILANCE ACTIVITIES

For the first time ever, the NATO Airborne Early Warning and Control Force (NAEW&CF) conducted command and control (C2) operations on Friday, Feb. 9, 2024, with an all-female aircrew composition.

The flight was a regular mission sortie for the multinational crew in support of NATO's enhanced Vigilance Activities (eVA). With

the flight NATO AWACS highlights the women working in the Airborne Early Warning community and shines a light on female aviation.

Showcasing the capabilities of the female crew will prove that women are able to perform in traditionally male-dominated occupations in equal capacity

"The purpose of this flight encompassed our operational mission safeguarding NATO's borders," said Captain Béatrice, Aircrew Training Squadron Flight Commander. She explained that it is normal for the E-3A AWACS to have women on the flight or serve as maintainers for the aircraft.

"The flight demonstrates that the mission and every position on board the AWACS can be executed by women," said Captain Ciara, Aircrew Training Squadron Simulator Operations Chief. "Showcasing the capabilities of the female crew will prove that women are able to perform in traditionally male-dominated occupations in equal capacity."

The flight was organised by the NAEW&CF Women's Initiative Team (WIT) who aim to champion equality and inclusion and was the first attempt of a crew comprised of female aviators representing various backgrounds highlighting the achievements of women in aviation.

According to the 2020 Summary of the National Reports of NATO Member and Partner Nations, the average percentage of women in the armed forces of the NATO Alliance has more than doubled since 1998. As the Alliance's mission is to protect its one billion people, NATO believes that women play a vital role in all that is done to build a stronger Alliance that draws on the skills and talents of its diverse population.



NATO Airborne Early Warning and Control Force crew members discuss the mission

"Everyone is unique and brings individual talents to the team, which benefits our operational effectiveness within NATO," said Technical Sergeant Maddie, 852<sup>nd</sup> Medical Dental Squadron Laboratory NCO In-Charge. "By recognising strength in diversity, we can unleash its potential and positively impact the culture at NATO."

Since 2013, gender perspectives have been integrated in NATO defence planning, Strategic Intelligence Requirements, and in its work to counter terrorism. NATO believes every policy, program, or project can affect men and women differently, so understanding these differences can help improve the way work is pursued.

## POLAND STRENGTHENS MILITARY COOPERATION WITH DENMARK

A bilateral meeting between Deputy Prime Minister W. Kosiniak-Kamysz and Troels Lund Poulsen, Deputy Prime Minister - Minister

of Defense of Denmark, took place in Warsaw in order to sign an agreement to strengthen their military cooperation.

Denmark is a member of the Multinational Northeast Corps in Szczecin, Poland. Nearly 400 NATO officers, non-commissioned officers and civilian employees serve in the corps. The Multinational Northeast Corps Command plays the role of the Regional Land Component Command in the NATO force structure and is responsible for the region encompassing the so-called eastern flank.



Polish and Danish soldiers training in the Balkans

The heads of the defense ministries discussed the ongoing military cooperation between the two countries and identified directions for its development in terms of joint exercises and training. They discussed the current security situation in the Baltic Sea basin. The "Agreement on cooperation between the Ministry of Defense of the Kingdom of Denmark and the Minister of National Defense of the Republic of Poland in the field of security and defense" was signed.

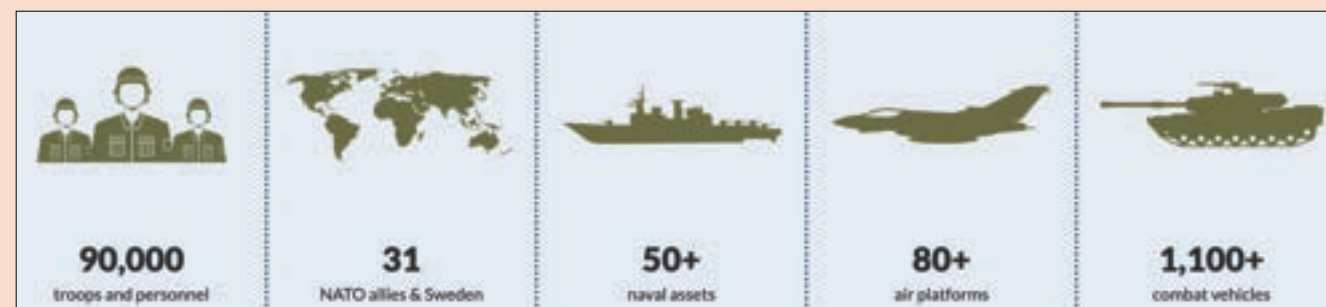
*I was assured today by the Minister of support, of continuity, of cooperation in Szczecin. Thank you very much for that. The Baltic Sea, the protection of critical infrastructure, e.g. Baltic Pipe, the gas port, everything that is extremely important to us today, critical infrastructure, is the spot we need to take special care of. (...) We talked about common priorities. Security definitely has to be a shared priority. (...) The European defense industry must accelerate. It must put all its production forces into action and come out of its lethargy. Come out of a dormant state, a sedate state. As we are in a state of imminent danger. If the war is fought so close to us, this state of imminent danger exist. The entire arms industry in Europe must accelerate, must understand that there is a time of direct danger*

- said the head of the Ministry of Defense.

In his statement, Deputy Prime Minister also gave his opinion on cooperation in the European Union format and support for the defending itself Ukraine.

*We share one and the same opinion - Europe must get involved, the European Union must get involved in helping Ukraine. One must not become accustomed to war. One must not forget that people are dying every day in Ukraine, that they are fighting there for peace, for freedom, for normality, for democracy, for Ukraine to be an independent state. But also for the rest of Europe to be safe. (...) We will support Ukraine bilaterally. We appreciate what Denmark has been doing. The decision to transfer of F-16 aircraft, the multi-billion dollar commitment to military aid Ukraine that Denmark is implementing is extremely valuable to us as a neighbor of Ukraine*

- stressed Deputy Prime Minister W. Kosiniak-Kamysz.





## PROJECT 406 THE LARGEST, AND MOST LUXURIOUS AND INDIVIDUAL TRUE SPORTFISH YACHT IN THE WORLD

The ground-breaking big fisher, Royal Huisman's Project 406, is in transit from the shipyard's inland new-build facilities in Vollenhove, gearing up for the anticipated final stage – her launch in Amsterdam. The powerful hull of this unique vessel measures 52m / 171ft overall and her towering profile accommodates six decks. These remarkable features not only make her the largest, but also the most luxurious and individual true sportfish yacht in the world: the ultimate expression of personal freedom.

Project 406 is designed for an experienced owner who is passionate about fishing. She is a unique vessel in so many respects. Vripack Yacht Design is responsible for the exterior and interior design and naval architecture of this highly prestigious project. Her design is extremely distinctive, with a long bow and high bulwarks sweeping through a clear sheer to a low and uncluttered cockpit aft.



The high tower offers outstanding views with a downward angle on the water for specialized fishing. Apart from its practical function, the tower also offers a superb viewing platform for guests, who can follow all the action below. Project 406 effortlessly blends the ultimate sports fishing experience with genuine superyacht scale, comfort and refinement.

Not only is she the largest but, without doubt, the most bespoke, finely appointed, meticulously engineered and most impressive true sportfish yacht anywhere in the world. Project 406 is immaculately and extensively designed and engineered and efficiently built by the shipyard team of over 350 individual experts and highly qualified co-makers. Royal Huisman is viewed to be the only shipyard in the world capable of delivering such an individual, innovative and bespoke motoryacht project.

## THE FIRST AND ONLY STERILE AT-HOME INSEMINATION KIT, AWARDED FDA CLEARANCE

**Following Her Own Infertility Diagnosis, Dr. Jennifer Hintzsche, Ph.D., Invented and Patented the First and Only Sterile, Over-the-Counter Fertility Treatment, the Now FDA-Cleared Intravaginal Insemination Device that Conceived Her Daughter**

PherDal Fertility Science, Inc., creators of the first and only

sterile, at-home insemination kit, is now accepting pre-orders of its intravaginal insemination (IVI) device, following FDA (US Food and Drug Administration) class II clearance. The PherDal Kit is the first and only to combine the sterile environment of the fertility clinic with the at-home capabilities of insemination.

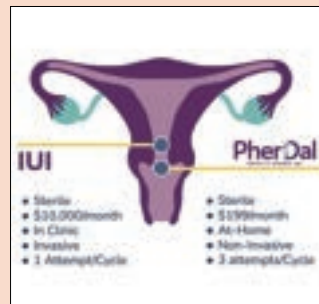


Dr. Jennifer Hintzsche, Ph.D

Each PherDal Kit includes three (3) sterile syringes and three (3) sterile collection cups to make at-home insemination as sterile, safe and accessible as possible. Unique to the PherDal Kit, the sterile syringe is intentionally designed to deliver sperm at the opening of the cervix, while bypassing bacterial or anatomical interference, which studies have linked to infertility.

PherDal is bridging the gap between traditional conception and more invasive options with a sterile at-home insemination option for individuals who have been unable to conceive through intercourse or have chosen not to conceive through intercourse.

The PherDal kits, which are 100% made in the USA, are currently available at pherdal.com for \$199. Customers do not need a prescription to purchase.



## MORE THAN 50 YEARS AFTER THEFT, STOLEN JOHN OPIE PAINTING RECOVERED AND RETURNED TO RIGHTFUL OWNER

**The Painting Allegedly Remained in Criminal Hands for Decades**

An original John Opie painting believed to have been stolen by mobsters in July 1969 has been returned to its rightful owner after a two-year investigation by the FBI's Salt Lake City Field Office.

FBI Special Agent Gary France presented the painting, titled "The Schoolmistress", to Dr. Francis Wood, 96, at his home in Newark, New Jersey, after a judge in the Fifth Judicial District Court for

Washington County, Utah, resolved the question of ownership. The piece, painted circa 1784, is oil on canvas and approximately 40 inches by 50 inches. This recovered original Opie painting has a sister painting housed in the Tate Britain art gallery in London.

The FBI was contacted in December 2021 by a Washington County, Utah, accounting firm acting as a trustee for a client who died in 2020. The client had hired the firm to liquidate his residences and personal property. While appraising the painting for auction, it was discovered to likely be an original Opie stolen in 1969 from a private residence of the Wood family in New Jersey.

Wood's father, Dr. Earl Leroy Wood, purchased the painting during the Great Depression in the 1930s for \$7,500.

According to court documents, on July 25, 1969, three men, identified as Gerald Festa, Gerald Donnerstag, and Austin Costiglione broke into Dr. Wood's home and stole the Opie painting.

It is believed that law enforcement pressure resulted in the painting's transfer to another mobster. The painting's location between 1969 and the late 1980s is unknown but the FBI believes it remained in the hands of organized crime members.

Twenty years later, in 1989, the Utah accounting firm's deceased client purchased a home in Hallandale, Florida from convicted mobster, Joseph Covello, Sr. The Opie painting was included in the sale of the home without the client's knowledge of its identity or history. The client eventually sold his Florida home and moved the painting to St. George, Utah, where it remained until his death in 2020.

"It was an honor playing a role in recovering a significant piece of art and culture, and reuniting a family with its stolen heritage," Special Agent France said. "In a world where criminal investigations often leave scars, it was a rare joy to be a part of a win-win case: a triumph for history, justice, and the Wood family."



Special Agent, Gary France (left) looks on as Dr. Francis Wood signs an FBI property release form for the recovered Opie painting

## MIGALOO'S \$2 BILLION CUSTOMIZABLE SUPERYACHT M5 CAN PLUNGE UNDERWATER AND BECOME A SUBMARINE

The name MIGALOO is the Aborigini-based name of an albino humpback whale often seen around Australian waters. As

MIGALOO's Submersible Superyachts should be painted in bright white to contrast from conventional submarines, the Albino-analogy is quite appropriate.

Migaloo is a well-known brand associated with luxury superyachts, particularly the Migaloo Submarine Yacht series. The Migaloo Submarine Yacht is designed to combine the luxury of a superyacht with the capability to submerge and operate underwater.



The Migaloo Submarine Yacht series includes various models, such as the "Migaloo M2" and "Migaloo M5." These yachts are typically characterized by their sleek and modern design, high-end amenities, and the unique feature of being able to transform into a submarine for underwater exploration.

The most distinctive feature of the Migaloo Submarine Yacht is its ability to submerge, allowing passengers to experience underwater environments.

These yachts are designed to offer opulent living spaces, featuring state-of-the-art technology, spacious cabins, entertainment systems, and other luxurious amenities.

Migaloo Yachts based in Graz, Austria, are customizable to meet the specific preferences and requirements of the owner. This may include the interior layout, decor, and additional features.

Length overall: 165.8 m  
Beam: 23.0 m  
Draft: 8.6 m  
Range: approx. 15,000 km  
Submerged duration: approx. 4 weeks  
Depth: approx. 250 m  
Owner & Guests: e.g. 14-20, acc. to the Owners preferences  
Crew & Staff: e.g. 32-40  
Double Hull Construction with several Pressure Hulls  
2 Midget Submarines - accessible from the Main Pressure Hull  
Personal Safety Equipment for Guests and Crew such as Submarine Escape Immersion Equipment (SEIE)  
Aft Deck Helipad (D-Value 13 m) and Helicopter Hangar in dedicated Pressure Hull  
Propulsion: Diesel Electric & AIP  
Speed: 20 knots surfaced, 12 knots submerged  
Surface Tender:  
e.g. 12.5 m Custom Compass Enclosed Limousine Tender, e.g. 10.5 m Compass Beach Landing Craft, e.g. 6.8 m Pascoe Jet Drive RHIB Work Tender

Submarine Tender & Underwater Exploration:  
2 Custom Midget-Submarines (MIGALOO LST - Limo Sub Tender and/or Exploration Sub Tender, length: 17 m), 2 Submersibles, several ROVs and UAVs

Air Tender:  
1x Helicopter (e.g. Bell 407 or Bell 429), Drones, Hot-Air Balloon  
Land Tender:  
2x Expedition Vehicles or SUVs or Trucks/Pick-Up



## VOLKSWAGEN INTEGRATES CHATGPT INTO ITS VEHICLES



ChatGPT will be available in VW models with electric and ICE drive

At CES 2024, the world's leading electronics trade fair, Volkswagen introduced the first vehicles in which the artificial-intelligence-based chatbot ChatGPT is integrated into its IDA voice assistant.

In future, customers will have seamless access to the constantly growing artificial intelligence database in all Volkswagen models equipped with the IDA voice assistant and have researched content read out to them while driving. Cerence Chat Pro from technology partner Cerence Inc. is the foundation of the new function, which offers a uniquely intelligent, automotive-grade ChatGPT integration. Volkswagen will be the first volume manufacturer to offer Chat GPT as a standard feature from the second quarter of 2024 in many production vehicles.

The new chatbot is offered in conjunction with the latest generation of infotainment in the following models: ID.7, ID.4, ID.5, ID.3, the all-new Tiguan and the all-new Passat, as well as in the new Golf.



ChatGPT is seamlessly integrated into the IDA voice assistant

Enabled by Cerence Chat Pro, the integration of ChatGPT into the backend of the Volkswagen voice assistant offers a multitude of new capabilities that go far beyond the previous voice control. For example, the IDA voice assistant can be used to control the infotainment, navigation, and air conditioning, or to answer general knowledge questions. In the future, AI will provide additional information in response to questions that go beyond this as part of its continuously expanding capabilities. This can be helpful on many levels during a car journey: Enriching conversations, clearing up questions, interacting in intuitive language, receiving vehicle-specific information, and much more – purely hands-free.

Nothing changes for the person behind the wheel. There is no need to create a new account, install a new app or activate ChatGPT: The voice assistant is activated by saying "Hello IDA" or pressing the button on the steering wheel. IDA automatically prioritises whether a vehicle function should be executed, a destination searched or

the temperature adjusted. If the request cannot be answered by the Volkswagen system, it is forwarded anonymously to AI and the familiar Volkswagen voice responds

## NASA, LOCKHEED MARTIN REVEAL X-59 QUIET SUPERSONIC AIRCRAFT

NASA and Lockheed Martin have formally debuted the agency's X-59 quiet supersonic aircraft. Using this one-of-a-kind experimental airplane, NASA aims to gather data that could revolutionize air travel, paving the way for a new generation of commercial aircraft that can travel faster than the speed of sound.

"This is a major accomplishment made possible only through the hard work and ingenuity from NASA and the entire X-59 team," said NASA Deputy Administrator Pam Melroy. "In just a few short years we've gone from an ambitious concept to reality. NASA's X-59 will help change the way we travel, bringing us closer together in much less time."



NASA's X-59 quiet supersonic research aircraft sits on the apron outside Lockheed Martin's Skunk Works facility at dawn in Palmdale, California

The X-59 is at the center of NASA's Quesst mission, which focuses on providing data to help regulators reconsider rules that prohibit commercial supersonic flight over land. For 50 years, the U.S. and other nations have prohibited such flights because of the disturbance caused by loud, startling sonic booms on the communities below. The X-59 is expected to fly at 1.4 times the speed of sound, or 925 mph. Its design, shaping and technologies will allow the aircraft to achieve these speeds while generating a quieter sonic thump.

With rollout complete, the Quesst team will shift to its next steps in preparation for first flight: integrated systems testing, engine runs, and taxi testing for the X-59.

Once NASA completes flight tests, the agency will fly the aircraft over several to-be-selected cities across the U.S., collecting input about the sound the X-59 generates and how people perceive it. NASA will provide that data to the Federal Aviation Administration and international regulators.

The X-59 is a unique experimental airplane, not a prototype – its technologies are meant to inform future generations of quiet supersonic aircraft.

At 99.7 feet long and 29.5 feet wide, the aircraft's shape and the technological advancements it houses will make quiet supersonic flight possible. The X-59's thin, tapered nose accounts for almost a third of its length and will break up the shock waves that would ordinarily result in a supersonic aircraft causing a sonic boom.

Due to this configuration, the cockpit is located almost halfway down the length of the aircraft – and does not have a forward-facing window. Instead, the Quesst team developed the eXternal Vision System, a series of high-resolution cameras feeding a 4K monitor in the cockpit.



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Farmers' demonstration in Saint-  
Etienne-de-Fontbellon, France

# PLANTING DISCONTENT

## How Europe's farmers are falling out with the European Union

Few could have missed the series of angry protests by European Farmers that have dogged the early months of the year. Many roads were blocked with stationary (or near-stationary) tractors and other agricultural vehicles in a display of anger and concern. Europe's farmers, however quietly rural their normal lives may be, have never turned their back on showing European politicians just what they think of them. Not a lot, it seems. On the motorway from Paris to Brussels, the fed-up farmers daubed the words "Ursula, we are here", just in case European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen failed to get the message. Fear not; she did. How could she possibly miss it? The tractor protest was aimed at encouraging the politicians to end the EU's various free trade agreements with third countries; they're demanding a lessening of bureaucracy as well as better process for their produce. The farmers (and farm workers) know their protests are unpopular with many ordinary citizens who have shown little interest in where the foodstuffs on their supermarket shelves come from nor just how much effort must be put into putting it there.

### History repeats itself

We appear to be building up towards another "peasants' revolt", an event in 14<sup>th</sup> century England when peasants marched on London, led by Wat Tyler, supported by a preacher, John Ball, who is claimed to have said: "When Adam delved (dug, in modern English) and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?".



Richard II meeting with the rebels of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. A 1470s copy of Jean Froissart's Chronicles

The King at the time, Richard II, had to shelter in the Tower of London, but he wanted to have both Tyler and Ball executed. At least that's not a fate that threatens today's protestors, although it provides proof that the uprising back then involved women as well as men, willing to suspend their spinning activities to get their message across. Ball's much copied slogan, of course, made the valid point that it's not the finely-dressed gentry who plant corn or dig up turnips or clear up the waste from cattle to use as fertilizer, but the simple sons (and daughters) of the soil. It

still is. It's a good slogan and I commend it to the protestors (with perhaps some minor updating adaptations)! Just to complete the story, back then, led by Tyler, the men of Kent killed some Flemish merchants (sorry, Belgium!) and burned down the palace of the King's unpopular uncle, John of Gaunt, obliging the King to grant the protestors cheap land, trade that was free of taxes and restrictions, along with the abolition of serfdom and forced labour. Not a bad achievement, really, although London's Chancellor, Archbishop Simon of Sudbury, and the Treasurer, Sir Robert Tales, were both blamed for the unpopular poll tax and subsequently murdered by the peasants.



A protest by farmers advocating ecological farming in Berlin, Germany

Much of the protest today is also against the proliferation of regulations (it's funny how history repeats itself) and all the many forms that must be filled in before the farmers can get their hands on their promised subsidies, to which they are entitled, of course. The fact is that all of us, however un-rural, need food and people with the skills (and physical strength) to grow it, tend it or milk it. We may all be in thrall to technology these days – and even depend upon it – but you can't eat a computer. Now farmers from Spain, Italy, Greece and Poland have joined the party, demonstrating their support for the protestors' cause. Indeed, the movement is still spreading. If you're feeling bored sitting behind the wheel of a tractor, there's nothing quite like a lively demonstration to raise your spirits. On the other hand, some of the protests appear to have links to Europe's political parties of the far right, which is worrying some politicians.

Much of the anger centres around Ukraine. Poland is, after all, just next door, and imports of cheap produce, subsidised to assist struggling Ukraine, are certainly harming Poland's farmers. The produce includes cereals and milk products. In one demonstration, their tractors bore the slogan: "EU Policy is Ruining Polish Farmers". Another carried the words: "No farmers, no food, no future" or variations on that theme, and you have to admit they have a point. The farmers seem to be doing their best to spread the ruin far and wide, too, cutting down trees and burning them in some places, applauded by the more



extreme Conservative politicians. They have even burned their own produce. Russia has made matters worse with its aggression interrupting trade flows. European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen has promised to cut down on bureaucracy, rather than trees, to allow the farmers to spend more of their time in their fields, instead of sitting at their desks or their kitchen tables, depending upon where they carry out their mountainous paperwork.

## Doing bad by doing good?

Leading politicians, at EU level and nationally, have announced a variety of measures aimed at addressing the problems the farmers face and lowering their anger. Britain's "The Economist" magazine referred in a headline to "The pitchforks of discontent", but so far levels of violence have been fairly low, apart from the occasional use of water canon to disperse the more riotous groups. Even so, when protests have got out of hand, the police have made arrests, albeit not many. The article makes it plain, however, that European farming is in decline, rather like the relevance of the EU itself, it says. There have been calls for calm, however, from such politicians as the Prime Minister of Belgium, Alexander De Croo. "Don't demonise the farmers," he warned, "Don't send the army on them, but talk to them."



Belgium's Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo

At EU level, politicians don't want to close the doors completely to agricultural imports from, for instance, South American countries, but those imports must meet the standards that EU farmers must reach in order to sell their produce. Von der Leyen has already granted one major concession to the protestors: she has promised to scrap a plan to cut the use of pesticides by 50%. That should go some way towards appeasing the angry sons (and daughters) of the soil.

Europe's farmers are also less than happy with existing and proposed environmental regulations, such as the requirement that 4% of farmland is supposed to be given over to biodiversity and protecting the landscape, which farmers say will affect them negatively. Meanwhile, the EU's "Green Deal" will lead to a reduction in the use of chemicals and forms of production that may lead to green gas emissions. A number of environmental proposals have also been shelved or scrapped because of their feared impact on farming. Europe's farmers have been coming under increasing pressure, admits European Commission vice-president, Maroš Šefčovič, a Slovak diplomat now responsible for pushing through the EU's so-called "Green Deal" of

environmental improvements, most of them unpopular with the farmers because it involves additional cost, more work and little or no reward. Who wants to spend more only to earn less?



European Commission Vice-President, Maroš Šefčovič

And with European elections earmarked for June, no politician wants to upset too many voters. Šefčovič told MEPs during a plenary debate on agriculture that there is a need for a "future where farming and nature go hand in hand in balance." That's a great idea in theory but rather hard to achieve in the real world. Manfred Weber, head of the centre-right European People's party group, said "we are in favour of protecting the environment, but together with farmers, not against them." Of course, it's not just the farmers and the politicians who are involved in this game; there is also large-scale industry whose only interest is in maximising profit. Green MEP Tilly Mets wants the European Commission to "launch an investigation into how powerful agri-food oligopolies impact farmers' incomes and propose guidelines for an agri-food windfall tax." That sounds like a good idea. The European farming organisations, COPA (Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations) and COGECA (Comité général de la coopération agricole de l'Union européenne), said: "most of what was said was a political blame game, but not enough was said about solutions for the future of the sector." Basically, far right politicians have hijacked the organisations to lobby (and more) against reforms. They're rather like the American "anti-woke" groups who view any social or environmental conscience as being one step away from Marxism. However, they still want to see food on their supermarket shelves, even if their main interest is in seeing fat dividends for their share-holder friends. Anyone got a magic wand they're not using at the moment?

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period from 2023 to 2027 supports a gradual transition towards a more sustainable kind of farming and forestry in the Union. In other words growing what people need in a way

that will allow you to do it again next year and the year after, and, indeed, indefinitely. It's a laudable goal, of course, but achieving it is less simple. There is an old English saying about "killing the goose that lays the golden egg" – taking actions to reach a good end but unintentionally harming everything along the way and thus rendering the intended outcome unachievable. There's been much talk about a "greener CAP" and the document specifies "no backsliding"; under the scheme payments to farmers would be linked to environmental and climate action so that no-one could have one without the other. For example, on every farm at least 3% of arable land must be dedicated to biodiversity and non-productive elements, with a possibility to receive support via eco-schemes to raise it to 7%. Wetlands and peatlands are also protected, and animal welfare measures are introduced. In fact, that, along with more organic farming and ecology measures takes up some 25% of the direct payments budget, while more than 35% of the budget for rural development is targeted at programmes supporting climate, biodiversity, the environment and also animal welfare again. Similarly, at least 15% of the budget for operational programmes for fruit and vegetables is for environmental issues. It all has to do with climate change, of course, although that's not entirely down to the farmers. Scientists now believe that global temperatures are already 1.8 °C higher than in pre-industrial times. The finding comes from sea sponges in the Caribbean. There is also work going on to find out if sea creatures could eat more of the plastic in the ocean if it's biodegradable. Making air traffic fly at lower altitudes could also reduce emissions, and it would not involve farmers. Scientists are now saying we should focus on net-zero emissions, rather than setting temperature limits. In fact, the rise in mean surface temperature is thought to be half a degree higher than accepted estimates already.



Green MEP Tilly Mets

## Making Politicians understand



Spraying fertilized field with pesticide and insecticide

The people who work the land haven't been forgotten, either. The proposed reforms include a redistribution of income support, with EU countries being obliged to dedicate at least 10% of their direct payments to what's called the "redistributive income support" tool, thus helping the smaller and even medium-sized farms to meet their fiscal needs. The various reforms include improving working conditions for farm labourers. There is also an intention to encourage young farmers in the industry through income or investment support or start-up aid, and that includes aid for women in farming to encourage female participation in the industry. If you put all the EU's intentions like that, it sounds wonderful. What's not to like? Well, quite a lot, it seems. We should bear in mind that agriculture accounts for only 1.4% of the EU's GDP, 4.2% of the EU's employment, and 14.3% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions, but at the same time it receives around 30% of the EU's budget.

For more than sixty years, European farming policies and subsidies have gone into the industrialisation of agriculture, with its consequent reliance on fossil fuels, chemical fertilizers and pesticides. What's more, more than 80% of CAP subsidies are still going to just 20% of European farms, promoting large-scale industrial production and the concentration of land ownership in a small number of hands. Most ordinary Europeans don't really understand what the demonstrations are all about: just what exactly do these farmers want? That's not such an easy question to answer, but one French farmer demonstrating in Paris told CNN: "We are no longer making a living from our profession". Fewer regulations restricting such convenient commodities as chemical fertilisers, chemical pesticides and simple, inexpensive ways to get rid of waste, of which agriculture produces large quantities. Like most people, they want cheaper ways to work and bigger profits at the end of it. Yes, the proposed reforms looked to be good for the land, the farm animals and cleaner air, but as COPA-COGECA pointed out: "Let's not forget that this proposal was ideological from the outset, with no connection to the realities of agriculture, proposing unrealistic transitions without the necessary funding." Most consumers support the overall aims of the farmers, but that doesn't mean they will buy local produce that costs much more than imports, although they wouldn't favour polluted air, lakes and rivers, either. It's not that locally-grown produce isn't available; it just costs more. Ever-





COPA-COGECA, is the union of the two big agricultural umbrella organisations COPA and COGECA and the strongest interest group for European farmers

higher energy costs and raised wages for farm workers have taken their toll as well, although no-one would dispute that agricultural workers deserve to earn more.

The far right have latched onto the protests by Europe's fed-up farmers as a way to address various things they don't like about today's world. In America, a conservative movement decided to take a stand against what became known as "wokeness" – what they saw as too much emphasis on gender issues, sexuality and what was called "critical race theory", which is defined in the Encyclopaedia Britannica as an intellectual and social movement based on the premise that race itself is not a natural, biologically grounded feature. It's been scientifically proven not to define subgroups of human beings but is instead what it

calls a "culturally invented category", existing seemingly just to oppress and exploit people of colour. I'm sure most Americans believe that such arguments became obsolete with the end of the American Civil War. Sadly, it seems, a great many people still identify with the Confederacy that fought so hard to retain slavery. The Civil War Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, is a fascinating collection of Civil War-related objects but it makes no attempt to defend Confederate political thought about race and slavery. If you ever get to Atlanta I recommend a visit to the museum, which contains (among many other things) one of the original engines involved in what became known as "the Great Locomotive Chase" (the Walt Disney corporation made a movie about it) in which Union spies stole an up-to-date steam engine and tried to drive it to the North, although they failed.

I followed the story in my childhood comic, The Eagle, and wanted the Union people to win, although the two spies were captured. The engine is a magnificent beast, however, and well worth a visit, even if "The Texas" was just one of several engines involved in the pursuit. In any case, whatever the anti-woke people believe, race has no genetic basis. Variations in appearance cannot be traced to different biological categories. We're all just people, of whatever colour or appearance. The Confederates were simply wrong, as is slavery, of course. Whatever Europe's farmers may be calling for and whatever COPA-COGECA may say, it's certainly not a return to that kind of racist, neo-Fascist, sexist, or anti-liberal thinking. Indeed, I'm sure that COPA-COGECA don't want that either.

## Is there a way forward?

Of course, the farmers are not winning over many members of the public by blocking roads and burning things in the street and stopping non-farmers from getting to work or taking their children to school. It always happens with any sort of industrial action. Winning arguments by making lots of people angry and unsympathetic is never easy, and neither is it easy for politicians to pour oil on troubled waters and calm everything and everyone down. Poland's Deputy Prime Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, has called on the EU Agriculture Commissioner, Janusz Wojciechowski, to resign. He has come under fire from all sides. Although this now lengthy protest appears to have taken Europe's politicians by surprise, they should have seen it coming; all the

signs were there. Europe's farmers are heavily burdened by debt, powerful retailers and their representatives have squeezed prices to the bone, as have the agrochemical companies, on top of which the farmers have suffered bad weather and competition from cheap foreign imports, made worse by Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine.



Polish Deputy Prime Minister, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz



EU Agriculture Commissioner, Janusz Wojciechowski

With elections happening in many places this year, the farmers have timed their protest well: politicians who need votes can hardly ignore them. Much of the anger is over a proliferation of rules, mainly in aid of environmental concerns, that add to the farmers' costs, their workload and their paperwork. Who wouldn't protest? One farmer told reporters that EU leaders are "drowning them in legislation". That's why support for far-right and anti-EU politicians has been growing.

The fact is that Europe's political leaders are under pressure to clean up the environment and improve animal welfare standards and the workers' wage packets at the same time as trying to keep food prices affordable and Europe clean and healthy. They know that Europe generates almost 26 million tonnes of plastic waste each

year, in addition to which around 80% of marine litter is plastic, and 87% of Europeans are worried about the impact plastic products are having on the environment. It's a conundrum. EU leaders say they want to change the way in which plastic products are made, used and recycled, while trying to achieve a sustainable plastics economy, with safer production and consumption measures that also encourage innovation, competitiveness and jobs, not just in Europe but across the world. That's why the EU is tightening up the rules on plastic bags, especially those lightweight ones given away in supermarkets only to be discarded later. The Commission also wants to tackle plastic packaging, in fact all kinds of packaging, cut back on single-use plastics and – if possible – reduce marine litter, in line with the aims of the United Nations Environment programme. That's why the EU is very much in favour of the UN's Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter, an organisation set up in 2012. The problem is that such improvements cost money and at present it seems to be mainly the farmers who are paying for it. Improving the world is expensive, but EU leaders want to try, preferably without causing the farming community to drown in debt.



Plastic debris washed ashore

It's a bit of a tall order and one that extremist politicians are racing to use, although there is no shortage of non-political organisations involved in various programmes, such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), which has pointed out that some experts are now predicting that by 2050 the quantity of plastics in our oceans could outweigh all the fish. Plastics kill marine life and take thousands of years to break down. Some scientists have estimated that we currently have some 171-trillion piece of plastic in our seas. That's 171 followed by twelve noughts: 171,000,000,000,000, by the way. But we need to find a way to do that that doesn't bankrupt our farmers. That's why the European Commission has decided to delay a proposed regulation that would compel them to leave a certain proportion of their land to lie fallow, or non-productive. Meanwhile, the protest actions continue throughout the EU, releasing the farmers' anger and frustrations but so far not coming up with a working solution. Perhaps there isn't one. However, senior EU politicians are going to have to go on looking; they can't afford not to. Otherwise, with or without Climate change, the farmers will make things too hot for them.

*Jim Gibbons*

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One of the original engines involved in what became known as "the Great Locomotive Chase"





# ARCTIC MELTDOWN

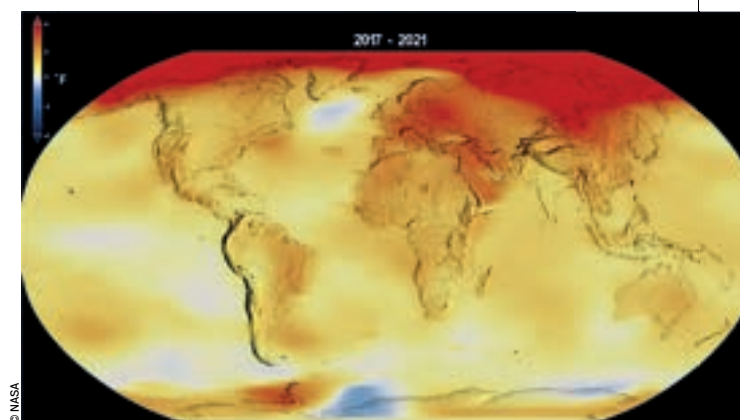
## Geopolitical shifts and challenges

Russia's involvement in the Arctic region is deeply rooted, dating back centuries to the conquest of Siberia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Over the years, successive governments have strongly supported and promoted various activities in the region, focussing primarily on facilitating trade and the extraction of natural resources. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the discovery of oil and gas deposits in Siberia, both below and above the Arctic Circle, proved to be extremely lucrative. These resources not only brought wealth and foreign currency to the nation, but also contributed to domestic consumption, financed the Soviet military apparatus and served as the economic basis for the Soviet Union to pursue its foreign policy goals.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's involvement in the exploitation of Arctic resources gained considerable momentum. Oil and gas played a central role in revitalising the country's economic situation in the early 2000s. This resurgence in economic stability played a crucial role in fuelling Vladimir Putin's rise as Russia's undisputed leader. It also enabled Russia to reclaim its position on the world stage as an ambitious superpower determined to regain its influence in Europe and assert its rightful place in the international system.

But there is one huge problem which, at the time, was not considered as part of the equation; global temperatures have risen by around 1.3°C above pre-industrial levels, and this increasing heat is unevenly distributed around the globe.

The Arctic, often referred to as the Earth's freezer, is experiencing a rapid thaw due to the effects of climate change. Thermometers in the region are rising four times faster than in other parts of the world as the Arctic is increasingly exposed to intense solar radiation. This feverish warming is upsetting the delicate balance of the pole and triggering widespread ice loss with far-reaching consequences.



The picture displays worldwide variations in surface temperatures for the year 2021. Elevated temperatures, indicated in red, are visible in areas like the Arctic. Temperatures that are below average are indicated by the colour blue

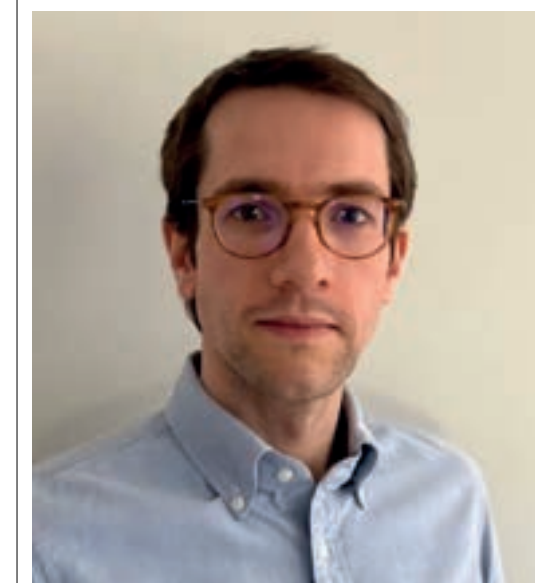
Be that as it may, Moscow is seeking to capitalise on the dwindling ice and exploit the thawing treasures, leading to tensions as rivals jostle for position in the newly navigable north. Economically, the melting of the permafrost favours opportunistic drilling for oil and other minerals, but threatens the way of life of the locals. Ecologically, reversing this frozen feedback loop, risks global destabilisation.

As the canary forewarned coal miners of the danger of carbon monoxide gas, the Arctic is the first to sound the alarm that the

climate crisis is sparing no place in our shared, rapidly warming world.

Much has been said about how global warming may bring about more conflict, but to understand its roots and connections to climate change, we need to understand what is happening to Arctic Sea ice.

In recent decades, significant changes have taken place in the vast icy components of the Earth's cryosphere. These components consist of frozen water reserves such as ice caps, glaciers, snow packs, permafrost and the Antarctic ice sheet. Analyses of satellite data show that the extent of Arctic sea ice in the summer months decreased by more than 10 per cent per decade from the late 1970s to the mid-2000s. If this pattern continues, the Arctic region could experience ice-free summers for the first time in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Mathieu Boulègue

Russia's extensive coastline within the Arctic Circle, which stretches over 24,000 kilometres, poses a major challenge. In the past, the sea ice acted as a robust natural defence, effectively keeping military ships and submarines at bay.

However, the decline in the extent of sea ice has led to less ice cover and even longer periods without ice. As a result, foreign reconnaissance vessels can now approach much closer and remain in the region for much longer, exceeding the level of proximity desired by Russia.

Mathieu Boulègue, a Senior Fellow with the Transatlantic Defense and Security Programme at the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) says: *"If history has taught us anything about how Russia perceives these intrusions it's that they need to limit the presence of foreign actors, and they do it the way Russia does it, which is to militarise the region to make sure that we don't get too close. And by 'we' I mean the collective West, and now, NATO."*





President Vladimir Putin is welcomed at the Nagurskoye military base in the Russian Arctic



The Nagurskoye military base in the Russian Arctic

Militarisation of the increasingly ice-free and exposed border began in earnest in the 2010s. However, relations threatened to freeze when Russia adopted a much more aggressive stance. Common interests in the once cooperative Arctic states of the polar region are fracturing, primarily due to Moscow's provocative actions and policies, particularly its behaviour towards Ukraine since 2014 and continuing until the full-scale invasion of that country in February 2022.

## Emerging fault lines

Analysing contemporary Arctic geopolitics reveals the definition of intriguing new dividing lines. Where once coexistence prevailed throughout the region, Russia is increasingly isolated, while its adversaries are levelling up. With the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance through the accession of Finland and Sweden, the seven NATO states surrounding the Arctic Circle now form a solid united front, with Russia as the only outlier.

The once disparate, independent states have consolidated into a dynamic that essentially pits Russia against NATO. As the Kremlin displays more antagonism and the alliance tightens its ring around Russia's northern borderlands, the long-standing cooperative dynamic is now giving way to the demarcation of clearly opposing camps. In the future, interactions are likely to polarise along this emerging divide between Russia and the rest of the world unless steps are taken to rediscover common interests and mitigate escalating tensions between the erstwhile partners along the circumpolar passage.

Russia's growing militarisation in the Arctic is unmistakable. For years, a slow but steady process of regaining control over certain territories and consolidating its physical presence has been

underway. Existing military facilities have been reinforced and new airstrips have been built to accommodate larger and heavier aircraft should the Kremlin deem their deployment necessary.

However, it's important to distinguish between two facets of security in such an environment. 'Soft security' is primarily concerned with search and rescue operations and border protection, such as curbing illegal fishing or trafficking. In contrast, 'hard security' refers directly to military weapons and capabilities that can provide important information about the enemy.

As analyst Mathieu Boulègue points out, *"A defensive system can literally be turned into an offensive one just by the flick of a switch. Russia may not be seeking to escalate the situation for no reason, but in planning for all contingencies including defensive maneuvers, it is also planning for war."*



A map showing Russian territorial claims in the Arctic. The 200 nautical mile line from the coast is shown in black. Additional territorial claims by Russia are shown in grey

As Russia stealthily expands its military capabilities in the Arctic, uncertainty about its strategic intentions inevitably grows – requiring vigilance from all parties to prevent unintended crises in this newly accessible but volatile region.

## Thawing profits and perils as China steps in

After years of actively excluding China and other non-Arctic nations from the region, Russia's attitude has notably shifted. Previously, Moscow denied Chinese scientists access for research and also declined to assist Beijing in building icebreakers or obtaining related technical infrastructure. While Russia once firmly rejected China's involvement, recent developments suggest a change in approach. Given the setbacks related to the Ukraine campaign, Moscow seems to have eased its restrictive policy and is gradually permitting an expansion of Chinese presence and the transfer of capabilities rather than obstructing them.

This strategic adjustment signifies a significant geopolitical development and indicates Russia's willingness to leverage Sino-Russian cooperation across the previously tightly controlled Arctic border. After years of defining China's role in the polar region, Moscow's removal of barriers signals increased PRC engagement and potential challenges for traditional regional players observing this adaptive diplomatic shift.



Malte Humpert

The burgeoning friendship between Russia and China has paradoxically been favoured not only by sanctions, but also by the effects of climate

change, particularly melting sea ice. This ecological change has opened up a new trade route through the Russian Arctic, providing Russia with the opportunity to generate revenue and support its ongoing military activities despite the restrictions imposed by the sanctions.

Malte Humpert, is a senior fellow at the Arctic Institute in Washington DC, a think tank specialising in Arctic policies: *"There is the shipping route that goes along Russia's northern coastline, from Scandinavia in the west all the way to the Bering Strait, close to Alaska in the east. For transit shipping from Asia to Europe, this route is shorter by about 40% compared to transiting through the Suez Canal or the Panama Canal. While this route is not practicable in winter due to ice formations, it is clear for four or five months per year."*



The maritime aspect of the Polar Silk Road

But just to clarify this point, it should be noted that the volume of world trade that is handled via this route is still relatively low, although it is steadily increasing and has become a significant source of income for Russia which has the ability to collect fees and tolls from ships using this route.

According to Malte Humpert, the Arctic region overall accounts for around 20 per cent of Russia's GDP. However, there is some disagreement over this claim; the United States argues that Russia does not have the right to charge tolls, and many countries have decided to boycott this trade route since the invasion of Ukraine. But there are exceptions to this boycott, notably China, which continues to trade via the Arctic route.

For China, the Arctic represents a strategic alternative to vital but vulnerable trade routes. Beijing is heavily dependent on chokepoints such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Malacca, over which it has little control, and is aware of its vulnerability. Imagining the climatic conditions in a few decades, Chinese analysts foresee an even greater dilution of control.

As the earth continues to warm, more and more polar sea lanes will thaw, expanding shipping opportunities as ice sheets diminish. The melting of harbours holds hidden economic benefits for China's long-term prospects. The harsh Arctic climes may be imposing now, but they offer potential answers to emerging geopolitical pressures on globalised supply chains and oil imports.

This is how Malte Humpert characterises the relationship between Russia and China: *"China is definitely a benefactor of the sanctions; they receive more and more oil from the Russian*



Arctic and they are receiving it at a discount. They are paying about US\$ 6 less per barrel for Russian oil compared to Saudi oil. Russia has now replaced Saudi Arabia as the biggest provider of oil to China.

The melting ice in the Arctic has opened up new opportunities for Russia to explore and produce larger quantities of oil and gas than in the past. Russia is currently producing 40 per cent more oil in the Arctic than ten years ago. However, operating in the Arctic poses considerable challenges. The region is characterised by hostile conditions, including sub-zero temperatures, and is extremely isolated. In emergencies, it can take weeks or even months for help to arrive.

In addition, there is no existing infrastructure in the Arctic, so it has to be built from scratch, which makes operations in the Arctic a very costly endeavour. But as Malte Humpert explains, this is precisely where China once again comes into play: “China has invested heavily in those operations, including the liquefied natural gas project on the Yamal Peninsula situated in northwest Siberia. There is also the upcoming LNG 2 Project. But the irony here is that it took climate change to melt about 50 per cent of the ice, allowing more exploitation of oil and gas, causing more CO2 emissions! But for Russia, this really is a lifeblood.”

These new relations between Russia and China, two of the world's superpowers, might be perceived by some as threatening, and certainly something the US and Europe will be watching closely, particularly in the Nordic countries, all members of NATO.



The Russian Arctic tanker Mikhail at the Prirazlomnaya platform in the Pechora Sea

The Arctic-Atlantic Interconnection Zone, in which the five Nordic countries are located, serves as a vital link between the Arctic Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean and stretches from north to south. It is of strategic importance as it overlooks the eastern and western regions of the North American and European continents, respectively.

As the security of the United States is closely linked to this region, so it is seen as imperative for the US to prevent China from gaining a foothold or significant strength there.

However, China views the Nordic countries as the western terminus of its ‘Polar Silk Road’, a crucial component of China’s broader ‘Belt and Road’ initiative. Therefore, China has significant shipping, scientific and strategic interests in this

region as the ‘Polar Silk Road’ is of immense importance to China’s endeavours to improve connectivity and promote trade between Asia and Europe.



Chinese female border guard training in temperatures as low as -20° Celsius

## Rising tensions

Whatever China’s and Russia’s aims may be, as technological progress enables more efficient resource extraction in the Arctic and climate change causes ice cover to shrink, competition for influence and control in the region intensifies. Advances in the exploitation of fisheries, rare earths, oil and gas are leading to a race for resources that threatens future clashes.

Even among allies, minor disputes over territorial boundaries and transit rights on newly navigable waters continue as the legal framework fails to keep pace. Meanwhile, the Arctic states are expanding their military infrastructure, such as bases and patrols, to secure the burgeoning resources and transit routes, increasing tensions.

The environmental changes that are restructuring the geopolitical equation are leading to unintended security consequences that are difficult to predict. As access to natural resources changes and dependencies deepen, old disagreements could escalate into major rifts without careful co-operation. And as the thaw opens up once-frozen borders, outside powers are sure to probe vulnerabilities and fuel geopolitical jockeying.

To further complicate the situation, Russia has called for restrictive measures along the shipping route, including requiring foreign warships to give advance notice and obtain Russian authorisation before passing through. These measures restrict international access to the sea route and pose a challenge to the principles of freedom of navigation laid down in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

There are no easy solutions to secure fair access and sustainable development in this time of change. Vigilance and compromise will be required from all sides to manage tensions and prevent the growing strategic pressures of a warming climate from boiling over into open geopolitical conflict in the increasingly contested Arctic domain.

Although there is no centralised governing body in the Arctic, there are several loosely cooperating organisations. Of these, the Arctic Council, based in Washington DC, and to which the eight Arctic states belong, has proved to be the most successful forum. The Council’s work focuses on environmental monitoring, supporting indigenous communities and coordinating emergency response. However, it does not deal with national security issues.

There are numerous complex problems in the region that have the potential to escalate into conflict. Even among the allied nations, there are minor disagreements over territorial claims and navigational rights. In addition, the expansion of military bases and deployments poses a challenge, as some Arctic nations view them as essential to securing their resources and logistics networks. These factors contribute to the complicated dynamics and potential tensions in the region.



## Endangered frontline communities

Sensational headlines announcing a new cold war in the Arctic abound in international media. But analyst Mathieu Boulègue is more sceptical and believes that such declarations and analyses are too alarmist: “There are attention-grabbing headlines that should not be taken at face value. Cooperation remains, despite the current geopolitics when it comes to matters of, for instance, border management between Russia-Norway and Russia-

Finland...when it comes to search and rescue operations at sea. In the same spirit, Mikhail Gorbachev made a famous speech in 1987 in which he said that geopolitics should be laid aside in the Arctic because of the nature of the environment. Because of the fragility of the environment.”



Mikhail Gorbachev (left) and Ronald Reagan at the Reykjavik Summit in 1986

With his groundbreaking speech in Murmansk in 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev presented a visionary foreign policy concept aimed at changing the economic, ecological and security policy dynamics in the strategic and sensitive Arctic Circle.

In his speech in the icy northern Russian port city, the last Soviet prime minister wanted to transform the polar region from its status as a Cold War military hotspot into an internationally recognised zone of peace and cooperation between the Arctic powers. Known as the ‘Murmansk Initiative’, Gorbachev strove for a co-operative approach to the new challenges in the Arctic.

But those days of cooperative management in the Arctic are long gone, as even the small risks of renewed superpower rivalry weigh heavily on the communities most affected by climate impacts. Without cross-border cooperation, it will become increasingly difficult to jointly address the melting sea ice, opening new shipping lanes and fears of associated militarisation in this sensitive area.

The inhabitants of the Arctic are facing increasing change as a warming world restructures the opportunities and threats on their doorstep. But geopolitical upheavals are now isolating Russia’s borders from collective efforts to mitigate climate change, jeopardising populations who rely on mitigating emissions as much as possible.

The only balm could be unprecedented global action to reverse the warming of the atmosphere and renew the retreating ice shelves - a multi-generational task that revitalises the solidarity of scientific collaboration in the fight against the climate crisis. But even stabilising temperatures may not be enough if disputes outweigh goodwill across the ice margins, which are fraying into geopolitical control zones.

For the most vulnerable communities, restoring environmental co-operation is the most promising solution to hedge against the effects of rising tensions or a rapid thaw. Their voices are calling on leaders in the North to rise to the growing challenges and break down the barriers in our shared cryosphere.

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# LYING FOR A LIVING - THE PUTIN WAY

## How Putin uses disinformation to cement his control

The writer George Orwell once said: “In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act”. Perhaps that’s why you won’t hear much truth coming out of Moscow these days. Vladimir Putin has effectively banned it; he doesn’t like revolutionary acts, I suppose. Perhaps that’s why he hates Vladimir Lenin, who was a revolutionary. He really should remember what radicalised Lenin and stopped him from being a lover of hunting, fishing, chess, and the English classics. It was when his brother was executed in 1887. Putin should bear in mind that when he deliberately causes the death of rivals, such as Aleksei Navalny, who died in an Arctic prison colony, where he’d been sent as a punishment for not agreeing with Putin. After all, whatever the Kremlin’s current occupant may think, people still queue every day for a ticket to visit Lenin’s mausoleum. They still admire the man who effectively invented Bolshevism. They’re unlikely to flock to a memorial for Vladimir Putin, although some have thrown eggs at his propaganda posters. For his part, Putin has thrown metaphorical eggs at Europe’s legitimate political parties. That’s why top EU diplomat Josep Borrell has issued a warning about the huge volume of disinformation on Europe pouring out of Russia as the elections draw near.

The elections are due in June but even before the end of January, a dedicated EU task force had investigated some 750 incidents of deliberately misleading information being spread across Europe by “foreign agents”, normally Russian. Most concerned Ukraine, but there were attacks, too, on the United States, Germany and Poland. The European External Action Service has identified attacks on the EU itself, but also on NATO and on trustworthy news sources like Deutsche Welle, Reuters and Euronews. The Russian lie-spreaders don’t like citizens accessing genuine sources of true news.



© CYBER POLICE UKRAINE  
An Ukrainian law enforcement agent dismantling a bot farm spreading Russian propaganda over social media

It’s not just lies, either; three weeks after Israel launched its attack on the Gaza Strip, following the vicious attack and hostage-taking by the Hamas terrorist group, the people of Paris awoke to find, especially Moldovans spray-painted all over the city. French investigators established that they were the work of Russia, sometimes acting through agents in Russia’s pay. Russia has not been blamed for every act of disinformation, some of which was clearly aimed at stirring up hatred over refugees and a housing shortage. Tommaso Canetta, who works for the Italian

fact-checking organisation, Pagella Politica, says he’s most worried about “disinformation just before the elections that attacks the Green Deal or the pandemic plan.”



Russia started its disinformation warfare back in 2014, when it pioneered its so-called “bot farms” to spread false information about its invasion of Crimea. In February, Viginum, the French foreign information watchdog, said it had uncovered preparations for a massive disinformation campaign in France, Germany, Poland and other European countries, linked partially to the second anniversary of Vladimir Putin’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and to the upcoming European elections. Viginum found 193 websites, which it has given the code name “Portal Combat”, and more than fifty of them are new, putting out news in French, German, Polish and English. Mainly, the sites redistribute false news about the war in Ukraine. It’s all about destabilisation, but it threatens to upset the real voting intentions of citizens and distort the result. Viginum said it had found some 1,095 bots on the “X” (formerly Twitter) site, publishing 2,589 postings, cloning familiar Western websites linked to a Russian internet site, ironically and misleadingly entitled “Recent Reliable News.” It is not at all reliable and is packed with lies.

France fears it is Moscow’s favourite target, trying to stir up dissent and undermining French backing for Ukraine while supporting Marine Le Pen of the far right, who receives financial backing from Russia, as several far right politicians do. France, Germany and Poland have recently accused Russia of assembling a network of pro-Russian websites aimed at undermining governments. They are determined to stop this divisive attack by Russia that is intended to prevent free and fair election in Europe. Russia has used the network to suggest that Zelensky has lost the support of his long-term Western allies, which simply isn’t true, but Putin cares nothing about truth, of course. The European powers are expecting Russia’s dishonest and dishonourable campaign to accelerate as the elections draw nearer. Any propaganda you see, whoever it claims to be from, should be checked very thoroughly as regards to its real origin.

All news outlets in Russia are controlled by the Kremlin. What the Kremlin says is seldom



true and usually unpleasant. For six nights each week, there is a television programme of political chatter, chaired by Vladimir Solovyov, a leading voice in Russian propaganda. Mostly, the talk is to belittle Ukraine and its allies and debating what Russia can do. Solovyov suggested that one option could be to “turn the world to dust”, by which we must assume he’s advocating the use of nuclear weapons on every country outside Russia. That would clearly be a very drastic move that would invite the arrival of similar bombs from the Western allies. When Russian victory, is invariably reported by Russian television news reports that the defeated place has been “liberated from the neo-Nazis”. It’s said with conviction, even though the only neo-Nazi involved in the war works in the Kremlin. .

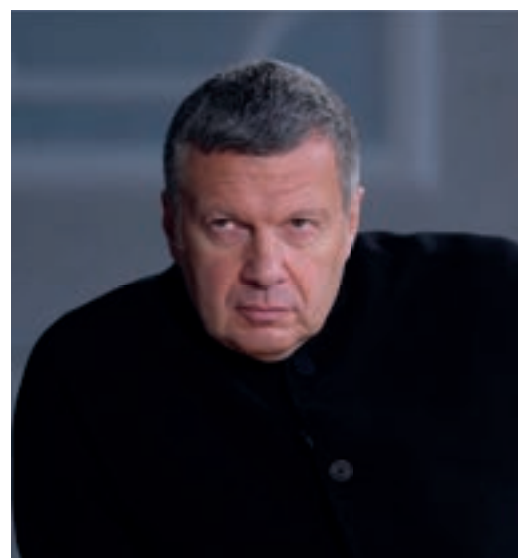
Putin’s untrue stories are repeated in Russia’s “newspapers”, which are really simple propaganda sheets. TV news reports often mock Ukraine’s President Zelensky and talk of UK President Joe Biden’s declining mental health. It should be embarrassing to Russians, but since they are only ever told lies, they don’t realise how fake their supposed “news” really is. Putin is, to put it bluntly, a liar, and he orders the people he controls to lie, too. Among the nonsensical stories that are often repeated, Russian media insists that the sanctions imposed by Western nations are causing hardship in the West, but not in Russia. That said, most news coverage (a lot of it untrue, too) is about the war in Ukraine and how brave Russian soldiers are standing up to what the media calls “Ukrainian fascism”. We must assume that Putin and his propagandists don’t actually know what fascism is. In case that’s true, here is the Wikipedia definition: “Fascism is a far-right, authoritarian, ultranationalist political ideology and movement, characterized by a dictatorial leader, centralized autocracy, militarism, forcible suppression of opposition, belief in a natural social hierarchy, subordination of individual interests for the perceived good of the nation or race, and strong regimentation of society and the economy.” It sounds rather like Russia under Putin, in fact.



Vladimir Putin visiting the Russia Today broadcasting centre

The New Yorker reports that a historian from Yale, Timothy Snyder, has coined the expression “schizo-fascism”, to describe actual fascists who call their enemies “fascists”, like Putin. He has also pointed out that Putin has adopted a tactic used by Adolf Hitler: tell a lie so outrageous that the cost of refuting it is simply too much for most people. For instance, Putin claims that “Jews

are the worst antisemites”, which is rather like saying that giants are the smallest people. Solovyov has described Zelensky as “a supposed Jew”. The whole thing would be funny were it not for the fact that Putin uses these ridiculous lies to explain his “brave” action against the supposed fascists running Ukraine. Now, with European elections coming up, Putin is using his propaganda machine to spread falsehoods in the hope of influencing the outcome. He does not believe in democracy, but he firmly believes in disrupting it to get the result he wants.



Volodymyr Solovyov

## Truth and lies, sleep well

Putin began his first presidential term, back in 2000, with a state takeover of Russia’s leading privately-owned television channel. Within a few years, all broadcast television, even local stations, were under state control. News outlets are not allowed to criticise the President, nor can they question the logic of the way in which Putin’s unholy war against Ukraine is being conducted. When (if!) Russia ever gets rid of Putin it will take years for the Russian people to learn and to understand what is really happening in the world. We must assume they actually believe the utter nonsense Putin trots out as fact. His influence has always been entirely malign, and it seems to be getting worse. In Russia, there is no such thing as “free speech”; Putin has signed into law a rule that criminalises any reporting that contradicts the Russian government’s point of view. Russian television insists that Russian troops are always well-mannered (they’re not) and that the Ukrainian people greet them as “liberators”. Of course that’s untrue, but then state media is not permitted to mention Russia’s bombing of Kyiv while it must also claim that Ukraine has suffered

no civilian casualties. It’s so utterly ridiculous that it would be amusing if Putin’s words didn’t cause so much death and destruction. The media are not allowed to use the words “war” or “invasion”, either.

Many who follow (and who actually understand) what Putin means say that we in the West simply don’t “get” him. After all, whatever we may think of him, he is still one of the most important people in the world, even if he is threatening to turn the world to ash. Navalny spent years denouncing the corruption he saw in Putin’s government. But it is true that we in the West, including our politicians, journalists and academics, have made little attempt to understand the man behind the myths. In his excellent and often quite surprising book, “We Need to Talk About Putin”, Mark Galeotti says that the West gets him wrong. This may well be true, perhaps we’ve been unfair. But he kills people.



Mark Galeotti, a British expert on Russian issues, speaking to BalkanInsight

He also says that Western “disrespect” for Russia is one of the problems. He seems to think that only Russians suffered death or hardship in the Second World War, which is nonsense, of course. The popular singer Semyon Slepakov composed what he called a “lullaby”, which attracted more than two million views on social media. Its words, however, are very controversial and have angered some. Indeed, it’s hard to believe that anyone could have anything but contempt for someone who could assemble such hate-filled lines just to demonise the people you’re busy killing. The opening lines are:

“Don’t cry, little one;  
Don’t fear the wolves and storms.  
We have a much worse enemy,  
The Ukrainian Nazis.  
They’re the cause of all our troubles,  
If not for them. We could live in peace.”  
Alternatively, Russia could simply stop attacking

its neighbours, but that option seems not to have occurred to Slepakov, nor to Putin and his lickspittle toadies. Russia’s claims that it never harms civilians, that its troops are invariably polite and that Ukrainian people welcome them with open arms as “liberators” are, of course, complete nonsense. Or, to put it another way, they are simply more of Putin’s endless stream of self-serving lies. He and his minions believe themselves to be invincible.

## Save money and money will save you (possibly...)

In some ways, Putin has correctly assessed Western attitudes to life. In the West, money rules. Most of the decisions the governments take are, at the root of it, about cash. A proposal by UK Foreign Secretary (and former Prime Minister) Lord David Cameron to seize Russian assets in the City of London in order to fund the rebuilding of Ukraine is being fiercely opposed by influential (or extremely rich, if you prefer) bankers in the city. These financiers are said to be worried that a seizure of funds by the state could “damage trust” among clients who may relocate their wealth to another financial hub. Lord Cameron spoke of a “moral and economic” case to seize £250-billion (€291.65-billion) of assets held in Western banks. Of which £26-billion (€30.33-billion) is held in the UK.

Perhaps more defensible as an argument is the banks’ supposed fear that some of the seized assets could be used to top up Treasury coffers, rather than to help Ukraine. Even the bankers doubt the motivation of bankers. They should remember the words of Bob Dylan: “All the money you made will never buy back your soul”. But of course, Dylan was hardly a poor man. Neither, I understand, is Putin.

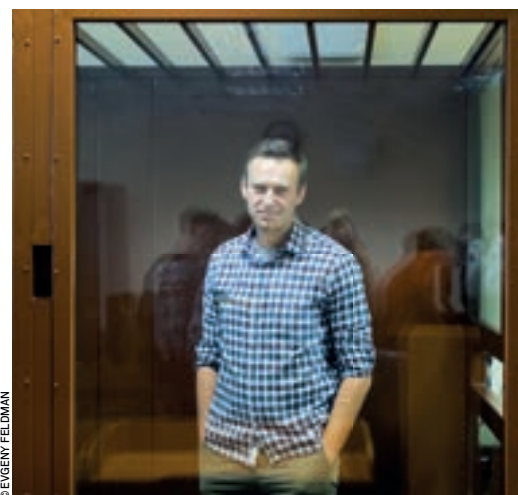


Russian President Vladimir Putin and UK Prime Minister David Cameron flying over the Sochi Olympic stadium by helicopter in 2013

Putin still seems to adhere to that ancient belief, dating back to when we all lived in caves and hunted mammoths, that physical strength equates to the qualities needed for leadership. “With clocklike regularity,” writes Professor Brian Klaas, in his book about power and its misuse, “Corruptible”, “Vladimir



Putin releases photos of himself shirtless on a horse, practising judo, or performing some other warrior show of strength.” It seems an odd thing for a supposed leader to do. “Those signals can be effective,” he continues, “because our Stone Age brains still link some perceptions of leadership to physical size.” Needless to say, size and strength are in no way related to an ability to govern well and take good decisions. Otherwise, we could replace all those mathematicians and physicists with wrestlers on the grounds that their strength and ability to twist people’s arms up their backs was just as sound a qualification for running a country as having a good brain. But of course, Russia has never known true democracy, nor really understood the notion of letting the people choose their own leaders to run their country and take decisions. Putin has never understood the notion and sadly never will. That’s why it’s not a recipe for long life and happiness to openly defy the man. He deals with any would-be opponents in a terminal way.



Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in a cage at a District Court in Moscow

You only have to look at what he has had done to the dissident Alexie Navalny, murdered during a 19-year sentence in a prison camp inside the Arctic Circle just for disagreeing with Putin. Navalny’s widow has sworn to carry on his fight, but it will have to be from outside Russia, or she won’t see out this year. Putin is not only a tyrant, he’s a murderer.

Putin had long been an admirer of the KGB, Russia’s infamous secret intelligence service. He had wanted to join up, seeing himself as a Soviet James Bond, chasing down and shooting the enemies of Bolshevism. He blamed Lenin for “creating” Ukraine on what had previously been Russian land. On TV, he described Lenin as its “creator and architect,” by giving in to nationalism. The people living there had not been consulted, but then re-attributing land to powers other than the obvious is something he should know about, having done much the same himself.

He should recall Lenin’s words in 1919 about how to deal with troublesome leaders. “In England and France,” he wrote, “they executed their kings some centuries ago, but we were late with ours.” Putin himself seems to regard his unique form of one-man government as the best way to rule his country. Certainly, it sets aside arguments. It’s one man, one vote; and he is the one man, of course.

## I Do as you’re told!

Putin retains close links with his old friends and comrades in the KGB and its successors. His own background is strange, having been raised in a single room in a cramped and overcrowded communal apartment in Leningrad, that lacked a bath and even access to hot water. According to Putin, Ukraine has in reality been a part of Russia for centuries. It was, he argues, the artificial creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and then the subsequent breakup of the USSR in 1991 that led to the “historical mistake”, as he calls it, of Ukraine becoming an independent state when, he claimed, it had never been one originally. Such is history; in Russia’s case, it’s somewhat malleable.

Much of the debate centres on Chekism (Чекизм), a type of governance in the old Soviet Union in which the police and security services had ultimate control of everything. Wikipedia explains it very well as: “the underlying ideology that promotes and popularizes political police violence and arbitrariness against real and imagined enemies of the state.” Apparently, Putin is still very keen on it. He remained in the KGB for seventeen years and never really left it. According to Mark Galeotti’s book, Putin once met with US Senator John McCain. After meeting Putin, McCain said he’d looked Putin in the eyes, where he’d seen three things: “a K, a G, and a B.” There was nothing else there. As far as Putin was concerned, it seems, the entire world was and remains Russia’s enemy.



Vladimir Putin’s Stasi identification card when he was assigned as a KGB agent in Dresden in 1985

For Putin, it will always be an ongoing war against the West. There can be no rapprochement as long as Russia and the West view the world so differently. From Putin’s viewpoint, Russians are always the good guys. That is not to view of the Poles. In 1939, thousands of them were crowded onto packed train with no food, little water and no sanitation, for a long ride to a forced labour camp in Siberia to cut down trees. The Russians may have

forgotten about it, but the Poles haven’t. In Putin’s version of the world, it’s we Westerners who are so irredeemably wicked. On Solovyov’s television programme, Putin was asked about the likelihood of nuclear war and replied: “If they start a nuclear war, we will respond. But we, being righteous people, will go straight to Heaven, while they will just croak.” It’s a very strange and horribly one-sided view of global politics (just ask the Poles!). Of course, all television broadcasts in Russia are controlled by the state, with supposedly rival stations broadcasting virtually identical newscasts, running the same stories in the same way and in the same order. Truth has no place on Russian media, with supposedly Ukrainian war prisoners confessing to raping Russian women and murdering their husbands.



Giovanni Zagni

Disinformation and outright lies are already being broadcast ready for the European elections later this year and many, many more are on the way as Putin steps up his campaign. Russian government officials constantly and falsely portray Russia as a perpetual victim and its aggressive actions as no more than a response forced upon them by the United States and its democratic partners and allies. Russia also broadcasts made-up nonsense about LGBTQ+ issues and has accused US operatives of seeking to influence various elections, albeit in not quite the determined and well-organised manner chosen in Moscow. Those elections in Europe will be fair and correct, but they won’t be reported that way by a Russian media devoted to distorting truth. The Russian news reports distributed in Turkey claimed fraud with regard to religion and there were also claims (untrue, of course) that a minority party would be excluded from parliamentary elections in Montenegro. There were false claims about voter fraud in Spain and also claims of ballot tampering, deliberate miscounting of votes and various other activities, all of the reports penned by Russian agents. The Russians also had a hand in helping Britain’s Conservatives win the vote to leave the EU, saying Britain would save £350-million (€409,47-million) each week by leaving the Union. Britain is still counting the cost.

We can certainly anticipate a continuation of Putin-style lies in the run-up to European elections. He clearly sees no shame in simply misleading people; the truth means nothing to him, which is a shame. Russia used to be an honourable country. Topics expected to crop up, severely distorted, include the war in Ukraine, issues surrounding immigration and refugees and climate change, in which Russia seems not to believe. The chair of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) is Giovanni Zagni, and among the fake news items he has identified is one on Russian television claiming that the US is releasing diseased birds in Russia to spread disease. Another report on Russia state television claimed

that Zelensky was drunk and had lost his mind. In real life, Putin should be arrested for putting out misinformation, but he won’t be, of course. Similar stories have also appeared on one British TV network that seems sympathetic to the Kremlin. It’s not easy to counter. “A lot of communications between users has moved towards closed groups and private chats,” warns Zagni, “and those channels are largely outside the possibility of monitoring what is going on there.” The safest thing to do, perhaps, is simply to conclude that any story with a Russian origin is almost certainly untrue. NATO concedes that Russia’s constant disinformation campaign poses a threat. “Russia wants to establish spheres of influence and control other countries,” it warns, “through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means – including disinformation – against NATO Allies and partners.”



A complimentary educational poster issued by Prestwick House, cautioning against the spread of misinformation

Russia media reports that NATO is at war with Russia in Ukraine. This is untrue. Russia claims NATO has broken its promise not to expand. No such promise was ever made. Russia claims NATO deployments threaten Russia, but they don’t. NATO has suspended cooperation with Russia over its attack on Ukraine but remains open to dialogue. Russia is a great country, with a great history. Sadly, it currently suffers under the deceptive and totally dishonest leadership of a man who only seeks glory for himself. We must ignore everything he says, because it’s almost certainly untrue.

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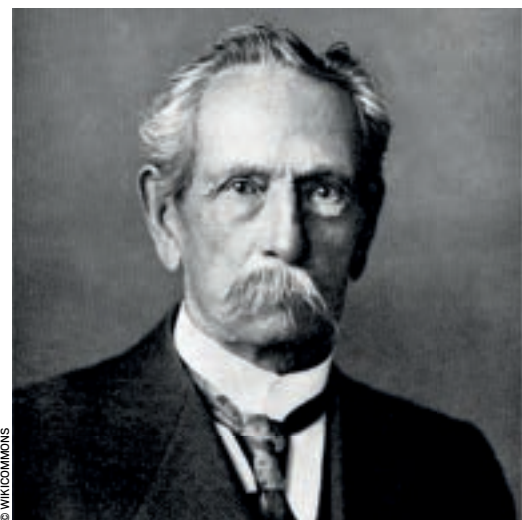
## GOING GREEN

Europe leads the global  
push for electric mobility



Since Karl Benz designed the first functional automobile in 1885, we have seen remarkable progress in the world of cars. They have become smarter, faster and more affordable and are no longer the preserve of the elite. However, the proliferation of cars has also raised the pressing issue of pollution. The transport sector, including cars, is one of the main contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in the European Union.

Reducing emissions from vehicles is therefore seen as crucial to achieving the EU's ambitious climate neutrality targets. In recent decades, alternatives have been sought to fossil fuels, which are not only harmful to the environment, but will also eventually be exhausted and run out. Humanity needs alternative and renewable options.



Karl Benz

Although the first electric car was invented more than a century ago, Elon Musk and his company Tesla Motors have played a crucial role in the spread of electric vehicles and driven the global transition to sustainable transport.

Tesla revolutionised the electric car industry by introducing the first modern and commercially successful electric vehicle. The company pioneered the use of lithium-ion batteries and gained international recognition. The Tesla Roadster, launched in 2008, was an important milestone as it was Tesla's first mass-produced car and paved the way for the company's rapid growth. Until very recently, Tesla was the world's largest manufacturer of electric vehicles with a market valuation of over US\$ 660 billion. However, in 2023, a conglomerate of Chinese manufacturing companies led by BYD officially overtook Tesla in terms of sales figures. BYD has seen significant growth, almost doubling its sales last year. China has a robust domestic electric vehicle industry with various manufacturers such as NIO, BYD, XPeng Motors and others. These companies produce a wide range of electric cars, including cheaper models compared to their competitors.



China accounts for nearly 60% of EV sales worldwide. 25% of New Car Sales in China are 100% electric.

The Chinese government has actively supported the introduction of electric vehicles to reduce air pollution in major cities and reduce dependence on traditional fossil fuels. Chinese manufacturers have the advantage of lower labour costs, government incentives, subsidies and supportive policies, as well as seamless integration into the local market. In response to these favourable conditions, several international car manufacturers, including Tesla, have set up production facilities in China to benefit from the same local production advantages.

Tesla quickly gained international popularity due to a unique combination of factors. Its electric cars were characterised by a modern and futuristic design, coupled with the integration of innovative technologies, smart business strategies and a growing market demand for sustainable transport. Tesla's first models, such as the Model S and Model X, wowed consumers with their impressive performance, long electric range and cutting-edge technology.

In response to the growing demand from European consumers for environmentally-friendly alternatives to conventional cars, Tesla emerged as a satisfactory solution. Recognising the need, the company invested in building an extensive and convenient charging network across Europe and the US, addressing a common concern of potential electric vehicle buyers. The charismatic leader of Tesla, Elon Musk, gained a lot of media attention for his actions and statements, which were often controversial and widely discussed. This helped to consolidate Tesla's enthusiastic fan base in Europe and worldwide.



Elon Musk

The high demand for Tesla cars led to long waiting lists. Over time, however, Tesla's electric vehicles proved their value to consumers, receiving favourable reviews and awards for their innovation, safety and performance. With the increasing popularity of electric vehicles, Tesla expanded its product range to include more affordable models such as the Model 3, which is very popular with Europeans.

Tesla challenged the traditional car manufacturers and captured the attention of European consumers. Tesla's resounding success served as a catalyst for other car manufacturers to enter the emerging electric vehicle market and compete for a share. Over time, more and more car brands recognised the potential of electric vehicles and included them in their product portfolio to appeal to specific customer segments. As of 2022, the Volkswagen Group emerged as the leading car manufacturer in Europe, having sold over 349,100 new electric vehicles. (source: Statista.com).

However, Tesla continues to assert its dominant position in the European electric car market. The latest data shows that Tesla's Model Y SUV has sold more than 71,000 units, putting it in the top spot. The Model 3 follows closely behind with almost 20,000 units sold. In third place is the Volkswagen ID.3, which recorded an impressive increase of 105% compared to the previous year, while the ID.4, another Volkswagen model, and the Dacia Spring occupy fourth place with over 14,000 units sold and an increase of 56%. The Dacia Spring, known for its affordability, has gained popularity among urban electric car buyers.



Dacia Spring Extreme built in China's Hubei province starts at 20,800 euros

In recent years, the market for electric cars in Europe has experienced remarkable growth and development. Various factors have played a crucial role in the strong consumer demand for electric vehicles in the region. One important factor is the proactive engagement of governments in European countries where governments have introduced incentives such as tax rebates, subsidies and free parking to make electric vehicles financially attractive to consumers despite their

initially high prices. In Finland, for example, electric vehicles are exempt from registration tax until 2025, and road tax and charging infrastructure for electric vehicles were subsidised by up to 35% until December 2022.

Denmark has introduced electricity tax reductions specifically aimed at promoting the use of commercial electric vehicles. In addition, it has reduced registration fees for electric vehicles by 60% to further incentivise their purchase and use. In Sweden, the government grants subsidies that cover up to 50% of the purchase and installation costs for charging stations.

In an effort to make the installation of charging stations more financially viable while increasing supply and reducing charging costs, the Dutch government has introduced an energy tax rebate for charging stations until 2024. Iceland, the country with the second highest number of registered electric vehicles in 2023, sources all of its electricity from fully renewable sources. This has enabled Iceland to provide low-cost electricity, a key factor that has favoured faster adoption of electric vehicles by citizens.



A Tesla Supercharger station with ten posts

Norway tops the list of countries with the highest proportion of electric vehicles in their vehicle fleet in 2023 with 91.3 %. This is largely due to the fact that Norway introduced a comprehensive package of coordinated, consistent support measures for electric vehicles starting in the 1990s - over a decade earlier than other countries. The country continues to incentivise EV drivers by halving tolls on roads and car parks. Almost all European Union member states now offer some form of fiscal incentive to expand their electric vehicle markets, albeit with their own individual policies and strategies. Only six EU countries - Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Malta, Latvia and Slovakia - have not directly subsidised the purchase of electric vehicles, although many of them still provide tax breaks or exemptions for the purchase of new EVs to stimulate their markets.

Several countries are incentivising companies to electrify their vehicle fleets through tax breaks, subsidies or discounted charging facilities. Owners of electric vehicle are often entitled to free or reduced motorway tolls, parking spaces or bridge tolls. In some areas, EVs are given access to the lanes for high-occupancy vehicles (HOVs), which shortens journey times. Many EU countries have passed laws requiring the inclusion of charging infrastructure in the planning of new buildings. The expansion of charging facilities is crucial for the widespread acceptance of electric vehicles. Significant investment is being made across Europe to expand the network of charging stations, including fast charging facilities, to improve the usability of EVs for daily use.



However, there are signs that these concessions are gradually disappearing or diminishing as governments across Europe consider EVs to be sufficiently mainstream and uptake increases, meaning that fewer tax concessions are required. However, this approach risks unintended consequences. Many people have a strong attachment to their vehicle and are reluctant to give up tradition for the sake of modernity or environmental protection.

Many EU Member States have introduced scrappage schemes to incentivise the exchange of older, polluting vehicles for new electric vehicles. From 1992, a number of Euro standards were introduced in the EU to limit emissions from conventional cars, thereby reducing pollution and encouraging car manufacturers to produce more environmentally friendly vehicles. The standards have gradually evolved and now drastically restrict the access of many highly polluting vehicles in the centres of major European cities, which is another reason to consider buying an electric car.



An infographic on the website of the UK Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders

From the initial EURO 1, we have now reached the EURO 7 standard for new cars. *"The Euro 7 standards rules will be the first worldwide emission standards to move beyond regulating exhaust pipe emissions and set additional limits for particulate emissions from brakes and rules on micro plastic emissions from tyres, to apply to all vehicles, including electric ones. The new rules will regulate the durability of batteries installed in cars and vans in order to increase consumer confidence in electric vehicles. This will also reduce the need for replacing batteries early in the life of a vehicle, thus reducing the need for new critical raw materials required to produce batteries."* (source: ec. Europa.eu)

Environmental protection is gaining in importance for many Europeans. As a result, consumer preferences are changing towards more sustainable and environmentally friendly modes of transport, including electric vehicles. The cost of fossil fuels in Europe has traditionally been relatively high and subject to major fluctuations, especially in recent years. Combined with the lower running costs of electric cars, this factor increases their attractiveness.

Car manufacturers across Europe and around the world have recently introduced a variety of electric vehicle models to meet every consumer need. Battery-powered cars were the third-most popular choice for buyers last year, ahead of diesel vehicles. According to the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association ([www.acea.auto](http://www.acea.auto)) the market share of fully electric cars in the European Union was 14.6% in 2023. Large car markets in Europe such as Germany, France and Spain recorded particularly high electric car shares. Only four EU countries - Cyprus, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia - recorded a share of electric vehicles of less than 5% of their total fleet. (source: [eea.europa.eu](http://eea.europa.eu)).



The Volkswagen ID.4

Nevertheless, EV sales fell in December 2023 compared to the previous December 2022, especially in Europe's largest car market, Germany. While recession risks are looming across Europe due to financial and economic instability, EV sales could reflect this volatility. Overall, however, the number of e-cars has increased significantly. The German Volkswagen Group has established itself as one of the most popular brands for electric vehicles in Europe. This result was in some ways to be expected, as Germany leads the way in Europe with almost 1.5 million registered electric vehicles. Surprisingly, the Skoda Enyaq was the best-selling electric car manufacturer in Germany last year.

Electric vehicles are also gaining ground in freight and passenger transport. In the last ten years, app-based shuttle and ride-sharing services have emerged that utilise electric cars, such as Uber Green and Green Mobility. In addition, major delivery companies such as FedEx and Amazon have converted large parts of their delivery fleets to electric cars. These changes in the economy have contributed to an increasing demand for electric commercial vehicles.



The Berlin-Brandenburg Tesla Gigafactory will manufacture hundreds of thousands of Model Y vehicles and millions of battery cells

Bloomberg has forecast that the market for electric vehicles will reach 8.09 trillion euros by 2030. In the European Union, almost half of all new passenger car registrations between January and November 2023 were electric cars. In general,

young professionals, educated millennials and Generation Z are the main target group for electric vehicle manufacturers, as 18 to 44-year-olds are much more inclined to buy electric vehicles. In 2024, sales in the European electric car market are estimated at around €168 billion and are expected to increase by 12.11% year-on-year from 2024 to 2028. However, while electric car sales continue to rise, car dealers have observed a slowdown in growth in recent months. This slump is due to economic conditions in many EU countries as well as the discontinuation of various purchase incentives previously offered by European governments for buyers and owners of electric vehicles.

However, the once-novel electric vehicles are quickly becoming a ubiquitous sight on the roads. The acceptance of electric cars as a means of transport is increasing, especially on the European continent but also in countries such as Japan and Korea. China has also become a major player when it comes to electric vehicles. In 2023, 25% of all cars sold in China were electric-powered, generating sales that exceeded total global sales in the rest of the world.

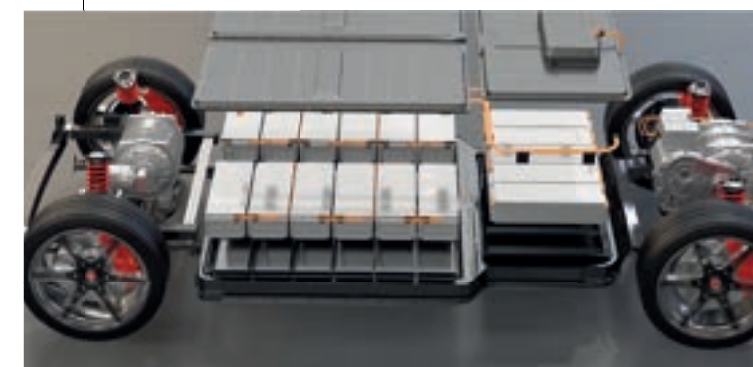


According to EV Chinese manufacturer Nio, the € 2,500,000 EP 9 two-seat sports car is "One of the fastest electric cars in the World"

In a departure from the early, purely commuter-oriented commercial electric vehicles, electric vehicles now offer sufficient range for longer journeys. However, the high manufacturing costs, especially for batteries, which drive up the purchase price, remain a key challenge for electric vehicle manufacturers. To overtake conventional cars, vehicle manufacturers need to find more efficient and cost-effective production alternatives while developing batteries with faster charging capabilities - another factor that makes consumers hesitant when considering buying an electric car. Billions of euros have been earmarked for investment to achieve these goals by 2030. At the same time, replacements are being sought for certain rare minerals currently found in standard car batteries, some of which are of strategic importance or are becoming geopolitical bargaining chips.

With the increase in sales of new electric vehicles, the supply of used electric cars is also growing. However, the used car market for electric cars is still less attractive than that for conventional

used vehicles. According to an analysis by iSeeCars.com, electric vehicles depreciate faster than any other type of vehicle, losing on average around 49% of their value after just five years. This is mainly due to rapid technological advances that make electric vehicles obsolete, as well as adjustments to account for the diminishing value of tax incentives over time.



Cutaway of EV, showing the battery modules

In electric vehicles, the battery is an important and cost-intensive component. Therefore, many consumers are reluctant to buy a used electric vehicle if they have no certainty about the quality and remaining life of the battery. Although EV batteries are typically designed to last 10 to 20 years, certain factors can shorten this period. For example, batteries can degrade more quickly in hotter climates where air conditioning systems are exposed to additional stresses. To reassure used car buyers, many manufacturers now offer extended warranties for batteries. In some European countries, it is also possible to transfer government incentives to buyers of used electric vehicles. However, the total cost of a used electric car is still significantly higher than that of comparable gasoline-powered vehicle, with a used electric car costing around €36,000 on average at the end of 2023.

Furthermore, the supply of used EVs is limited overall due to the nascent nature of the electric vehicle sector. For example, of the 1.4 million used cars offered for sale on mobile.de, Germany's largest online car marketplace, around 5.5% are used electric vehicles, a significantly below-average market share compared to gasoline-powered cars.

Even with the obvious environmental benefits of electric vehicles, some remain skeptical; they believe that the destruction of batteries reflects the manufacturing requirements, which are very resource-intensive. Proponents of alternatives such as fuel cell cars argue that technologies such as hydrogen could soon rival and possibly even surpass battery electric vehicles.

Despite lingering doubts, forecasts for electric vehicles in Europe remain encouraging as the continent continues to push ahead with its ambitious vision of a sustainable transport system. The tightening of emissions standards across the EU, coupled with continued innovation, promises to dramatically reshape the sector through this definitive, industry-wide transition.

The widespread adoption of electric vehicles promises significant environmental benefits and economic stimulus through job creation. As more and more European cities commit to carbon neutrality and enact increasingly stringent emissions policies, electric cars seem ideally suited to provide cleaner, greener transport and position the continent as the global vanguard of the EV revolution.

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# FROM MYTH TO REALITY

## Icarus, flying cars and the paradox of mobility

Imagine the following scenario: You are in the Rue de la Loi in Brussels, sitting in a taxi. You think of your colleague in Paris, who is no doubt experiencing the same frustrating situation on the ring road at the Porte d'Italie. Meanwhile, your other colleague in London is still 10 minutes away from St-Pancras station, where he has an appointment at 11am.

As if that weren't enough, your eldest daughter, a student, is stuck in the traffic chaos of St-Julien-en-Genevois, desperately trying to get to the University of Geneva. And then there's your eldest son, an entrepreneur in Fort Lauderdale, USA, who hops effortlessly from one business meeting to the next in his own small Piper aircraft.

But here you sit, stuck in your immobile taxi and ask yourself a question that baffles you: where is everyone speeding off to in their cars?

The enduring myth of Icarus has captivated mankind throughout history and awakened the collective desire to take to the skies, to leave the earthly world and enter the realm of the gods - to fly, to be precise. As technology has advanced, we have come to believe that our remarkable human ingenuity would allow us personal access to this utopia, so that each of us could own our own flying car and experience complete autonomy in the skies.

And all of a sudden, boom! You witnessed what awaited us in 2023; endless queues, millions of wasted working hours in utterly ridiculous traffic jams, a society gone mad in which it now takes almost twice as long to get anywhere as it did at the beginning of the century, an

increasingly hectic global race for access to a handful of fake paradises for tourists. In short, absurd means of transport that resemble a mad rush forwards. This is also reflected in the violent behaviour of most drivers, who are losing patience.

The Dutch GPS company, TomTom, which is known worldwide for its navigation devices, shared its findings on traffic volumes and congestion in French cities. Paris took first place nationwide, and came in at 37<sup>th</sup> place in the global rankings. It was closely followed by Marseille, Toulon, Bordeaux, and Lyon, with Nice in sixth place also experiencing significant congestion.

The statistics on rail transport are similarly eloquent. Recent reports from the SNCF, the French national railway company, show that journey times for 500 kilometres within France have increased by around half an hour.

Car journeys on the motorways also take longer on average per hour today than they did 40 years ago. This does not take into account the slightest weather event such as snow or ice that can lead to road closures.

Air travel has almost doubled every 10 years (except during Covid), but boarding times have increased by

200%, meaning they now take three times as long.

In a very different context and in a completely opposite way, the fabulous development of communication technologies has enormously reduced the need for business travel to conduct meetings around the globe: with FaceTime, Zoom and other tools, it is now possible to hold very high-quality meetings without leaving home.

And what can we deduce from all these paradoxes? That the advances in digital technology, combined with the rise of individualistic capitalism on a global scale have created a highly fragmented multipolar system. This extends to the smallest components of society - individuals and their personal connections enabled by mobile devices and subscriptions.

The core meaning of the term mobility has changed considerably. Whereas it used to stand for freedom, today it means something different. While economic thinking envisaged the liberation of man by enabling limitless movement through space, the dream of the modern individual is exactly the opposite - it is to "have space"

The perspective has shifted. Instead of constantly travelling across continents like the mythological Icarus, a realistic view now suggests anchoring oneself in one's living space, be it an upper-floor duplex, a remote ranch with technological connectivity or a high-tech chalet in the Alps. While away from the general public, such facilities provide direct access to digital networks.

But what are we to make of all this...?

### The flying car... the flying taxi

This form of public transport, newly developed in some Gulf states, seems to be well suited to meeting the need for fast inner-city transport.

Once completely unimaginable in the last century, this type of transport has a promising future, provided that the technology can conclusively prove its safety.

The first "modern" flying car, the XPENG X2 "Carbon Bird", was unveiled at the 2022 Dubai Motor Show. It completed its first public flight, soaring vertically to a height of 10 metres for 90 seconds with no one on board. According to the specifications, the XPENG X2 can carry two passengers for 35 minutes at a speed of up to 130 km/h. The commercial launch is planned for 2025 at the earliest.

Traffic and transportation challenges for travellers within the Paris region have long been a major issue. As early as 1994, a strategic planning document called the SDRIF (Schéma directeur de la région Île-de-France), attempted to define long-term guidelines for development up to 2025.

Today, over 35 million journeys are made in the Paris region on an average weekday, an increase of 6% over the last ten years. This growth corresponds exactly to the population growth of 5.9% over the same period for the people counted in the transport surveys (all over 6 years old).

At 27% of total expenditure (€830 million), transport accounts for the largest share of the Regional Council's budget in 2022, more than secondary/higher education (24%) and

economic development (19%). This level of transport funding is comparable to other major European capitals facing similar mobility challenges for large urban populations.

The use of cars remains predominant, especially depending on residential areas.

In line with this logic, many are investing in electric vehicles as a way to help protect our planet and the environment. Furthermore,

the concept of flying taxis transporting people around cities in the coming years has significant appeal.

Our mobility was brought to a standstill by the crisis in 2020. As restrictions were gradually lifted in spring 2021, transport activity increased sharply. This pandemic created a real awareness: electric vehicles can help protect our planet and improve daily life, but their use is reaching its limits in the cities where 4/5 of humanity lives. Could air transport be an alternative solution for urban mobility?

Over a decade ago in Marignane, Airbus Helicopters demonstrated with its unmanned H145 prototype that remote control is technically feasible.

The booming drone industry in all its variants has become an economic fact of life.

Cutting-edge innovators such as Ludovic Lazaret (jet-powered flying motorbike), Franky Zapata (Flyboard) and David Mayman (JetPack) are pushing the boundaries of what is technically feasible for personal aerial vehicles.

Environmentalists have the task of reshaping our understanding of "global progress". There is a view that environmental regulation is a barrier to business, especially industrial business, but this view seems to be confined to Europe.

### Mobility meets sustainability

In 2020, a significant proportion of the UK workforce (aged 17 to 59) experienced problems using public or active transport. Around a third experienced some form of difficulty. For around 14.5%, poor quality of service was the main issue, while availability and cost were a problem for 1.8% and 2.8% of commuters respectively.

According to an analysis of major cities around the world, Rome has the dubious honour of having the second-highest number of hours lost to traffic congestion each year. Drivers in the Italian capital spend an average of 254 hours a year stuck in traffic jams, research shows.

Meanwhile, Belgium is struggling with major traffic disruptions caused by winter snowfall and summer construction projects. The closure of several tunnels has further exacerbated the situation. In addition, the railway company's website has been the victim of a cyber attack by hackers, further exacerbating the challenges facing the country.

It seems that the intellectual and logistical elites of the European Union, as well as the authorities in places like Matignon, the Elysée Palace, Downing Street and Platz der Republik are primarily concerned that the access routes to the European Commission and these important places remain accessible and unhindered. Unfortunately, this leaves the rest of the traffic stuck in frustrating traffic jams.

*David-Laurent Coppée*  
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# OPINION COLUMN

This section deals with letters, emails and comments from our readers reacting to articles or topics covered in the magazine. It provides a forum for respectful debate and the exchange of different points of view on current affairs, politics, society and culture. Such feedback helps shape our coverage and strengthens democratic discourse. This month's feature is a response to our cover story in the January 2024 issue in which we analysed Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's position on the Ukraine issue.

Brussels, 1 February 2024

Dear Editorial Board,

We are writing to you about an article you have edited in the January issue of Europe Diplomatic Magazine.

The article "A clash of visions for Europe" and its illustration present the reader with an astonishingly biased and inaccurate picture of Hungary and its prime minister, which is unacceptable and unworthy of a newspaper whose editorial principles state that it "strives to work in comparing opinions and providing an objective analysis based on extensive research".

The cartoon chosen to illustrate this article is further proof that some people hide behind the supposedly innocent genre of caricature to make unacceptably crude and vile political statements. The article's conclusions are fundamentally flawed and biased, as they completely ignore the need to understand the Hungarian position and the views of the other side. In light of all this, we must conclude that the article is not intended as a political statement, but as an undignified and self-serving vilification, a demonisation of a political leader with a very high democratic legitimacy.

In our view, free expression should not be confused with hate speech and journalism with false propaganda. In our opinion, such a low-quality, openly inciting, and hate-filled article has no place in the European Parliament.

Kind regards,

**Kinga Gál MEP**  
President of the Fidesz Delegation to the European Parliament

**Tamás Deutsch MEP**  
Head of the Fidesz Delegation to the European Parliament

Dear Mrs Gál,  
Dear Mr Deutsch,

Thank you for taking the time to express your concerns about our recent article on Prime Minister Orbán. As elected representatives, your perspectives are certainly worthy of consideration.

However, we must respectfully disagree with accusations of bias, vilification and hate speech. While opinions on leadership and policy positions understandably differ, factual reporting and sound political analysis are of great value to public discourse, especially on issues of national importance.

While Mr Orbán has undeniably achieved electoral success, democratic legitimacy is also measured by protection of civil liberties, transparency and alignment with majority opinion over time - all relevant factors for analysis. It is possible for reasonable observers to discuss such complex issues without unfairly criticising motives.

As a magazine dedicated to informed discussion, we stand by our analysis, which is a fair assessment of the available facts and viewpoints as echoed throughout a large number of the most reputable publications in Europe and elsewhere. Vilification was certainly not our intention, and if certain points have perhaps not been sufficiently contextualised, we are open to thoughtful feedback on how we can do better.

At the same time, we cannot compromise our journalistic standards of impartial reporting for any leader or party. While criticism of reporting can be expected, accusations of bias, contempt and defamation are detrimental to respectful political debate.

We believe that robust debate, even on difficult issues, strengthens democracy when it is civilised and truthful. Going forward, we hope for constructive engagement, not accusations on matters of public importance. It goes without saying that our commitment to transparency and balanced reporting remains.

We naturally welcome further discussion where relevant, but in this case, we must stand by our editorial judgement. We thank you for your perspective; meaningful discourse will always benefit from diverse and respectful voices.

Yours sincerely,

**Trajan Dereville**  
Editor-in-chief, Europe Diplomatic Magazine

# TIMELESS CHIC

## STANDOUT FASHION AND BEAUTY TRENDS

### 7 TREND-SETTING BEAUTY AND FASHION LOOKS FOR SPRING 2024

From the latest enticing bags to the mini skirt revival, by way of make-up trends that reflect the essence of spring, our curated list covers it all.

### Introducing the textured jacket: a new look for a wardrobe staple.

This versatile piece adds a sophisticated touch to any outfit and effortlessly complements different denim styles : low-waist, ripped or baggy (left to right).



© INSTAGRAM @PPA\_DE\_BLOIS

### It-bags : The style triad of excellence

Here are this season's three most coveted handbags:

INTERNATIONALVICTORIABECKHAM.COM



#### #1 The oversized clutch

We have good news for all those who value plenty of space in their bags: bag trends for spring have reached new dimensions. As fashion houses such as Ferragamo, Victoria Beckham and The Attico, among others confirm, these spacious bags are particularly well suited to tailored ensembles, leather jackets and casual denims.

KHAITE.COM



#### #2 The slouchy tote bag

It's now official: The epitome of effortless elegance is being redefined by ultra-supple textures and formless designs. This capacious bag designed for enduring utility, is intended to be carried over your shoulder, brimming with essentials.

GUCCI.COM



#### #3 The bucket bag

This bag seems to usher us back into familiar terrain: The 2024 bucket bag pays homage to timeless classics – bags with circular bases and deep barrels that complement any ensemble and accommodate all essentials.





© PINTEREST - MILK MAKEUP

## Liquid blush: freshness unleashed

Following the 'Gloss craze' that seized the beauty industry in 2023, liquid blush is now taking centre stage. A majority of respected make-up artists are of the opinion that liquid blush lasts longer on the skin and leaves a naturally radiant complexion. They are particularly beneficial for people with an active lifestyle who prefer not to touch up their make-up throughout the day. They are also an excellent choice in warm and humid climates and for people with oily or combination skin.

## 'Metallic Meets Chic: A Style Epic'

Who says that sequins, lamé, and metallic fabrics are reserved exclusively for festive occasions or holidays? Certainly not the trends of this spring-summer season, which lend even the most unassuming pieces (such as a blouse or a flowing dress) the splendour of the most opulent designs.



Metallic flared slip dress, Cos (cos.com)



Silver pants, Karl Lagerfeld (spotted on zalando.be)



Bow-tie blouse with glitter thread, Week End Max Mara (spotted on breuninger.com)

## Fasten your belt

Saint Laurent and Celine, among other designers, have contributed to the "belt mania". Whether thin or thick, discreet or eye-catching, the important thing is that it accentuates your waist with elegance.

Adopt a minimalist approach to your clothing. After all, a luxury belt can enhance whatever you are wearing.



Medium Triomphe belt in natural calfskin tan (celine.com)

# EUROPE Diplomatic magazine

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