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MAGAZINE

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**SOFT POWER,  
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**Behind the Scenes  
of EU NGO Funding**



May 2025

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### **6 SOFT POWER, HARD CASH** Behind the Scenes of EU NGO Funding

### **14 NEWS IN BRIEF** From around the World

### **21 TYRANTS' TROUBLES** Recep Tayyip Erdogan is finding it's harder to keep a grip on Turkey than he may have imagined

### **28 EUROPEAN BIOTECHNOLOGY** Start-ups developing life-changing innovations

### **34 SUPERPOWER OR SUPERFLOP?** What the future may hold for the European Union

### **41 EUROPOL** Striking hard against crime in Europe

### **44 UNION OF SKILLS** Future-Proofing European Talent

### **49 TIMELESS CHIC**





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# SOFT POWER, HARD CASH

**Behind the Scenes of  
EU NGO Funding**





Klaus-Heiner Lehne, former President of the European Court of Auditors

**The European Union is one of the biggest backers of civil society worldwide, providing billions of euros every year to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on everything from human rights and climate action to humanitarian relief and social equality, both inside and outside Europe.**

**This funding plays a crucial role in influencing policies and improving lives, making the EU a major player in global civil society. But behind the noble intentions and dedication to democracy, cooperation, and sustainable development, there's a growing controversy over who really benefits from this funding. Is it really bringing positive change, or is it used as a tool for political influence?**

The concept of NGOs is much older than most people realise, evolving over centuries before becoming the global force they are today. In fact, NGOs existed even before the term was coined.

The transformation of NGOs from small-scale charitable initiatives in the Middle Ages, such as the Knights Hospitallers or the Islamic 'Waqf' or endowment trusts, to influential transnational advocacy giants—such as The Red Cross, Amnesty International and Greenpeace, to name just these three—represents one of the most significant developments in modern civil society.

This change required adapting to shifts such as wars, economic changes, and technological advances, which constantly redefined the roles of government, business, and society. Today, NGOs operate in a complex space, and while they are important checks on government power, their influence depends on funding, independence, and credibility. While many have brought about real, positive change, others face charges of corruption, political bias or inefficiency.

Critics argue that EU money often finds its way to NGOs with very particular political leanings—groups that, depending on who you ask, might be seen as pushing a specific agenda rather than serving some neutral, common good. Then there's the question of oversight—or, as some would say, the lack of it. With so much money floating about, are we absolutely sure it's all being spent properly? Or could some of it be a bit loosely managed?

## I Politics of Opacity

In November 2021, the influential French newspaper *Libération*, published the results of a major investigation titled "Fraud at the top of the European Court of Auditors", in which it was alleged that its then- president, Klaus-Heiner Lehne, a former MEP from Germany's CDU (conservatives), along with a good third of the Court's 27 members never showed up in Luxembourg—yet still pocketed large housing allowances by listing a fake address there. On a more serious note, the European Court of Auditors' (ECA) role being the protection of European funds, and guaranteeing their correct use, he and several of his associates, was alleged to have engaged in serious mismanagement.

And then, during *Libération*'s investigation, a 2018 report from the ECA suddenly resurfaced. Although it stopped short of calling it 'corruption,' the report condemned the lack of transparency in

European subsidies awarded to NGOs. For instance, some NGOs obtained new grants despite not having fulfilled earlier contracts. NGOs receiving grants often subcontracted the actual work to other organisations—without this information ever making it into the Commission's systems. Here's how it works: NGO 1 gets the funding but outsources all or part of the project to NGO 2, which then hands it off to NGO 3. And so on, down the line to NGOs 4, 5, and 6—as uncovered in one Ethiopia-based project. Now, how can you possibly monitor anything if the Commission doesn't even know who the subcontractors are? While overhead costs are supposedly capped at 7 per cent of the budget, the European Court of Auditors found that *'in five out of the six cases we reviewed, we uncovered layered overhead charges—first billed by the implementing entity, then again by the NGOs receiving cascading grants.'*

But what's most alarming is this: At no point does the Court question the Brussels bureaucrats who handpick these NGOs and approve their funding in the first place. One can't help but wonder about potential backroom understandings.



Laima Andrikiene

Laima Andrikiene, a Lithuanian politician, serving as a member of the ECA and one of the co-authors of the report recently declared *'Transparency is essential for NGOs to credibly participate in shaping EU policies. While there's been slight improvement since our last audit, the situation remains murky—with EU funding data for NGOs, particularly lobbying activities, still lacking reliability and transparency.'*

The sums involved are anything but trivial. Consider this: NGOs received 6.8 per cent of all European Development Funds (EDF)—amounting to a staggering €11.3 billion in the

2014-2020 EDF cycle. From 2021 to 2023, NGOs received €7.4 billion (€4.8 billion from the European Commission and €2.6 billion from member states), for key internal policies like cohesion, research, migration, and the environment.

But here's the catch: EU auditors warn these figures shouldn't be taken at face value because there's no reliable big-picture tracking of how much Europe actually spends on NGOs. Data gets published piecemeal, making it impossible to know if funds are overly concentrated in a handful of organisations—or to properly gauge NGOs' role in EU policymaking.

Of course, the Commission has gotten better at collecting info on NGO funding... but transparency is still lacking. And member states aren't even tracking or reporting their payouts properly. Worse yet, upcoming rule changes won't force them to start.

However, a major flaw in EU rules and regulations must be highlighted: the lack of a clear definition of what exactly constitutes an NGO. This means that European institutions pay little attention to how the billions of euros given to NGOs each year are actually used. Practically any organisation—even the most obscure committee—can claim NGO status and walk away with the money.

In 2024, the EU basically defined an NGO as a non-profit organisation, independent from government authorities. While this definition is a step forward, it alone doesn't guarantee proper NGO classification in the Union's financial transparency system. Here's why: organisations simply self-declare as NGOs on an honour system, and the European Commission doesn't verify key aspects of their status – such as whether government officials dominate their leadership boards or if they're actually serving their associates' commercial interests.

The European Commission hasn't been fully transparent about EU-funded NGO advocacy work. In fact, it only issued guidance during this very audit - conveniently late - stating that grant agreements shouldn't require recipients to lobby EU institutions. But here's the real issue: EU fund managers aren't actively checking whether NGOs violate core Union values such as rule of law and human rights. They just take them at their word. They're also not properly vetting funding sources, which could reveal who's really behind these organisations.

That said, let's be clear—this isn't some blanket condemnation of NGOs. The vast majority of them are doing vital work in humanitarian aid, environmental protection, and culture. As Michaël Privot, the former director of the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), put it: *'This report focuses on funds for external action. But for NGOs operating inside the EU, I can assure you every penny is accounted for—down to train tickets and metro receipts.'*



Michaël Privot, former director of European Network Against Racism



## Political Bias

Even with comprehensive bureaucratic reforms, the complex nature of civil society funding will always present challenges. Even in 2025, the EU's financial support for NGOs remains what diplomats might politely call "politically sensitive" and what everyone else calls a total minefield. The truth is, for every step Brussels takes towards transparency, another controversy seems to erupt somewhere.

The perennial complaint—echoed loudly in certain parliamentary corners—is that the system still tilts suspiciously toward progressive causes. You can practically set your watch by the outrage when funding figures reveal climate activists, migration advocates and gender equality campaigns dominating the recipient lists. Conservative MEPs routinely brandish spreadsheets showing what they claim is institutional bias, while Commission officials counter that they're simply funding organisations aligned with EU treaty values.

Here are two examples: A study in 2024 by the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group found that 68% of "civil society" funding went to NGOs with progressive agendas, while conservative-leaning groups received less than 10%.



In countries like Hungary and Poland, EU-funded NGOs are seen as tools to undermine conservative governments. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has repeatedly clashed with NGOs as well as the EU over freezing funds for NGOs that the government accuses of "political interference".

One such example is the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, active in the rights of asylum seekers and stateless people in need of assistance.

Just this past April, Hungary's parliament passed a law restricting the rights of dual nationals and LGBTQ+ people. Prime Minister Orbán, whose Fidesz party voted through the bill had declared in March that an "Easter cleanup" of his critics was coming. Fidesz claims the new rule targets foreign-funded "fake NGOs, paid-off politicians, and so-called independent media." This has led many to think it's partly aimed at Hungarian-American billionaire



David Bedo, Hungarian opposition MP

George Soros and his Open Society Foundation, which Orbán often criticises.

Meanwhile, David Bedo, an opposition MP from the centrist Momentum Movement said *"This is only the first step they're taking in this one-year campaign, and we are going to see many more laws enacted and passed in parliament that is very much against any democracy or any rule of law."*

In Poland, the former government accused EU-backed NGOs in meddling in judicial reforms. Among these is The Batory Foundation which is the main distributor of Norwegian funding in Poland.

Marine Le Pen's National Rally had also slammed the EU for funding "anti-French" NGOs that oppose national sovereignty policies.

NGOs like Sea-Watch and SOS Méditerranée operate migrant rescue ships in the Mediterranean, but Italy's government has blocked their ships, accusing them of aiding human traffickers. Greece has also fined NGOs for allegedly helping migrants enter illegally.

Meanwhile in Eastern Europe, there's another problem. The rules meant to stop fraud have accidentally created a sneaky back-and-forth game. Clever scammers have found ways to cheat



- setting up 'official' NGOs that somehow always hire family members and rent from friends. The EU's fraud fighters are stuck constantly putting out fires. It's like a scratched record in Brussels - the same argument keeps repeating with no real solution.

Then the Ukraine war made these problems even worse. As billions poured in for emergency aid, the usual checks couldn't keep up. Reports started surfacing about fake charities and ridiculous overcharging - exactly the kind of stories that feed the idea of EU money vanishing into thin air. It didn't matter that most funds helped real people - the bad cases always get more attention.

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) is investigating 19 cases tied to Ukraine aid, amid growing concerns over misuse of funds meant for the war-torn country. Meanwhile, the EU has blacklisted 12 NGOs in Eastern Europe for fraud since 2023—exposing vulnerabilities in how aid reaches its intended recipients.

But these cases have become political ammunition for populist parties, like Germany's AfD, that are seizing on them to claim "EU aid is wasted." Their rhetoric risks undermining public support for critical assistance programmes, even as auditors stress that fraud remains a small fraction of total spending. The EU is racing to plug leaks in its aid pipeline—but as far as public opinion is concerned, damage may already be done.

## The "Big Cartel" Problem

Looking at the problem objectively, a small group of big, powerful NGOs stand out that get most of the funding. These groups have become too successful for their own good. The same organisations win grants year after year, making people whisper about a sort of 'activism machine' where EU officials and NGO leaders just swap jobs with each other.

Among the handful of these large, well-connected NGOs that dominate EU funding: Greenpeace, Oxfam, Amnesty International, Caritas as well as pro-migration groups such as Save the Children and Médecins Sans Frontières. These organisations have dedicated EU lobbying teams, making it easier to secure multi-million-euro grants.

Smaller grassroots groups complain the application process has become so difficult and inaccessible that only those with professional fundraisers and legal teams need apply.

What proves particularly revealing is how these conflicts expose Europe's fundamental political divisions. For some, funding NGOs represents support for democracy's guardians; for others, it amounts to financing activist pet projects. The migration



crisis exacerbated this divide—with southern NGOs accused of facilitating migration, while their northern counterparts are characterized as inflexible bureaucrats. The climate debate reveals an identical pattern: environmental groups are alternately portrayed as planetary saviours or economic saboteurs, depending on one's perspective.

The irony is that the clearer the system gets, the louder the arguments grow. Every grant posted online, every report published, just gives both sides new talking points. Brussels can't win—they're either 'meddling micromanagers' or 'careless enablers' as soon as something goes wrong.

## The Shifting Sands of NGO Funding

The past couple of years have seen developments that would have been hard to predict back when those damning audit reports first landed—some welcome, some contentious, and all of them revealing just how politically charged this issue remains.

Let's examine the new rules on political activism that were introduced in early 2024. On paper, they looked like a sensible enough modification—a clearer distinction between educational work and outright campaigning, designed to address the constant accusations of EU funds bankrolling protests. But how does this work in practice? Well, these new rules have created fresh tensions. NGOs that used to get funding easily now face tough questions about whether their work could "accidentally affect laws." At the same time, right-wing politicians say the changes are too weak, while campaigners worry they'll scare groups into silence. It's that classic EU middle ground - where no one's completely happy, so it's probably the perfect compromise.

Then there's the Brexit mess that's still not properly sorted. UK charities used to be big winners in EU funding, but now they're mostly stuck watching from the sidelines. Some have opened small offices in Ireland and other European countries in order to keep getting cash, while others try for UK government money instead, only to find the rules have completely changed. The result of all this is that research teams that used to work easily across borders now juggle two separate funding systems in an awkward and inefficient manner.

Over in Eastern Europe, the game of cat and mouse continues. Whenever the EU plugs one loophole, people find another way around the rules. The latest trend is the setting up of NGOs that are technically compliant but functionally act as extensions of national governments—it's a clever loophole that's already got several countries in trouble for bending the rules. The EU is countering with tougher audits and better





financial tracking - they're adapting, but it's an endless battle against those trying to cheat the system.

Perhaps most telling is how business-aligned NGOs have been gradually increasing their presence. What started as small, business-sponsored sustainability initiatives has become a big thing, with everyone from energy giants to tech firms suddenly keen to demonstrate their civil society credentials. Traditionalists complain about "greenwashing with EU money," but the uncomfortable truth is that these well-resourced newcomers are often better at delivering measurable results than their idealistic but underfunded counterparts.

Two notable examples among many: the partnership between Coca Cola and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), focusing on water conservation and sustainable agricultural practices. Teaming up Coca-Cola's global supply chain with WWF's environmental know-how has created real results – they're making a difference in water conservation for communities around the world. It's a win-win situation: Coke boosts its green credentials while WWF gets closer to its conservation targets.

Then there's Microsoft, which through its philanthropic arm, has provided funding, technology, and training resources to NGOs working to bridge the digital divide. They're helping underserved communities in Asia and Africa acquire the tech skills that really matter in today's world.

## Newest Battleground: Climate Activism

The European Union finds itself caught in an increasingly bitter tug-of-war over its funding of environmental NGOs. On one side, groups like the Climate Action Network receive hundreds of millions in EU grants to champion green causes. On the other, furious farmers—particularly in France and the Netherlands—accuse these same organisations of biting the hand that feeds them, using public money to lobby against agricultural livelihoods.

The controversy has become so heated that Germany's AfD party took the extraordinary step of suing the EU in 2024 over its funding of what they call "political activism", specifically highlighting links to the Fridays for Future movement, that began in 2018 after Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg and other young activists sat in front of the Swedish parliament every week to protest against the lack of action on the climate crisis.



Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission speaking at a plenary session of the European Parliament

At the heart of the dispute lies a fundamental question about where education ends and activism begins. The European Commission maintains it only funds awareness-raising and educational projects, not protests or political campaigns. But when applied to real-world situations, this theoretical separation quickly breaks down.

When it emerged that EU grants had indirectly benefited Extinction Rebellion—a global, non-partisan movement using peaceful protest to demand government action on climate change—traditionally sympathetic politicians expressed disapproval. Centre-left MEPs complained that this stretched the definition of educational funding beyond what taxpayers might reasonably expect.

The situation represents a perfect storm for Brussels. Farmers' groups, already feeling besieged by environmental regulations, now direct their anger at publicly-funded NGOs they see as undermining their way of life. Populist parties across Europe regularly amplify these grievances, using each new grant disclosure to bolster their narrative of EU funds being misused for ideological purposes. Ironically, the Commission's push for greater transparency has inadvertently provided more ammunition for these critics, as every published grant agreement gets scrutinised for potential signs of political activism.

This fight isn't just about money—it's about clashing visions for Europe's future. Green groups say they're doing crucial work governments ignore, while critics call them out-of-touch activists with too much power. As arguments heat up, the EU is stuck trying to deliver on climate goals without overstepping—a near-impossible balancing act as public opinion splits further apart.

## Future Prospects

The EU faces a tough choice in the coming years: restrict funding that might support activism (but risk harming environmental efforts) or keep the current system (and lose more public trust). Meanwhile, the argument continues with no clear way forward.

Looking ahead, three formidable challenges appear over the horizon, each carrying big implications for the future of the European Union.

First, the migration crisis isn't going away—it's still straining Europe's budgets and politics. Every euro spent on borders gets heavily questioned: Does it work? And is it even right?

Second, climate policy is still a major battleground—green groups and industry keep fighting over who calls the shots. This isn't just about ideas; it's about survival. Each side truly believes only their approach can save Europe's future.

Third - and most explosive - is how EU spending is becoming political. As elections turn into votes on whether Brussels is going too far, NGO money could go from a minor issue to a major battleground. Today's fights might look small compared to what's coming.

What's surprising isn't that these problems keep happening - governments have dealt with these tough choices for years. It's that the EU keeps trying to do the impossible. They want to support charities without taking sides, control spending without killing new ideas and help in emergencies without creating reliance.

The answers will certainly not please everyone – there will probably be messy compromises. But stopping all funding would cause even worse problems. One thing's certain though: this debate, with all its complexities and contradictions, is now a permanent fixture of Europe's political landscape.

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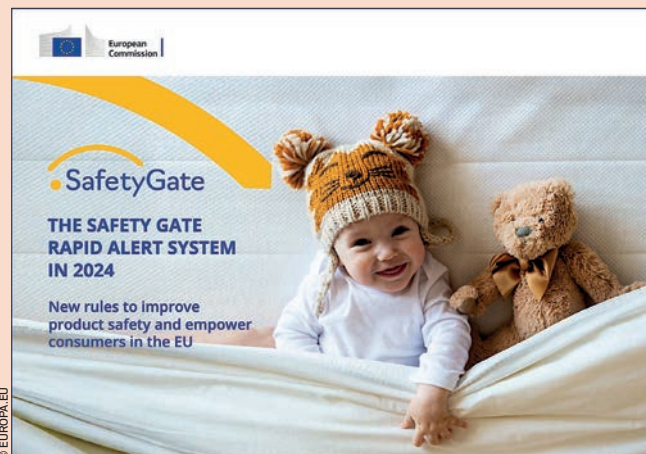


This article is based on official data, reports from the European Court of Auditors, and testimonies from EU officials. All cited figures are verifiable in public EU documents and these websites: • NGO Watchdog Reports: <https://www.ngowatch.org> • European Court of Auditors: <https://www.presseportal.de/en/pm/111458/6008184> • European Court of Auditors: <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/multiple-reports> • EU Legislation: EUR-Lex (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu>) • Funding Data: EU Transparency Register (<https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister>) • Case Law: Curia (<https://curia.europa.eu>) • Libération: [https://www.liberation.fr/international/fraude-au-sommet-de-la-cour-des-comptes-europeenne-20211126\\_UGCXGTDBNNHUDNOEVCWEWG2AONQ/](https://www.liberation.fr/international/fraude-au-sommet-de-la-cour-des-comptes-europeenne-20211126_UGCXGTDBNNHUDNOEVCWEWG2AONQ/)



# NEWS IN BRIEF

## LIST OF DANGEROUS PRODUCTS NOTIFIED IN COMMISSION'S SAFETY GATE 2024 SETS THE PATH FOR INCREASED CONSUMER PROTECTION



The European Commission has unveiled its annual report on Safety Gate, the European Rapid Alert System for dangerous non-food products. The report presents an overview of dangerous products notified in the Safety Gate in 2024. 4,137 alerts were notified last year - the highest ever recorded amount of alerts since the launch of the system in 2003. This increase in alerts demonstrates the growing effectiveness and trust in the Safety Gate system, as authorities are using the platform more often to report and address potential threats to consumer safety. The report also outlines the follow-up actions taken by national authorities of the EU Member States, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein to prevent harm to consumers and stop the sale of hazardous products.

### Main findings

Last year, cosmetics (36%) remained the most frequently reported products posing health risks, followed by toys (15%), electrical appliances (10%), motor vehicles (9%) and chemical products (6%).

Chemical ingredients were the main cause of risk in almost half of the alerts. Dangerous chemicals detected included cadmium, nickel and lead in jewellery, as well as allergenic fragrances in body oils, and synthetic chemicals used to soften the plastic, for example in some clothing. 97% of the cosmetics notified were reported to contain BMHCA, a banned synthetic fragrance, which can harm the reproductive system and cause skin irritation.

Alerts registered in the Safety Gate system triggered a robust response from market surveillance authorities with over 4,200 follow-up actions taken to stop the sale of these products or even take them off the market.

Michael McGrath, Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection :

*"Year after year, the Commission has strengthened and modernised its tools to ensure that the products entering our homes are safe."*

*At the heart of this effort is the Safety Gate Rapid Alert system, which enables us to swiftly address the risks posed by dangerous goods across the EU. The results speak for themselves, and I look forward to continuing this work to ensure we leave no blind spots in our oversight."*

### Next steps

The Commission is working closely with national market surveillance authorities to prepare the first ever product safety sweep. A 'sweep' is a set of checks carried out on websites simultaneously to identify breaches of EU consumer law in a particular sector. The aim of the product safety sweep will be to check the products sold on online marketplaces on their compliance with the new General Product Safety Regulation to ultimately enhance the safety of products offered for sale online.

## DATA CENTRES IN ORBIT AND ON THE MOON



It sounds like sci-fi, but Stephen Eisele believes his firm will one day open a data centre on the Moon. *'By putting the data centre in space, you're offering unparalleled security,'* says the president of Lonestar Data Holdings.

Last month, the Florida-based company tested a tiny data centre—the size of a hardback book—aboard a lunar lander from Intuitive Machines, launched via SpaceX.

Data centres, which store and process digital information, are usually vast warehouses filled with servers. Lonestar claims lunar data centres would provide ultra-secure, reliable processing, powered by unlimited solar energy.

Lunar data centres might sound like science fiction, but they're becoming a serious solution to Earth's growing storage crisis. With AI driving unprecedented demand – projected to grow 20% annually – traditional facilities face impossible pressures: astronomical energy needs, water-guzzling cooling systems, and increasing local opposition to new constructions. The moon offers an elegant answer: limitless space, constant solar power, and natural vacuum cooling. Increasingly, local

people don't want them built near their homes, and as terrestrial options vanish, space becomes the logical next frontier.

Space-based data centres—whether in orbit or on the Moon—could reduce environmental harm, with unlimited solar power and no neighbours to disturb.

They'd also offer faster data transfers between spacecraft than ground-based alternatives.

Last summer, a European Commission-backed study by Thales Alenia Space found orbital data centres could 'transform Europe's digital landscape' while being 'more eco-friendly'. The plan involves 13 satellites (totalling 200m x 80m) with 10MW processing power—equivalent to a medium Earth-based centre.

Damien Dumestier, the project's architect, says rockets must become 10 times cleaner for space centres to be greener. Scaling up to 200MW would require 200 launches, with commercial viability possible by 2037.

But Dr Domenico Vicinanza (Anglia Ruskin University) highlights major hurdles: launch costs (€thousands per kg), cooling challenges (zero-gravity limits traditional systems), space weather risks, and debris damage. Repairs could demand costly manned missions, prolonging downtime.

*'Even with SpaceX's advances,'* he says, *'the weight and complexity make this far from straightforward.'*

Yet firms like Lonestar remain undeterred, insisting demand drives their plans. *'We wouldn't do this if customers weren't asking,'* says CEO Chris Stott.

The company aims to place a lunar-orbiting data centre by 2027, while rivals like Washington's Starcloud target 2026 launches.

Stott argues space-based storage offers unique security—data bypasses terrestrial networks, beaming directly to secure ground stations. *'Like a bank vault,'* he says, *'the Moon's distance makes hacking far harder.'*

While 1.5-second latency rules out real-time uses, it's viable for backups and regulated data sovereignty—legally, the hardware acts as 'an embassy in space' under the launch nation's laws.

Early adopters include Florida and the Isle of Man governments.

## BRITISH SOLDIERS TAKE DOWN DRONE SWARM IN GROUNDBREAKING USE OF RADIO WAVE WEAPON



The RF DEW demonstrator

British soldiers have successfully tracked, targeted and defeated swarms of drones in the latest trial of a new directed energy weapon developed in the UK.

- UK-made, invisible radio wave weapon knocks out drone swarms for the first time.
- Weapon has potential to help protect against drone threats as nature of warfare changes.

The trial was completed at a weapons range in West Wales and was the largest counter-drone swarm exercise the British Army have conducted to date.

The weapon system demonstrator is a type of Radiofrequency Directed Energy Weapon (RF DEW) and has proven capable of neutralising multiple targets simultaneously with near-instant effect.

The UK Government has invested more than £40 million in RF DEW research and development to date, supporting 135 highly skilled jobs in Northern Ireland and the South-East of England.

It uses high frequency radio waves to disrupt or damage critical electronic components inside drones, causing them to crash or malfunction.

At an estimated cost of 10p per shot fired, if developed into operational service it could provide a cost-effective complement to traditional missile-based air defence systems.

RF DEW systems can defeat airborne targets at ranges of up to 1km and are effective against threats which cannot be jammed using electronic warfare.

The successful trial comes as drone swarms are increasingly seen in use in frontline combat in Ukraine. UK Defence Intelligence estimates that last year Ukraine had to defend against attacks from more than 18,000 drones.

With national security a foundation for the Plan for Change, the government is significantly increasing the proportion of MOD's equipment procurement spend on novel technologies, spending at least 10% from 2025-26. It follows the announcement of the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the Cold War, as the UK will spend 2.5% of GDP on defence by April 2027.

The project has been delivered by Team Hersa – a collaboration between Defence Equipment & Support and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. The RF DEW demonstrator has been developed by an industry consortium led by Thales UK.

Successful experiments included the Army taking down two swarms of drones in a single engagement, and the project saw more than 100 drones being tracked, engaged and defeated using the weapon across all trials.

## HYBRID-ELECTRIC AIRCRAFT SECURES \$9BN IN PRE-ORDERS

In recent years, the aeronautics sector has seen a surge of bold initiatives. Among them, French start-up Beyond Aero is preparing to unveil the first hydrogen-electric business jet. Meanwhile, companies Turbotech, Safran, and Air Liquide have combined their expertise in the *BeautyHyFuel* project to develop the first hydrogen-powered aircraft gas turbine. Recently, Electra gained attention with its EL9 Ultra Short, an ultra-quiet hybrid-electric aircraft.

Electra's hybrid-electric aircraft combines classic design with groundbreaking lift technology, enabling ultra-slow takeoffs



and landings—a feat that has secured 2,200 pre-orders worth \$9 billion (€8.3 billion).

While eVTOLs (electric vertical take-off and landing) are gaining industry hype after years in labs, Electra took a different approach: delivering on eVTOL promises while slashing operating costs.



3D Rendering of EL-9

Electra unveiled its eSTOL (electric Short Take-off and Landing) concept in 2021—an emissions-free aircraft requiring ultra-short runways. After two years of rigorous ground testing, the company reached a milestone in November 2023: the maiden flight of its piloted Goldfinch EL-2 prototype.

The EL-2 showcased near-silent electric propulsion, taking off in just 30 metres—far quieter than traditional engines. By October 2024, an upgraded two-seat hybrid version with blown wings achieved even better performance: 46-metre take-off and 34.7-metre landing.

But it's the aircraft's near-silent operation that truly stands out: during trials, it emitted just 55 decibels at 152 metres altitude—comparable to the sound level of a quiet conversation at home. Building on this success, Electra has confirmed 2,200 pre-orders from 52 operators worldwide for its next-gen hybrid-electric EL9 Ultra Short, with an estimated value of nearly \$9 billion (€7.9 billion). This order book ranks among the largest in the fledgling electric aviation sector.

The EL9 stands out with its revolutionary design: eight electric propellers line the wing's leading edge, while large flaps dominate the trailing edge. This configuration creates a blown lift effect, enabling takeoffs at an exceptionally slow speed of just 56 km/h. The EL9's power system features a compact turbogenerator that charges an onboard battery, which in turn feeds its eight electric motors. Electra highlights the system's flexibility—compatible with sustainable aviation fuels (SAF), biofuels, and synthetic fuels.

When operational, the aircraft will offer versatile capabilities:

- Cargo transport (1,361 kg payload with pilot)
- Passenger flights (9 occupants + luggage)
- 2,037 km range at 322 km/h cruise speed

Its low noise footprint and ultra-short takeoff capability enable operations from constrained sites—including fields, urban pads, heliports, or conventional airports.

Alongside EL9 testing, Electra continues its technological advancements. The company is currently developing a nine-seat demonstrator, with its maiden flight planned for 2026. While not the final commercial version, this prototype will closely mirror it and will serve as the basis for FAA certification. Staying true to its roadmap, Electra still aims to bring its certified aircraft into service within three years.

## EU AND UKRAINE SIGN AGREEMENT ON UKRAINE'S PARTICIPATION IN COMPONENTS OF THE EU SPACE PROGRAMME

The European Commission and the Government of Ukraine have reached a significant milestone in space cooperation by signing an agreement enabling Ukraine's participation in three key components of the European Union Space Programme: Copernicus, Space Weather Events (SWE) and Near-Earth Objects (NEO) sub-components. This step further strengthens the longstanding partnership between the EU and Ukraine in the domain of space.

This agreement builds upon the existing cooperation framework established under Chapter 8 of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement signed in 2014, which covers satellite navigation, Earth observation, space science, and applied space technologies. It also follows the 2018 Copernicus Cooperation Arrangement that laid the groundwork for reciprocal Earth observation data-sharing.

### Strengthening Space Collaboration with Ukraine

The EU and Ukraine agreed on a participation in Copernicus, SWE and NEO. This Agreement marks the first step in Ukraine's ever closer association to the Union Space Programme. It was prepared in close consultation with Ukrainian authorities whereas Council was kept regularly informed thereof.

### Strategic Benefits for both Ukraine and the EU

Ukraine's participation will support recovery efforts by enhancing access to EU space services and fostering space innovation:

- **Copernicus:** Ukraine will benefit from high-quality Earth observation data to support energy and food security, environmental monitoring, and post-war reconstruction planning.
- **Space Weather Services:** Ukrainian satellite operators will gain access to future forecasting and nowcasting services, providing protection to national space infrastructure from solar and cosmic hazards.
- **Near-Earth Objects:** Cooperation in this area will bolster Ukraine's capacity to monitor and respond to risks posed by asteroids and other near-Earth bodies.



EU Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius (right) exchanging signed documents with the Head of Mission of Ukraine to the EU, Vsevolod Chentsov

The Agreement also promotes capacity building, supports the growth of Ukraine's space sector, and encourages the exchange of engineering expertise and business practices, thereby enriching the broader European space ecosystem.

While exploring a potential participation in other components of the Union Space Programme, including satellite navigation and secure connectivity, Copernicus and the selected sub-components already offer Ukrainian participation in the Programme.

As part of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, space cooperation is well established through the bilateral Working Group on Space Cooperation, which can meet at senior official level as needed. The last meeting took place in 2023 and the Working Group is projected to meet again in 2025.

Ukraine's progressive association to the EU Space Programme underscores the strategic value of EU-Ukraine relations and affirms the EU's commitment to supporting Ukraine's sovereignty, resilience, and technological development. This agreement paves the way for deeper space cooperation and marks a crucial step in Ukraine's European integration course.

## HOW TO STOP THE NEXT PANDEMIC: ECDC PUBLISHES GUIDANCE TO STRENGTHEN PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS IN THE EU/EEA

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) has published a set of recommendations for preparedness planning for public health threats, offering tailored guidance for improving readiness for future health emergencies across European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA) countries, at both national and regional levels.

Drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and the multi-country mpox outbreak of 2022–2023, the report provides practical, phase-based recommendations for health authorities across the EU/EEA.

It complements the EU's broader preparedness planning framework, published in 2024, and is designed to help public health planners and policy-makers align with EU legislation and the World Health Organization's (WHO) international standards.

### From lessons learned to actionable recommendations

ECDC identified several thematic lessons from recent crises, including the need for sustained investment in public health, strong governance and leadership with a defined role for the public health sector, cross-sectoral collaboration, equitable access to care, and improved risk communication. These are translated into specific recommendations for each phase of the ECDC model of the preparedness cycle:

- **Anticipation:** Countries are encouraged to conduct cross-sectoral risk mapping, scenario-based planning, and capacity assessments. Tools such as the Joint External Evaluation (JEE) and States Parties Self-Assessment Annual Reporting (SPAR) can support these efforts.
- **Response:** Establishing national coordination structures, maintaining public health emergency operation centres, deploying real-time analytics, and developing clear escalation protocols are recommended, as well as digital surveillance systems and platforms such as EpiPulse.



- **Recovery:** After-Action Reviews (AARs) and In-Action Reviews (IARs), with a focus on health system restoration, adaption of existing plans, workforce support, and rebuilding public trust are important for the constant evaluation of the preparedness cycle.

### A strong focus on communication

The guidance has a strong focus on risk communication, community engagement, and infodemic management (RCCE-IM). Countries are advised to form multidisciplinary RCCE-IM teams and engage proactively with communities, particularly when implementing public health and social measure.

### The priority for workforce readiness

Recommendations include developing surge capacity strategies, supporting healthcare staff's wellbeing, and investing in recruitment, training, and retention—particularly of the staff working in public health and the management of infectious disease outbreaks.

### Tools, country lessons, and technical resources

The guidance features a range of case studies during and after a public health crisis from several EU/EEA countries, the European Commission and ECDC, and includes a catalogue of resources from ECDC, WHO and other international organisations to assist public health planners.



## MILEX 25 MILITARY EXERCISE TESTS READINESS OF EU TO RESPOND TO A CRISIS



Colonel General Gábor Böröndi in conversation with German soldiers during the MILEX 25 exercise

**Taking place in Hungary with 13 member states participating, MILEX indicates EU's growing security role.**

The European Union Crisis Management Military Exercise (MILEX) is the EU's premier annual military exercise. It is designed to enhance the EU's crisis management and rapid deployment capabilities. MILEX also serves to validate the EU's military readiness.

This year's MILEX25 was a strategic, operational and tactical level alert and deployment exercise to test and enhance the effectiveness of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC) and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) under realistic conditions.

### Training in Hungary

MILEX25 saw forces from 13 EU Member States training together in Hungary. The exercise presented a complex strategic synchronisation challenge, from a strategic deployment transitioning to a standard field training exercise.

As the exercise brings together joint military forces from 13 countries, it significantly contributes to enhancing EU defence and military cooperation and bolsters interoperability at all levels.

### EU as security provider

MILEX25 also highlights a notable milestone by presenting the EU RDC in action. This is evidence that EU has made additional progress as a security provider.

Throughout the training, the MPCC serves as the Operational Headquarters (OHQ) in Brussels while Eurocorps acts as the Force Headquarters (FHQ) in Strasbourg. They collaborate on crisis response planning.

### Force of 5 000 troops

The MPCC oversees the deployment of the EU's RDC, a formidable force up to 5 000 troops - the key deliverable of the EU Strategic Compass. Meanwhile, Eurocorps in its established command element at Pápa Air Base, Hungary, ensures seamless coordination between the OHQ in Brussels and the units deployed on the ground.

## NATO ACQUIRES AI-ENABLED WARFIGHTING SYSTEM

The NATO Communications and Information Agency (NCIA) and Palantir Technologies Inc. (Palantir) have finalised the acquisition of the Palantir Maven Smart System NATO (MSS NATO) for deployment within NATO's Allied Command Operations (ACO), marking a significant step forward in the modernisation of NATO's warfighting capabilities.

"NCIA is pleased to collaborate with Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and Palantir to deliver MSS NATO to the warfighter, providing bespoke, state-of-the-art AI capabilities to the Alliance, and equipping our forces with the tools necessary to operate effectively and decisively on the modern battlefield," said Ludwig Decamps, NCIA General Manager.

The MSS NATO capability enables commanders and warfighters to harness cutting-edge artificial intelligence (AI) safely and securely within core military operations. By delivering a common, data-enabled warfighting capability to the Alliance—utilising a broad range of AI applications, from large language models (LLMs) to generative AI and machine learning—MSS NATO enhances intelligence fusion and targeting, situational awareness and planning, and accelerates decision-making.

"We're proud to support NATO's commitment to strengthening deterrence through the deployment of an AI-enabled warfighting platform at SHAPE. This partnership underscores the Alliance's resolve to lead with technological innovation," said Shon Manasco, Senior Counsellor at Palantir Technologies.



An air controller aboard an RAF Boeing E-3D Sentry (aka AWACS), conducting a mission in support of NATO

Through MSS NATO, SHAPE aims to speed up the adoption of other innovative capabilities being developed across the Alliance—including emerging AI models, and modelling and simulation—demonstrating the enduring partnership between the North American and European technology bases.

"ACO is at the forefront of adopting technologies that make NATO more agile, adaptable, and responsive to emerging threats. Innovation is central to our warfighting capability. Maven Smart System NATO enables the Alliance to exploit complex data, accelerate decision-making, and in doing so, provides genuine operational value," said General Markus Laubenthal, SHAPE Chief of Staff.

The procurement of MSS NATO was among the fastest in NATO's history, taking just six months from defining the requirement to acquiring the system.

## SCHUMACHER'S ICONIC FERRARI UP FOR AUCTION DURING THE FORMULA 1 TAG HEUER GRAND PRIX DE MONACO

At the next Monaco Grand Prix on 24 May 2025, a remarkable event is expected to enthrall both collectors and motorsport fans. Fans will have the chance to acquire a valuable relic from Michael Schumacher's remarkable career when a Ferrari F2001b, a rare piece of Formula One history, goes up for auction.

In Formula One history, the Ferrari F2001b has a unique place. Schumacher piloted this specific chassis in the early going of the 2002 season, which saw him win his fifth World Championship. Ferrari's supremacy in the early 2000s was aided by the car's absolutely amazing on-track performance. Given the circuit's legendary association with glamour and high-stakes racing, its inclusion at the Monaco Grand Prix auction by RM Sotheby's adds a level of distinction.

The excitement around the auction is evident even though the specifics, such as the projected value and the auction company managing the sale, have not yet been revealed. Fans and collectors are keen to learn more, so it's best to keep an eye out for updates by following official announcements from the Monaco Grand Prix organisers and respectable auction houses.

A portion of the money raised from the special auction will go to the Keep Fighting Foundation, which continues Michael Schumacher's humanitarian efforts.

This will be the first time a sale has been conducted during a Grand Prix weekend in the Principality.

## A \$15 MILLION PAINTING THAT WAS PURCHASED FOR \$50 AT A GARAGE SALE IN MINNESOTA DECLARED "NOT AUTHENTIC" BY THE VAN GOGH MUSEUM

The assertion that the picture Elimar, which shows a rough-looking fisherman smoking a pipe, is an authentic piece by Vincent van Gogh has been formally denied by the Van Gogh Museum. This claim followed the presentation of a thorough 456-page report by the New York-based LMI Group International that sought to identify the picture as being by Van Gogh. "We

maintain our view that this is not an authentic painting by Vincent van Gogh," the museum said, reaffirming its 2019 assessment in light of the new material.

LMI Group criticised the Van Gogh Museum for reportedly rejecting their comprehensive results without a close inspection of the actual painting, expressing confusion at the museum's choice. They emphasised that rather than using an in-person investigation, the museum's assessment was based on digital reproductions. LMI further noted that the Van Gogh Museum has previously changed its views on the veracity of several of its pieces.

Independent scholars have suggested that Elimar may be the work of Henning Elimar, a lesser-known Danish artist, further confusing the painting's provenance. Similarities in signature and style between the disputed artwork and other well-known pieces by Henning Elimar lend credence to this theory.

Art Recognition, a Swiss business that specialises in AI-based art identification, added to the scepticism by analysing the picture and coming to the 97% sure that it was not by Van Gogh.

In conclusion, the Van Gogh Museum and other experts are still not convinced that Elimar is a Van Gogh, even after LMI Group invested a lot of money and effort to prove it.





## EU LAUNCHES €1.6 BILLION SUPPORT PROGRAMME FOR PALESTINIAN RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

During the first-ever High-Level Political Dialogue between the European Union and the Palestinian Authority, the European Commission has proposed a comprehensive multiannual support programme worth up to €1.6 billion. This initiative aims to bolster Palestinian recovery and resilience from 2025 to 2027, reaffirming the EU's commitment to a sustainable Two-State solution and long-term peace in the region.

### Three Pillars of Support

The programme is structured around three key pillars:

#### 1. Support to Essential Services

Approximately €620 million in direct budget support will be provided to the Palestinian Authority (PA). This marks an increase from previous years and is intended to help the PA address urgent public administration needs and maintain essential services for its population. Disbursements will be tied to progress on critical reforms in areas such as fiscal sustainability, democratic governance, private sector development, and infrastructure. These reforms are detailed in the "Reform Matrix" agreed by the EU and PA in November 2024. The funds will be channeled through the EU's PEGASE mechanism, ensuring strict oversight and safeguards.

#### 2. Recovery and Stabilization in West Bank and Gaza

Around €576 million will be allocated to recovery and resilience projects in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, pending improvements in the security situation. The focus will include infrastructure development in sectors like water, energy, and housing. A key component of this support is an annual €82

million contribution to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). This funding ensures UNRWA can continue its vital role in providing humanitarian aid and development services across Palestinian territories and the broader region.

#### 3. Private Sector Development

The programme also includes up to €400 million in loans through the European Investment Bank (EIB) to boost the Palestinian private sector, pending approval by EIB's governing bodies. This financing aims to stimulate economic activity, generate employment, and foster sustainable growth.

#### Enhanced International Coordination

To facilitate transparency and coordination, the Commission will establish a dedicated Palestine Donor Platform. This platform will enable the Palestinian Authority to present progress on its Reform Agenda and serve as a space for international partners to coordinate efforts, particularly regarding Gaza's future reconstruction.

#### BACKGROUND AND PREVIOUS SUPPORT

This new initiative builds on a Letter of Intent signed on 19 July 2024 between the EU and the Palestinian Authority, outlining a two-step support approach. The first step was the emergency disbursement of €400 million between July 2024 and February 2025 to address fiscal challenges. The new programme represents the second step and reflects continued dialogue with both Palestinian and international stakeholders.

The EU remains the largest donor to the Palestinians, with over €1.043 billion already allocated from a €1.36 billion envelope for 2021–2024.

Note: This designation does not imply EU recognition of a Palestinian state and does not affect Member States' positions on this matter.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan



## TYRANTS' TROUBLES

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is finding it's harder to keep a grip on Turkey than he may have imagined





Despots and tyrants seldom find that everything keeps going their way without a hitch. At least, not all the time. It can be quite a tough business staying on top of the heap and it's not a good way to win friends or influence people, either. Some leaders in history have more-or-less made it. Take Caligula, for instance, who succeeded in taking control of all the armed forces of ancient Rome. His real name was Gaius Caesar and he gained the nickname, Caligula, which means "Little Boot", from the soldiers of his father, Germanicus Caesar. He is not remembered fondly: he reintroduced treason trials in which he demonstrated notable cruelty, including his execution of Naevius Sutorius Macro, whose support had secured him the throne. He had his army plunder Gaul with great cruelty and seems to have wanted to be seen as a god, despite his most unholy actions, having a statue of himself erected in a temple for people to worship. They didn't and he was not popular, however. Just four years after becoming Emperor he was murdered.

Absolutism, power that nobody can challenge, has been a bit of a theme running through world history. You will recall that some leaders and their allies have argued that a monopoly of power can be justified on the basis of a presumed knowledge of absolute truth. It was the argument used by Vladimir Ilich Lenin to explain

and defend the absolute rule of the Communist Party in Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. There have been other examples of benevolent one-person (or one-party) rule. In most cases, however, it's not proved a popular, nor even an effective form of government, albeit one that's been hard to dislodge. Generally speaking, it hasn't proved very benevolent, either. Which brings us to the present-day example provided by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, ruler of Turkey. Don't get me wrong: I like Turkey a great deal; it's a beautiful country with lovely scenery, interesting products to offer and a lively (if sometimes rather violent) history. The capital, Istanbul, is an historic and beautiful city that is well worth seeing, if you get the opportunity. Its people (or at least those I met) are friendly and welcoming. Descended from the old Ottoman Empire, it has a long and somewhat chequered past. But on the continent of Europe, what country doesn't?

So where does that place President Erdoğan? Well, he's the man currently in charge and determined to retain that state of affairs, but he faces a number of challenges. As tensions rose across parts of the Middle East, Turkey found itself in a difficult position, caught up in the Arab Spring and in supporting the moves towards democracy in Syria. Various uprisings put an end to the political careers of the Tunisian President, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and the Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak. Turkey began supporting democratic movements, which was a hazardous position to take, especially in view of Russia's growing interest in the region and the dangers that posed. Russia doesn't seem to be very keen on democratic movements, apparently preferring absolute and unchallenged power.



Ahmed al-Sharaa, Interim President of the Syrian Arab Republic and Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on April 11 in Antalya



Ekrem İmamoğlu, Turkish politician and businessman who serves as the 32nd Mayor of Istanbul since 2019 is currently suspended from office temporarily. He is the Republican People's Party candidate for the next Turkish presidential election. (The poster reads : 15,5 million votes referring to the votes for presidential candidacy he received while in detention)

It's hard to imagine that President Erdoğan will ever be held in quite such high regard as a famous former president of Turkey, Kemal Atatürk. He was known as "the Father of the Turks". Indeed, that's what Atatürk means; his given name was Mustafa Kemal. Of course, though, the row over Donald Trump's bizarre decision to ramp up tariffs on imported goods in the strange belief that this would benefit the American economy has tended to overshadow whatever President Erdoğan may or may not do. So far, he has tried to keep Turkey out of global conflicts and disputes, which seems sensible, but when unprovoked trade wars are in play, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid getting caught up in them.

Inevitably, however, despite the fog of war (trade war, that is) Erdoğan is seemingly striving to stay ahead of the game. He has urged other nations to lift the sanctions on Syria in order to help restore stability in the Middle East. It would also, he pointed out, help a return to "normality", which would in turn allow Syrians to return to their homeland. His hope for American support in his attempts to fight terrorism are hampered, however, by an American alliance with a Syrian Kurdish militia, which Turkey regards as a terrorist group.

The US stance has been condemned by Turkey as a betrayal of a NATO ally, although it's in compliance with something called CAATSA – otherwise known as the "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act", which is seen as part of the US support for that militia. Erdoğan wants an end to the sanctions imposed under CAATSA so that he can complete his acquisition of F-16 Viper multirole jet fighters and further develop defence industry cooperation between the US and Turkey. Ankara was blocked from progressing with the F-35 fighter programme by its purchase of Russian S-400 defence systems, which was never likely to please Washington. Complicated picture, isn't it? It's easy to see both points of view but so far impossible to see a simple resolution that keeps everyone happy. Recently, almost 250 people (at the time of writing), including 60 children, have been killed by landmines and other war-related ordnance in Syria. Close to 400 people have been injured. These are the casualty figures from just the last few months since December, when the Assad regime was overthrown. In fact, casualties resulting from landmines and other explosive remnants of Syria's internal war have dramatically increased since December. Partly, this is because

more people are using roads and trackways where many of the bombs and traps are positioned, including a very large number of people who had been displaced by the war and are finally able to return home, albeit clearly not safely.

In Turkey tens of thousands of Turkish protestors have recently had to face tear gas, baton rounds and rubber bullets in the country's worst unrest for a decade. More than 1,400 people have been arrested, too, over seven days of protests in March against Mr. Erdoğan's rule. It was all part of an angry protest over the arrest of Turkey's main opposition leader, the Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu. Journalists working in the country say they've never seen a crackdown like it. One possible explanation, provided to the UK's Independent newspaper by Can Dündar, a Turkish journalist charged with treason in his home country and now living in Europe, who has few doubts about Mr. Erdoğan's ambitions: "He wanted to be another Putin." He told the paper, "but the country is not ready to be another Russia." I suppose we should be relieved about that. Surely, one Russia is enough? According to Mr. Dündar, Mr. İmamoğlu has defeated Mr. Erdoğan's party four times in recent elections, which makes Mr. Erdoğan understandably nervous. What's more, recent opinion polls suggest that Mr. Erdoğan wouldn't win another presidential election anyway.

What about other world trouble spots? Well, Turkey's views are seen as crucial in the struggle over Ukraine. President Volodymyr Zelensky believes that Mr. Erdoğan will play an important role in guaranteeing Ukraine's independence, even if that means he won't be "flavour-of-the-month" in Moscow. Mr. Zelensky told Arab News that Turkey has played a role in brokering "several prisoner swap deals between Russia and Ukraine which have seen hundreds of prisoners returning home despite the ongoing conflict". Mr. Zelensky is not happy with the supposed





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Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

peace talks between the US and Russia, suspecting both of not taking Ukraine's viewpoint into account in their negotiations. In any case, Putin want President Zelensky out of the picture; he gets in the way of his military goals. Ukraine had previously won Mr. Erdoğan's support within NATO. Mr. Erdoğan has also said that Ukraine deserves to be a member of NATO, a position that Turkey maintains, although this clearly wouldn't go down well with President Putin. It wouldn't please President Trump, either: US Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth recently ruled out the possibility of Nato membership for Kyiv, calling it "unrealistic" and stating that Europe should be responsible for Ukraine's security, presumably avoiding the need for Washington to take sides.

Perhaps we should also recall that when Zelensky met with President Erdoğan recently, US officials were meeting with their Russian counterparts in Riyadh. Kyiv and the EU were both left out of those discussions, presumably because neither President Trump nor President Putin consider them sufficiently important. According to Al Jazeera, Ukraine's population stood at 34.7 million in 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion began. Since then, 6.9 million Ukrainians have left and gone abroad, 3.7 million of them were internally displaced, and 5 million remained in Russian-occupied areas, not necessarily of their own choosing, although it could be. 1.3 million Ukrainians live in Russia or in its closest ally, Belarus, according to reports by the United Nations, they're there by choice. According to Ukrainian officials, they face jail, torture and loss of property if they make any attempt to vote. Welcome to democracy, Putin-style.

Turkey would like to buy a fleet of American F-35 5th generation fighters, which would help it to defend itself against foreign adventurism, but at present Israel stands in the way. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been lobbying US Secretary of State Marco Rubio to block the sale, keen to retain Israel's air superiority over Turkey, even though the two countries are not at war, nor seemingly likely to be. The fear is over Turkey's growing influence in Syria. One might have imagined that President Netanyahu would be more concerned about Mr. Trump's recent negotiations with Iran. Meanwhile, back in Turkey



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Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in New York in 2023

there have been increasingly violent protests throughout the country against President Erdoğan, who has in turn responded with violence of his own, often involving the use of rubber bullets. In fact, the anti-Erdoğan demonstrations have been mainly fairly peaceful – so far – but that could easily change. The whole region is clearly a powder keg, and its politicians are playing with matches. President Erdoğan has called the protests "evil" and accused his political opponents of turning into a "movement of violence", as he called it. That's presumably why his government has closed the social media sites of some 700 journalists. Other journalists have been arrested. President Erdoğan clearly feels that any political opposition to his rule is in some way criminal. Erol Onderoglu, who launched the Istanbul office of Reporters Without Borders in 1996 has claimed that the current state of press freedom in Turkey is worse than it was under military rule. He has claimed that the arrest of so many journalists is intended as a warning to the public at large. Meanwhile, the articles the



© WIKICOMMONS

Erol Onderoglu

reporters write are coming under increasingly close supervision by the Turkish authorities.

Relations between Russia and Turkey, which were virtually non-existent in Soviet times, have improved, with some Russians choosing to holiday in Turkey. However, the two countries certainly don't agree on foreign policy. They have strongly opposing views, for instance, on the Syrian civil war and the conflict in Kosovo, as well as on the genocides in Armenia and Bosnia. So, what about Russia's war in Ukraine? Certainly, Turkey has views but they may not be what you would expect. The Turkish government argues that Russia is clearly at war, in which case it has the right under the 1936 Montreux Convention to close to any warships the Bosphorus Strait, which leads into the Black Sea. That means warships of any nation, I should point out, but the measure is clearly aimed at the Russian navy, in case Moscow seeks to reinforce the firepower it already has in place there. Turkey's decision is, at least, an important if purely symbolic one in support of Ukraine. However, Turkey voted for a UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia, although it has not imposed sanctions on Russia, nor closed its airspace to Russian aircraft. On the issue of Ukraine, Turkey tries to pretend a neutral stance,



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Igor Sechin

but it's fairly obviously more sympathetic towards Russia's position. Indeed, it's clear that Turkey's interests and those of Russia are relatively close. But there again, perhaps that shouldn't come as a surprise, considering how closely aligned are the interests of Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

One thing of which we should be aware from the outset is Russia's love of complex plots. Igor Sechin, President Putin's "gatekeeper" is a former KGB operative from St. Petersburg who rose to become deputy head of the Kremlin and to gain a reputation as "Russia's Darth Vader", so notorious did he become for convoluted plotting. It's not the sort of nickname many would cherish, but Mr. Sechin is the Chief Executive Officer, Chairman of the Management Board, and Deputy Chair of the Board of Directors of Rosneft, the largest oil company in Russia.

Not surprisingly, he's very rich. According to a disputed article on Forbes List, strongly denied by the man himself, he possesses \$800-million (€725-million) and two super-yachts, although this claim was withdrawn after a Moscow court ruled it to be untrue and defamatory. So it would seem that he's probably not as wealthy as Forbes reported. Even so, he's not exactly hard-up, either. Then there's Nikolai Patrushev, the powerful former head of the FSB (Federal Security Service), the successor-agency to the KGB, and currently the Chief of the Security Council. President Putin is well-served by like-thinking and clever officials, the so-called Siloviki, or "inner circle". Don't ever underestimate Russia or the Russians: Vladimir Putin is a clever man who has surrounded himself with other clever men. Sergei Tretyakov, a former colonel in Russian Foreign Intelligence (the SVR), has warned the West that Russia is certainly not its friend and is just as determined as the KGB



ever was to destroy the United States. It's better-equipped to achieve that ambition, too. And here's another thing: I've seen a lot of photographs of Putin but in hardly any of them is he smiling, not even in the pictures of him with his wife, Lyudmilla and his second daughter, Katerina, or Katya, born in 1986 while he was stationed in Dresden.

I'm not trying to suggest he's a cheerless man. He's probably the life and soul of any party, given the chance. He just doesn't show it. President Erdoğan told him that cooperation between their two countries is an essential factor in resolving regional conflicts. This may well be true, but such discussions normally involve one of the participants accepting that the other party also holds a valid point of view. In the case of President Putin, that could be difficult. Even so, the two men spoke together in late March about various topics, including security in the Black Sea and President Erdoğan's pledge to try his best to ensure the safety of commercial navigation there.

According to the Kremlin, the discussion also touched on what it referred to as "the resumption of the Black Sea initiative for safe navigation and the removal of obstacles to the export of Russian food and fertilizers", an initiative first brokered in 2022 by Turkey and the United Nations. Don't

cheer just yet; although it was supposed to guarantee the safe transportation of Ukrainian agricultural produce through the Black Sea, Moscow withdrew from the deal the very next year, accusing the West of failing to fulfil its promise to lift sanctions while also hampering Russia's own exports of agricultural products and fertilizers.

It would seem that both the White House and the Kremlin have been courting President Erdoğan. President Trump's own "special envoy", Steve Witkoff, said in an interview recently that "there's a lot of good, positive news coming out of Turkey", even as increasingly violent protests spread across the country. That would explain Washington's decision to sell Istanbul those F-35 jets. He didn't comment on Turkey's arrest of the leading opposition politician, Ekrem Imamoglu, which led to more demonstrations by his supporters. At the time of writing, more than 1,800 people, including ten or more journalists, have been arrested, and the demonstrations continue. The protestors face tear gas, water canon and rubber bullets but seem undeterred. Mr. Erdoğan has pointed out that the demonstrations have seen injuries, leading him to declare that "our country will not give in to street terror".

It's clear that he enjoys the support of President Trump, who has described Mr. Erdoğan as "a good leader". Widespread fear of Russia in Europe prevents too much criticism of Mr. Erdoğan's leadership skills. Turkey's economy is not looking very healthy, either, although the government hopes that the opposition Republican People's Party can be placated by allowing it to retain control of Istanbul, as it desires. Taking control of Turkey from



Mass protests in Istanbul



A map showing the location of the Black Sea and some of the large ports around it



Türkiye's main opposition leader Ozgur Ozel

with Mr. Erdogan and his government. They may not stick for long to mere demonstrations in defence of their views. Not all the other countries like Mr. Erdogan enough to defend him.

A question mark also hangs over Russia's support. After all, Turkey has been arming and supporting Ukraine, which must be humiliating for President Putin. Turkey has also been instrumental in securing the release of Ukrainian leaders held by Moscow, which, incidentally, refers to them as "Nazis". However, the mess that Russia has made of its war with Ukraine can only strengthen Turkey's position. President Putin, it seems, needs Mr. Erdoğan, despite the fact that Turkey has been supplying Kyiv with combat drones, rocket systems and armoured vehicles, among other things, which a Turkish defence company, Baykar, has said it plans to build a drone factory in Ukraine. Friendship, it seems, is a slippery business. Whether or not that is to the long-term advantage of Mr. Erdoğan remains to be seen, as does the continued friendship of Mr. Putin.

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## EUROPEAN BIOTECHNOLOGY

**Start-ups developing  
life-changing innovations**



**With the right support to scale and bring their innovations to market, biotech start-ups can help transform healthcare across Europe.**

Many are developing technologies to better manage chronic diseases and address the unmet health needs of an ageing population, driving a much-needed shift toward more personalised, sustainable medicine. Crucially, biotech seed funding plays a pivotal role in enabling early-stage success, allowing start-ups to navigate the high costs and risks associated with research and development.

## The Healthcare Biotech Landscape in Europe

Europe has emerged as a global hub for healthcare biotechnology, driven by a combination of robust academic research institutions, government support, and thriving start-up ecosystems. The European biotech industry is renowned for its focus on solving complex healthcare challenges, ranging from rare diseases to oncology and regenerative medicine. With countries like Germany, France, and the UK leading the charge, the sector boasts more than 3,700 active biotech companies, many of which are focused on healthcare innovation.

However, the landscape is not without challenges. Regulatory hurdles, talent shortages, and the high costs associated with research and development (R&D) continue to pose barriers. Despite these obstacles, European biotech companies are setting benchmarks globally, particularly in the healthcare sector.

## AI in Biotech: Driving Breakthroughs in European Healthcare

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionising biotechnology, particularly in healthcare, where it enables breakthroughs in drug discovery, diagnostics, and personalised medicine. Studies have shown that AI can significantly reduce drug discovery timelines and costs by predicting molecule efficacy with record accuracy. In diagnostics, machine learning models have demonstrated higher accuracy in detecting diseases like breast cancer compared to traditional methods. AI's ability to analyse complex biological

data also supports advancements in personalised medicine, tailoring treatments to individual genetic profiles. Across Europe, biotech start-ups are leveraging AI to accelerate innovation and improve patient outcomes.

## Spotlight on 6 Biotech Start-Ups transforming Healthcare in Europe

### Cytocast (Hungary)



Attila Csikász Nagy, CEO

István Reguly, CTO

Cytocast is pioneering the future of drug discovery with its innovative Cytocast Digital Twin Patient™ platform. This high-performance digital twin technology leverages AI and advanced computational simulations to model protein interactions within virtual cells. By predicting physiological responses, protein complex formations across various tissue types, and potential side effects, the platform enhances the accuracy of drug development. This approach enables in-silico drug testing, reducing development costs and timelines while increasing success rates. Cytocast has already secured EUR 1.9 million in pre-seed funding and is actively seeking seed investment to expand its market reach and further enhance its platform.

EIT Health has played a crucial role in Cytocast's success by providing strategic mentorship, networking opportunities, and access to a pan-European ecosystem of healthcare innovators. EIT Health supported Cytocast by selecting it for the HICEE start-up support programme, which aims to accelerate high-impact start-ups in Europe. This programme provides tailored mentoring, strategic guidance, and networking opportunities, helping Cytocast navigate challenges and scale its innovative solutions in healthcare.

### Deep MedChem (Czech Republic)

Deep MedChem is revolutionising early drug development with its advanced software tools designed to accelerate medicinal chemistry. By enabling extremely fast and accurate searches, and prediction of molecular properties within vast chemical spaces,



Deep MedChem's management team, from left to right : Jan Macek, Chief Executive Officer - Miroslav Lžičař, Chief Technical Officer - Jiří Růžička, Chief Business Officer

the platform helps pharmaceutical, and biotech companies identify the most promising molecules for drug development. Despite being just a year old and in its seed funding stage, Deep MedChem has already gained significant traction with over 1000 users worldwide, first paying customers, and important collaborations with leading vendors of chemical space such as eMolecules, Mcule, Otava Chemicals, and Enamine.

EIT Health provided tailored mentoring, business development guidance, and access to a robust network of healthcare and biotech stakeholders across Europe. This pan-European support was crucial in helping Deep MedChem refine its strategy and accelerate its market entry.

### Gate2brain (Spain)

Gate2Brain is a biotech company developing peptide-based technology to enhance drug delivery across biological barriers, such as the blood-brain barrier, increasing treatment efficacy while minimising side effects. Founded in 2020 as a spin-off from IRB Barcelona, the Universitat de Barcelona, and Hospital Sant Joan de Déu Barcelona, Gate2Brain's platform is applicable to various therapeutic areas. Notably, their therapy G2B-002,

targeting brain tumours, received Orphan Drug Designation from the European Medicines Agency.

EIT Health played a crucial role in Gate2Brain's success by selecting the company for an accelerator programme, helping Gate2Brain refine its business model and accelerate product development.

### Fusix Biotech (Germany)

Fusix Biotech is a Munich-based start-up developing a synthetic oncolytic vector-based platform (InFUSE™) to advance cancer immunotherapy. Their innovative approach reprogrammes tumors from within, enhancing the body's immune response to target multiple solid cancer types. They are currently developing a pipeline of "armed" vectors, encoding for a variety of therapeutic genes, for personalised cancer treatments and attracting exciting business development opportunities. With EUR 1.6M in funding and several scientific milestones achieved, Fusix Biotech is positioned to transform the



G2B's founders, from left to right : Esther Riambau, BSc, MBA - Gloria Sanclimens, PhD - Meritxell Teixidó, PhD





Fusix Biotech's management team, from left to right : Marian Wiegand, Jennifer Altomonte, Markus Gerhard, Teresa Krabbe

immuno-oncology landscape and is on track to bring its lead asset, FUSE102, to patients by 2027.

Through EIT Health's accelerator programme and Catapult competition, Fusix Biotech benefited of strategic mentorship, expert guidance, and networking opportunities, accelerating Fusix's growth and helping them refine their business model.

### ■ Polygon Therapeutics (France)

Founded in 2021, Polygon Therapeutics is a French biotech company pioneering the field of cardio-immunology. The company focuses on the intersection of the immune system and cardiovascular health, aiming to develop novel immunotherapies for acute cardiovascular diseases. Their lead programme targets myocardial infarction (MI), a condition affecting millions annually, where existing treatments fail to prevent long-term damage such as heart failure. Polygon's discovery of the role of CD8+ T cells in heart damage following reperfusion has led to PLG-101, a first-in-class anti-CD8 depleting antibody. In preclinical studies, PLG-101 reduced infarct size by 60% and improved heart function by 25%, with no observed side effects.



Mohamed Abou Ali, co-founder and CEO, Polygon Therapeutics

Polygon then secured USD 7.5M in seed funding independently, bringing it closer to clinical trials. Collaborations with organisations like INSERM are also driving key initiatives, particularly to strengthen the pipeline. With this momentum, Polygon is set to launch its First-In-Human trial in 2025 and advance its promising therapies for high-risk acute myocardial infarction patients in Europe and the United States.

### ■ aptaTargets (Spain)

AptaTargets is a clinical stage biopharmaceutical company specialised on the development of therapeutic aptamers. Their lead product, ApTOLL, is an innovative neuroprotectant aimed at reducing brain damage in Acute Ischemic Stroke (AIS) when used in combination with endovascular therapy (EVT). Following successful preclinical development and a Phase I First-in-Human trial, aptaTargets conducted a Phase II clinical trial in AIS patients with outstanding results, showing that ApTOLL was able to reduce the brain damage and significantly improve functional outcomes. Founded in 2014, aptaTargets is based in Madrid (Spain).



David Segarra, co-founder of aptaTargets

Through EIT Health's accelerator programme, aptaTargets secured significant grants, including funding to advance their clinical trials for AIS. Additionally, aptaTargets received invaluable assistance in expanding into new European markets, helping them gain access to new opportunities and networks. This support, coupled with funding from VCs, the EIC Accelerator and the Spanish Ministry, has enabled aptaTargets to plan for late-stage clinical trials and signed a partnership agreement with a pharmaceutical company, taking a major step forward in bringing ApTOLL to market.

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Source : eit.europa.eu

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## SUPERPOWER OR SUPERFLOP?

**What the future may hold  
for the European Union**



“Peace does not depend solely on treaties and commitments,” said Jean Monnet, generally regarded as the “father of the European Union”, “but rather, on the creation of conditions which, although they may not change man’s nature, are conducive to peaceful behaviour towards others.” You’ll have gathered, I should think, that Mr. Monnet was a thoroughly decent sort of chap who truly believed that the European Economic Community, as it was then called, would prove to be a model that others would choose to follow. I never met Monnet but I worked with Dirk Spierenburg and Raymond Poidevin on a 1994 book called “The History of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community”, which told the blow-by-blow history of how the so-called ECSC, which turned into the Common Market, came into being. This meant frequent meetings to discuss the progress of our work and how to overcome the various obstacles, most often getting together in a small bar not far from the press entrance of the European Commission. I even get a mention in the acknowledgements for my help in editing the draft of the first English edition, the book having been initially published in French. Incidentally, I can thoroughly recommend the book although that will come as no surprise, I’m sure (although no, I don’t get



Dirk Spierenburg

royalties). Spierenburg had been the Director General of Foreign Economic Relations in the Netherlands, as well as the Deputy Government Commissioner for the Marshall Plan since 1947, while Poidevin was Professor of History at the University of Strasbourg III when I knew him. He was also the author of several books, including (somewhat ironically, perhaps) one called “Origins of European Integration”, written between 1948 and 1950.

When I was working with these two notable, charming and knowledgeable gentlemen (and enjoying a beer with them as we sat and chatted, reading and correcting proofs), those involved with the creation of what would become the European Union were still taking cautious backward glances at the Second World War, not so very far in the past, and were generally very well aware of where national hatred could lead. It seems to be the natural state of humankind, despite the fact that friendliness and cooperation would clearly be far more advantageous for everyone. Unification is never simple, although India achieved it, creating a vibrant, pluralist parliamentary democracy. Europe has been trying to achieve something similar, but despite having fewer people, still has the problems of nationalism and language boundaries to overcome. India had had similar problems but overcame them. Europeans, however, are an argumentative bunch and while everything was running fairly smoothly in terms of unifying health and safety standards, extreme nationalists started trying to break the Union apart. Those of us who firmly believed in it went on well-attended marches of protest but still Britain voted (narrowly) to leave the EU in a process that became known as “Brexit” – a silly name for a very silly process. Too many people, it seems, had been persuaded that an agreement to cooperate in raising standards was equivalent to surrendering a country’s sovereignty to the dreaded “foreigners”. Childish, I know, but it sold newspapers and won votes among those who liked to holiday abroad but didn’t want to mix or mingle with the locals once they got there. Racism remains a powerful force, still exploited by some less responsible politicians.

So how does the European Union – still inclined to be fractious even when theoretically cooperating – face up to a difficult future? Can it develop into a “superpower” or will it engage in fragmentation and come to nothing? I quite like the idea of the former but I’m inclined to find the latter more likely. Napoleon Bonaparte once said “You may wish to say that, without



Napoleon Bonaparte by Jacques-Louis David in 1805

the Revolution, you would not have had me. Nevertheless, without the Revolution, France would have been more happy.” At least, that’s how he is quoted by Joseph S. C. Abbott in his late 19th century book on the life of the great French leader. I’m convinced that in voicing that opinion, Napoleon was wrong. There is an old saying in English: “you can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs”. Or, in this case, chopping off a few heads. But such violence isn’t necessary to build a peaceful continent of cooperating nations, as long as one single one of them doesn’t insist on being in charge of the rest. When I was reporting on EU affairs from Brussels, I knew several of those anti-E U campaigners, but in my recollection they mainly wanted to have Britain in charge, regardless of how well (if at all) this would work. It was rather like the old children’s game of “I’m the king of the castle and you’re the dirty rascal”. Of course, in the eyes of the ultra-nationalists, everyone from a different country, however closely related in biological or evolutionary terms, was, of course, the “dirty rascal”. They still think that way.

Perhaps that does demonstrate one of the factors that makes fragmentation a more likely outcome than the establishment of a “superstate”. If there is no clear leader, the various members (or member states) are inclined to squabble about just who is in charge. It becomes like one of those endless committee meetings in which all the participants try to come out on top, even when there clearly cannot be a “top” to be on. One of the principle issues concerns security. How can the people of Europe feel safe from external attack when the EU itself is not a military power and lacks the EU-controlled means to repel invaders and keep its citizens safe ? In addition, we now have geo-



US President Donald Trump

economics in which enhanced cooperation has become essential. US President Donald Trump’s aggressive policy of imposing tariffs left, right and centre clearly makes the situation worse for everybody. It also looks likely to make matters much worse for the US itself.

Of course, the EU is set to get bigger, and its current rulers know it must reform itself if that is to work. We should recall that its present structure was established when the Common Market (as it was then) had just six member states. It has grown (and in one instance shrunk again) since then, but institutionally it remains the same. Now more countries want to join, especially from Central and Eastern Europe. That may be just as well for the EU’s future as its population dwindles and its people grow older. Those are factors that could make the EU less competitive globally. If the EU is really to become a superpower, it needs to deepen the cooperation among member states, becoming a family instead of a club with many and various members. The report in 2024 by the former President of the European



Thomas Piketty





Mario Draghi

Bank and Prime Minister of Italy, Mario Draghi, highlighted the need for innovation, investment, and unity among member states to ensure prosperity and stability. It also said that the EU needs to look further ahead if it wants to remain competitive as markets and global politics progress. As far as so-called ‘Cohesion policy’ is concerned, the report called for the issue of reducing regional disparities to be addressed urgently in a bid to ensure more balanced growth, also calling for greater investment in less developed regions, so as to enhance their infrastructure, education, and technological capabilities.

There is a big problem here. The European Union is a group of separate countries, each with its own history, aims and ambitions, and the council of finance ministers or even heads of government are totally unsuited to developing a real European parliamentary democracy, however well-intentioned they may be.

The gifted French economist Thomas Piketty explains this problem well in his book, *Capital and Ideology*. “The Council is a body consisting of one representative per country. As such, it is designed to pit the (perceived) national interests of member states against one another. In no way does it allow for pluralist deliberation or construction of a majority based on ideas rather than interests.” That means it is clearly unsuited to turning the European Union into a superpower of any sort. As he points out in this excellent book (which I wish I had owned when I was studying economics), “the German finance minister alone represents 83-million citizens, the French finance minister 67-million, the Greek finance minister 11-million and so on.” Looking for a European superpower? It may be very hard to find. As Piketty points out, tranquil deliberation of the various issues and the various points of view they attract could prove all but impossible.

Things were never meant to be like this, but economic events can behave like some kind of virus, spreading rapidly through the capital markets of the world. Just look at the Great Recession

that began in 2008. Millions of people in Europe, the United States and the world at large lost their jobs and their homes. Those who had set aside money “for a rainy day”, or for their children’s education, saw it dwindle away to a fraction of its previous value. “This is not the way things were supposed to be,” wrote the economist Joseph E. Stiglitz in his book, *Freefall*. “Modern economics with its faith in free markets and globalization, had promised prosperity for all” he wrote. It failed to deliver, however. But even within the EU, things are not quite what they were meant to be. “The European institutions,” wrote Piketty, “in which ministerial councils currently play the central and dominant role, relegating the European Parliament to a supporting role, were designed to regulate the broad market and conclude intergovernmental agreements; they were not designed to make fiscal and social policy.”

They have been forced into that role that they never sought, do not want and at which they are really not very good. It’s time for someone else to have a go. Indeed, among the leaders of those member states that favour a federal system of government, quite a number think it would be best to transfer all power over new taxes to the European Parliament. As someone who spent several years reporting on the European Parliament, I must say it would appear to be an excellent plan (even if some of the members I recall were far from being community-minded. Or even intelligent). Succeeding in getting them to reach agreement would seem to be quite a challenge.

What’s more, Draghi’s report argues that the EU

will face what he calls “an existential challenge” unless it manages to vastly increase the current level of investment and also to reform its industrial policy. Yet again we reach a bifurcation between becoming a superpower or a failed nonentity. We should never forget, of course, that watching from the sidelines will be Vladimir Putin, looking for any mistakes that might pitch Europe into his lap. I think we can safely assume that not many people outside the Russian border would favour such an outcome.

We should remember that the sudden end of the Cold War and the unanticipated collapse of the Soviet Union was at least partially down to friendship, in this case the personal relationship between Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, and the President of the United States at that time, Ronald Reagan.

According to the historian Robert Service, Gorbachev had come to realise there could be no future for the Soviet part of the world, while it was clear that he and Reagan had developed a personal friendship. They liked each other. In the book by Simon Jenkins, *A Short History of Europe – From Pericles to Putin*, he says that Gorbachev struggled to retain control, and he found that holding it all together was an impossible task. “In losing its autocratic character,” Jenkins wrote, “the Communist Party lost its brain and its spine. It disintegrated, and with it the fount of institutional discipline within the Leninist-Stalinist empire.” I was working in Berlin when the famous Wall was being dismantled. I noticed a bar right on the former frontier and went in for a drink, which

involved going downstairs. The toilets were in a cellar which was even further down and had a lot of stairs leading down to it. I went down, but I chose the wrong stairs to come back up and found myself in what had been East Berlin. Demolition teams were taking down what was left of the Wall, so I quickly realised I was safe, but it was nevertheless slightly disorienting to realise where I was. The beer was good, however, on whichever side it had been brewed.

Turning back to the European Union, we have to remember that the whole idea has its enemies. Among them, of course, we have President Putin, who doesn’t want a safe and economically successful group of countries on his doorstep. Then, we must consider President Trump, who seem to be opposed to seeing the EU become a rival for global dominance. It’s a fairly unlikely thing to happen, of course, since unlike the United States it has no ambitions to take over parts of the world and is fairly strongly opposed to other countries trying to do so, albeit without opposing such moves militarily. Mr. Trump, after all, wants to own Greenland, which belongs to Denmark, an EU member state, so of course he seem to dislike the EU. The EU has plenty of internal enemies, too. In Britain the more right-wing newspapers are opposed to it, being supporters of a country-based form of nationalism.

When there was talk of closer relations across Europe, one British newspaper ran the headline: “Don’t betray Brexit”. No, just go on hating everyone from any other country, presumably, but still go there on holiday. Of course.

But there’s another point we must consider: in order to become a super-power, a country (or in the EU’s case a group of countries) must have a burning desire to wield such global power. We know Putin wants it, seemingly seeing himself as another czar, perhaps, and so does Trump. But so far (and I think forever) the EU has shown no obvious desire to conquer and rule. As a group of mutually supporting countries devoted to trade it seems



General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan, signing the INF Treaty in 1987





“Stop Brexit Betrayal” campaign launched by The Sun newspaper

unlikely. It would be rather like the Boy Scouts deciding to conquer the world, which was never the intention of the movement’s founder, Robert Baden-Powell, as far as I know. Unless it’s some kind of underground power movement, planning to take over the world: today it’s just camping, carrying useful penknives and learning how to light fires, tomorrow it’s world domination. I just can’t see that as likely, somehow. And I think I’d look silly in shorts.

The nation states of the EU are, of course, individual and independent. They are completely unlike the states of America, too. As Thomas Piketty wrote in his book, *Capital and Ideology*, no member country has envisaged a totally federalist body, which would make the EU more like a single country. It has always been (and is treaty-bound always to remain) a group of individual countries and totally unlike the United States in its style of governance. “It makes no sense,” Piketty wrote, “to compare the US Senate to the European Council. The equivalent of the European Council would be a senate composed of the governors of the individual states, where two states, say California and New York, accounted for half the country’s GDP, which is roughly the situation of Germany and France in the Eurozone.” He adds: “Such a system would probably function very poorly, and the two governors would probably meet often without coming to any agreement.” Actually, that situation sounds disturbingly familiar...

So, now we come to the nub of the issue: superstate or super-flop, of no significance to anyone at all, really? The plain fact is apart from a few deluded lunatics with ideas above their station (and a hankering for raw, unbridled power) nobody really wants an all-powerful European Union trying to take over the world. You may recall that famous song from the 1963 musical, *Pickwick*? No-one was expected to take it seriously, especially since its early lines include the words: “If I ruled the world every day would

be the first day of spring”. Which would, of course, be not only impossible but also extremely dangerous. If it could happen in reality (which, of course, it cannot) there would never be an autumn and hence no harvest, either. We’d all starve to death. Neither Presidents Putin nor Trump, nor even the mysterious and virtually unknown leaders of the highly-secretive North Korea at their most ambitious and power-hungry could wish for such an outcome. (Actually, in the case of the leaders of North Korea I’m not entirely certain; try reading Annie Jacobsen’s terrifying book called “Nuclear War – a Scenario” and you may feel a little less certain about what the future holds but very certain of just how stupid human beings can be. It may lead you to wanting a ban on all nuclear weapons, if only we could all trust each other to keep our promises). What it demonstrates, perhaps, is that while something may sound idyllic and beautiful there is almost always a downside that gets overlooked.



Russian President Vladimir Putin

Do we Europeans really want to be part of a terrifyingly powerful superstate? I’m not sure I do, I’m afraid. What most of us would like best perhaps (apart from the likes of Trump, Putin and the North Koreans) is a group of peacefully co-existent countries without designs on one another’s territories or a wish to seize their raw materials and with absolutely no desire to go to war. In the end it all comes down to money. Many of those in positions of power are there because they are rich or because they really, really want to become rich by any means possible. Power helps them to get there. The super-rich and super-powerful (often the same people) have an almost religious belief in their right to be in charge. Even Putin, when he won Russia’s election in 2012, was seen to shed tears on taking over following four years of more liberal rule under Dmitry Medvedev, but not because he was sad at gaining power or at Medvedev losing it. He was apparently saddened by the fact that there had been serious protests about the result. It would seem he had expected the Russian people to be pleased that he was about to reimpose his own style of authoritarian government. I understand it’s called the delusions of power or grandeur. Well, at least there’s no risk of that happening in the European Union. Power is a dirty business, and I think that, although I want the European Union to be able to stand up for itself, I really don’t want it to become a superstate. Don’t worry: it probably never will.

*Jim Gibbons*

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# EUROPOL

## Hard-hitting, anti-crime offensive across Europe



# 1. Operation Bulut: Turkey takes the Lead in a Historic International Organised Crime Crackdown

## 225 high-ranking members of international criminal organisations arrested

Turkish officials, working with Europol and law enforcement agencies from Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain, have dismantled a wide network of organised criminal syndicates in a massive global operation known as "Operation BULUT" (meaning "cloud" in Turkish). 225 high-ranking members of international criminal organisations were arrested in Turkey and nine overseas as a result of the coordinated operations that were carried out.

Four significant international drug cartels were the focus of the investigation; they were involved in the trafficking of cocaine from South America, heroin from Iran and Afghanistan, skunk cannabis from the Balkans, and ecstasy into Turkey and wider Europe via various European routes. In addition to discovering massive money laundering activities connected to these networks, authorities recovered 21.2 tonnes of drugs, including 3.3 million MDMA tablets.

Using intelligence gleaned from encrypted communication services, particularly Sky ECC and ANOM, was a key component of Operation BULUT.

Turkish detectives were able to sketch out the criminal hierarchy and logistics of the syndicates thanks to decrypted data from these platforms that were provided by French and Australian authorities. Turkish officers were sent to Europol's headquarters to collaborate directly with European analysts, allowing for strategic planning and real-time coordination.

According to Jean-Philippe Lecouffe, Europol's Executive Deputy Director Operations "Years after their takedown, encrypted platforms like SKY ECC and ANOM are still helping law enforcement turn intelligence into action. This case shows how powerful that data remains in identifying and dismantling



Jean-Philippe Lecouffe, Europol's Executive Deputy Director, Operations Directorate

high-value criminal networks operating in Europe. From logistics coordinators to the top tier of the criminal infrastructure, no one is beyond reach when countries work together and act on solid intelligence".

The following authorities took part in the investigation:

- **France:** JUNALCO (National jurisdiction against Organised Crime), National Police (OFAST)
- **The Netherlands:** National Police
- **Belgium:** Federal Judicial Police Central Unit (DJSOC), Federal Judicial Police of East Flanders
- **Germany:** Federal Criminal Police (Bundeskriminalamt)
- **Spain:** National Police and Guardia Civil
- **Türkiye:** National Police; Counter Narcotics Department/Istanbul Narcotics Division (Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü Narkotik Suçlarla Mücadele Başkanlığı/İstanbul Narkotik Suçlarla Mücadele Şube Müdürlüğü), Interpol-Europol Department (Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü İnterpol-Europol Daire Başkanlığı)

## 2. AK Rifles and Grenades seized as Firearms Trafficking Route into France Dismantled

Cooperation between authorities from France, Slovenia, Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the support from Eurojust and Europol, has resulted in the dismantling of an arms traffickers group. Actions taking place simultaneously in France, Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina led to the arrest of seven members of the criminal group.

Investigations into the group started when authorities found a large number of weapons, ammunition and grenades. Further investigations in the group led to suspicions that some members of the group resided in France. Authorities found out that the criminal group trafficked large numbers of weapons that they bought on illegal marketplaces in Bosnia and Herzegovina to smuggle them into France.



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Authorities started to work together through Eurojust to stop the criminal group and arrest its members. Eurojust ensured that European Arrest Warrants and European Investigation Orders were prepared ahead of the coordinated operation. Europol supported the investigation from the outset, delivering operational analysis to the cases in the involved countries, coordinating international cooperation by organising operational meetings, and deploying officers to France and Spain for the action day.



© EUROPOL

Ammunition and grenades concealed in car tyres

A coordinated operation to take down the group started on 18 March. The cooperation between authorities led to the arrest of seven members of the criminal group, four in France, one in Spain and two in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Searches were carried out in Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina to collect information and evidence on the group's activities. Bosnian authorities are actively searching for the main target.

The following authorities carried out the operations:

- **France:** JIRS Paris (Interregional Specialised Jurisdiction); OCLCO (National Police Office against organised crime)
- **Slovenia:** District State Prosecutor's Office in Kranj; Police Directorate Kranj
- **Spain:** PPO Audiencia Nacional; Central Investigating Court num 5 at Audiencia Nacional; Guardia Civil
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** The Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Border Police of Bosnia and Herzegovina; Ministry of Interior Affairs - Republic of Srpska (part of the investigation before the operation)





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# UNION OF SKILLS

## Future-Proofing European Talent

*'The future belongs to those who learn more skills  
and combine them in creative ways'*  
Robert Greene.



© ROBERT GREENE

Robert Greene American author of books on strategy, power, and seduction

In a rapidly evolving global economy, skills have become the new currency of competitiveness. As industries transform and technology reshapes the job market, Europe faces a critical challenge: equipping its workforce with the right tools to thrive in the digital and green transitions. At the same time, it must streamline procedures, improve

the recognition and equivalence of qualifications across member states, and facilitate workforce mobility to ensure labor can move swiftly to where it is needed most.

The free movement of workers within the European Union was established with the founding of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 under the Treaty of Rome. However, its full implementation occurred in stages, beginning with the six founding members—Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. The principle was further solidified by EEC Regulation 1612/68, which fully guaranteed the free movement of workers, allowing EU citizens to move and work freely across member states without work permits. The Maastricht Treaty (1992) strengthened this freedom by introducing EU citizenship, granting individuals the right to live and work anywhere in the EU, regardless of employment status. At the turn of the 21st century, the EU expanded to include Central and Eastern European countries, broadening labour mobility. By 2011, the EU had achieved full labour mobility across the Union. Today, EU citizens can live, work, and study in any member state without visas or work permits, making free movement one of the cornerstones of the European Single Market.

Despite these developments, disparities and inconsistencies in requirements persist between different countries. While academic degrees are recognised throughout the Union, numerous obstacles remain, hindering full integration and more efficient labour mobility. Moreover, there is now a growing demand for new digital skills—many of which European workers currently lack. To remain competitive, we must equip our workforce with the tools needed to adapt to a rapidly changing environment and meet the real demands of today's economy.

In September 2024, Mario Draghi – former President of the European Central Bank and Prime Minister of Italy – published *The Future of European Competitiveness*, a comprehensive analysis of the challenges facing the European Union. Draghi warned of a growing productivity and competitiveness gap between Europe and other major economies, particularly the U.S. and China.



Roxana Minzatu unveils her first key initiative as European Commission Vice President for Social Rights and Skills

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The report stressed that Europe must urgently invest in reskilling and upskilling its workforce to keep pace with technological and industrial advancements. Highlighting the critical role of education reform, Draghi emphasised continuous learning while championing vocational training, STEM education, and digital skills development. He also identified acute shortages of highly skilled workers in strategic sectors such as AI, cybersecurity, engineering, and green technologies.

To address these challenges, Draghi proposed:

- Strengthening collaboration between education systems and industry to align skills with labour market needs
- Increasing funding for R&D and innovation to stimulate high-quality job creation
- Implementing lifelong learning policies to maintain workforce adaptability
- Attracting skilled migration to compensate for Europe's ageing population

These measures, the report argued, are essential for boosting Europe's global competitiveness in an increasingly digital and green economy. The report also highlighted another critical challenge: overly complex EU regulations that create barriers for businesses and restrict labour mobility. It called for simplified labour market rules and easier cross-border recognition of qualifications across member states.

Recognising this urgency, the European Commission launched the 'Union of Skills' initiative' on 5 March 2025. Vice-President Roxana Minzatu unveiled this flagship project—a comprehensive skills development strategy designed to tackle Europe's skills shortages, foster innovation and enhance the EU's global competitiveness.

This groundbreaking initiative aims to bridge the skills gap, support innovation, and prepare workers for tomorrow's jobs. By creating a more agile and adaptable workforce, the EU seeks to drive economic growth and strengthen Europe's position in the global marketplace. Beyond education, the strategy focuses on economic resilience and strategic autonomy, forming a key pillar of the EU's broader competitiveness agenda. Its goal? To



equip Europeans with future-proof skills for the digital, green, and industrial transitions.

Among other measures, the plan includes introducing a Basic Skills Support Scheme aimed at strengthening core competencies—reading, mathematics, science, and digital literacy—for both young people and adults. 'We need new skills for the future,' stressed Roxana Minzatu, Vice-President of the EU Commission, during her speech at the EU Social Forum in Brussels. 'We must understand the new skills ecosystem, invest more, and target funding more effectively.' At the Forum, Minzatu also emphasised the need for tighter collaboration between education institutions, the public sector, and private enterprises. She highlighted the importance of developing forecasting tools to anticipate industry needs in a timely manner.

One pressing issue is the alarming gap in basic maths skills among school leavers, severely restricting their employability and adaptability in today's fast-evolving job market. Compounding this, fewer students are choosing technical training or STEM degrees—a trend the Commission aims to reverse through its STEM Education Strategic Plan. Key objectives of the plan include modernising STEM curricula to reflect industry demands, fostering partnerships between schools, universities, and businesses and encouraging greater participation of women and underrepresented groups in STEM careers. The plan includes initiatives to modernise STEM curricula and establish stronger links between educational institutions and industries.

At the European Employment and Social Rights Forum in Brussels, discussions largely focused on tackling Europe's skills and labour challenges to boost competitiveness and social inclusion. Among other speakers, Mario Nava, Director-General at DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, stressed the need to promote sustainable prosperity and equip workers with adaptable skills to keep pace with rapid workforce changes. Topics ranged from AI's role in labour markets to social innovation programs designed to close skills gaps.

Chuck Robbins, CEO of Cisco, provided concrete insights into implementing the Union of Skills initiative, reiterating the critical role of public-private partnerships in tackling shortages: 'Only 7% of companies in Europe say they are ready for the transition to the digital age. We need to reduce digital illiteracy. Over the past 20 years, Cisco Network Academy offered digitalisation training to 20 million students. Cisco is committing today to additionally train in Europe 1.5 million students and 5,000 instructors by 2030. Digital skills are ever more relevant. Beyond a certain age, it is more difficult, but we don't want to leave anyone behind.'

The discussions also focused on enhancing adult learning and the growing imperative for continuous upskilling in today's fast-evolving labour market. As part of the Union of Skills initiative, the EU plans to revitalise vocational education and training (VET). The new VET strategy aims to make vocational



Chuck Robbins, Chair and Chief Executive, Cisco Systems

careers more attractive and innovative, strengthen business-education partnerships to align training with labour market demands and expand financial and structural support for apprenticeships and dual education systems. Lifelong learning remains a cornerstone of the plan. The Commission will promote micro-credentials—short, flexible learning modules—to help workers acquire and certify new skills efficiently. 'The Pact for Skills, already driving skills development in key sectors, will be reinforced to offer more training opportunities and funding for workers,' stated the EU Commission. Crucially, these qualifications must be recognised EU-wide,

enabling professionals to move seamlessly across borders. This would reduce bureaucratic hurdles, tackle labour shortages faster, and better match skills with industry needs.

Adult learning participation serves as a critical benchmark for assessing upskilling progress and labour market adaptability across the EU. Recent data from the *Adult Learning Survey* reveals that 39.5% of adults participated in formal or non-formal learning (excluding on-the-job training) in 2022 – a positive trend, yet still far below the EU's 2030 target of 60%. Notably, participation rates vary significantly between Member States, with higher-educated individuals being substantially more likely to engage in lifelong learning. (Source: *EU Monitor*). A study by Cedefop highlights the scale of the challenge: approximately 128 million EU adults (46.1%) require upskilling or reskilling. This assessment considers low formal education levels, inadequate digital competencies and employment in elementary occupations. Again, national disparities are stark – while Malta and Portugal report needs affecting approximately 70% of adults, the figure falls to about 28% in the Czech Republic and Finland. (Source: *jobmarketmonitor.com*).

The EU has introduced targeted measures to support workers requiring urgent retraining. Between 2021 and 2022, approximately 13,000 displaced workers received assistance through retraining programmes and job placement support. A pressing concern remains youth unemployment, driven by either skills mismatches or outdated qualifications. As of December 2024, the EU's youth unemployment rate stood at 15%, though with considerable national variations. Spain recorded a rate of 25.3% in January 2025. While still 11 percentage points above the EU average, this reflected notable progress compared to previous years (Source: *Eurostat*).

The European Union is actively working to attract top international researchers, engineers, and scientists through



The Commission's flagship research and innovation event brings together policymakers, researchers, stakeholders and the public to debate and shape the future of research and innovation in Europe and beyond





The network of the 41 European University Alliances

initiatives like 'Choose Europe' (part of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions). With a €22.5 million budget, the program aims to strengthen collaboration between European universities and research institutions, as well as offering competitive salaries, funding, and career development to retain talent. The need is urgent: 4 out of 10 European SMEs struggle to find qualified employees. Interestingly, recent reports suggest growing interest among US-based academics—particularly due to political uncertainties—in relocating to Europe. While outcomes remain uncertain, this could present a strategic opportunity for the EU.

The *Union of Skills* initiative directly supports the EU's 2040 competitiveness strategy, with three core objectives. Reducing critical skills shortages, strengthening Europe's resilience against economic and technological disruptions, and empowering workers to transition between careers throughout their working lives. While the digital revolution will inevitably displace many current jobs, it will simultaneously create new, unforeseen opportunities - some in roles we can't yet imagine. The real challenge lies in implementation and funding within Europe's current economic landscape. The Commission plans to support the initiative through a mixed financing model, combining public funding and private sector investment.

The initiative focuses on two key financial strategies: streamlining public funding to enhance the effectiveness of education and training programmes, and boosting private investment through improved incentives and regulatory conditions. A prime example of this approach in

action is the network of European University Alliances, which successfully combines public and private resources to drive innovation in higher education.

The *Union of Skills* initiative adopts a dual-phase approach, combining urgent actions with visionary 2030 targets. EU Executive Vice-President Roxana Minzatu (Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness) launched it within her first 100 days - a deliberate signal of its top-tier political priority. Immediate actions include pilot programmes like the *Basic Skills Support Scheme*, implementation of the Skills Guarantee, rapid upskilling in fundamental competencies and expansion of lifelong learning pathways.

In the longer term, strategic goals have been set for 2030. These include systemic education reforms, sustainable employability improvements and pan-European skills intelligence integration. To ensure effective execution, the Commission will establish a European Skills High-Level Board (strategic oversight) and a European Skills Intelligence Observatory (data-driven monitoring). This multi-layered governance model enables real-time policy adaptation while maintaining long-term strategic alignment.

The world is evolving towards greater competition and individualism, with growing scepticism about globalisation's benefits. We're witnessing rising resistance to free trade principles and new barriers to sharing technological advancements. In this climate of fragmentation, Europe faces an urgent imperative: to adapt swiftly to these emerging realities while preparing for future challenges. Our ability to remain agile will determine our success in the coming decade.

*'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.'*  
Nelson Mandela.

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# TIMELESS CHIC

## STANDOUT FASHION AND BEAUTY TRENDS

### WALK THIS WAY

*The 3 spring shoes everyone's talking about*

#### 1. Closed-Toe Slingbacks

These slingbacks artfully marry function and flair: covered toes fend off the cold while bare heels embrace the coming warmth. Your quintessential, in-between season statement piece.

Kitten heel, black suede Ann Mashburn slingbacks (shopmashburn.com)



© PINTEREST - WENDY SWAN



#### 2. Modern Mary Janes

From vibrant poppy red to sleek black, Mary Janes are classic flats with a modern edge. Effortlessly versatile, they pair perfectly with denim, dresses, and even statement prints. For a playful spring update, style them with crisp white socks.

Black patent leather Mary Janes, Louboutin (eu.christianlouboutin.com)



© INSTAGRAM @BELZAGRACIEHUBER



#### 3. Rainbow sneakers

Forget neutral tones! This spring, trainers are going technicolor. We're seeing bold greens, fiery reds and pastel blues on every sidewalk. Adidas leads the way, but other labels are in on the game. Bonus: suede finishes bring a luxe touch to these sporty staples.

Suede Gazelle Adidas sneakers (adidas.com)



© INSTAGRAM @EVENMILD





## THE “BOHO- CHIC” AESTHETIC

Boho Chic, the iconic early 2000s mix of frills, chiffon, denim, and suede is making a major comeback.

Fashionistas are embracing the return of floaty tops, boho dresses, oversized sunglasses, bags and sandals, all upgraded for a fresh, contemporary vibe.



© DOUTZEN KROES X TWINSET MILANO

### Key Features of the 2025 Boho Chic trend:

Flowy blouses and dresses.  
Bright neutral tones.  
Romantic details such as lace, sheer fabrics, ruffles, and chiffon.  
Flat sandals.

The most beautiful interpretation of the year goes to the spring-summer collection of the Twinset Milano brand, embodied by Dutch model, Doutzen Kroes.



© STANLEY



### Hydration meets haute couture

The Stanley cup is the latest must-have for stylish, eco-conscious women. Sleek, oversized, and now available in ultra-trendy shades, it's more than just a water bottle—it's a fashion statement, with more than 7 billion views under the hashtag #StanleyCup. From yoga class to the office, this bold accessory brings a splash of style to daily hydration. Practical, photogenic, and perfectly on-trend for 2025: who knew sipping water could look this good? (eu.stanley1913.com)

### It-bag

This shoulder bag from the FW24 Lacoste runway, blends practicality with feminine styling. A new essential inspired by the brand's heritage, with features inspired by its iconic tennis skirt and a spacious interior (lacoste.com)



# EUROPE *Diplomatic* magazine

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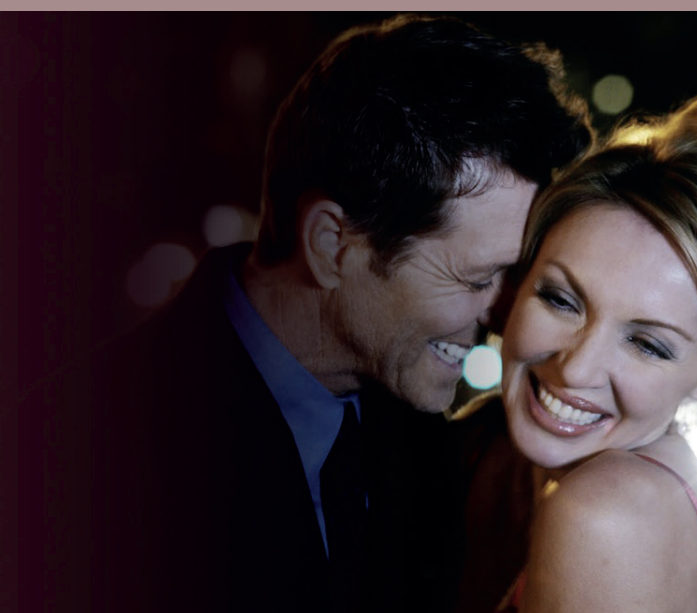


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