

EUROPE DIPLOMATIC

MAGAZINE



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July 2025

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EDITORIAL

EUROPE MUST REWRITE ITS SCRIPT ON THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

The Middle East finds itself, once again, on the brink. The spark came from those old tensions between Iran and Israel, amplified by America's heavy footprint in the region.

This time however, the terrifying prospect of nuclear escalation hangs over everything. In the middle of all this, the European Union often looks like a bewildered actor on a stage, holding onto a sophisticated script, but unable to perform. It's time Europe stepped into a leading role – not just for the region's fragile peace, but for its own safety.

Looking at the EU's track record, it must be admitted that its heart is often at the right place.

We are very good at declarations: condemning violence, calling for restraint, reaffirming support for a two-state solution. We deploy significant humanitarian aid, a vital lifeline in the rubble.

We maintain diplomatic channels with most players, a network Washington often lacks. And crucially, we possess immense economic leverage - collectively, the EU is the largest trading partner for many in the region.

Yet, when the real crisis hits, when the bombs fall and the centrifuges spin, Europe's voice often fades into background noise. Why? Well, for one thing, the EU is constrained by the US alliance; the US remains Israel's guarantor and Iran's antagonist. Europe's reliance on US security - especially NATO, leads to a reluctance to challenge flawed US strategies, as the JCPOA collapse painfully proved in 2018.

What's more, the EU is fractured by divergent national interests, energy needs, and threat perceptions, Europe speaks with a cacophony, not one voice. Its lack of hard power and political will leaves sanctions as its primary, often leaky, tool. And lastly, the EU seems mostly reactive rather than strategic. Europe manages fallout - refugees, energy spikes, terror risks - rather than tackling root causes: the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's ambitions, and the dangerous power vacuum.

Look at the path we're on: US dominance, Iranian defiance, Israeli security anxieties, Palestinian despair, and... European irrelevance! This isn't leading anywhere good. The Middle East doesn't need another spectator; it desperately needs a skilled, determined, and unified mediator with real leverage. Europe possesses the tools: economic might, diplomatic networks, and a fundamental interest in regional stability.

What it has lacked is the collective courage and strategic vision to use them effectively.

What's missing? It's not the tools. It's the guts. The collective courage. The clear, shared vision to actually pick up those tools and use them properly. To stop admiring them and start swinging them.

The script for a destructive conflict is being written every day. Europe must seize the pen and rewrite it towards de-escalation and genuine diplomacy. The cost of remaining a hesitant spectator will be paid not just in those distant deserts and mountains. We'll feel it here, on Europe's own shores, in its own security. The stage is set. It's time for Europe to step on.

The alternative might be getting burned by the whole thing going up in flames.

Trajan Dereville

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GANGING UP

**Europe hits back at
domestic cross-border
crime gangs**



Europe's most enduring drugs marketplace was known as Archetyp Market. It operated on the so-called "dark web". Like more traditional markets that sell illicit goods it had to retain a low profile, and it did. At least, it did until a series of co-ordinated police actions were undertaken in Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain and Sweden, principally targeting the site's administrator, its moderators, its top vendors and its technical infrastructure. Some 300 police officers were deployed to undertake the enforcement actions and to secure the vital evidence needed to close the market for good.

The Archetyp market had been in business for more than 5 years and had amassed a customer base of some 600,000 users around the globe. Nobody knows exactly the volume of drugs that have changed hands there, nor exactly what type (or types), but its transactions, totalled together, came to at least €250-million. It had 17,000 listings and was one of the very, very few dark net markets permitted to sell fentanyl and other highly potent synthetic opioids, thus contributing to the growing threat they posed to Europe and wider afield. The joint police actions was effective, taking down the infrastructure in the Netherlands, while its administrator, a 30-year-old German national, was arrested in Barcelona, Spain, while parallel actions in Germany and Sweden scooped up one of the market's moderators and six of the wealthiest and most successful vendors, together with assets of some €7.8-million. Not a bad day's work, which put an end to a criminal "service" that had allowed the highly-successful trade in illicit drugs to flourish.

The drugs involved included cocaine, MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine), amphetamines and synthetic opioids. Indeed, it was one of the world's largest drugs marketplaces, ranked alongside the notorious "Dream Market" and "Silk Road", former leaders in the highly lucrative online drug trafficking trade.



The coordinated cross-border police operation has successfully closed down one of the dark web's most successful and long-running drugs markets, cutting off supply of some of world's most dangerous substances to global criminal gangs. "With this take-down," said Jean-Philippe Lecouffe, Europol's Deputy Executive Director of Operations, "law enforcement has taken out one of the dark web's longest-running drug markets, cutting off a major supplyline for some of the world's most dangerous substances." This success he finds very encouraging. "By dismantling its infrastructure and arresting its key players, we are sending a clear message: there is no safe haven for those who profit from harming others." It is, indeed, a big step forward but it seems unlikely that it will put an end to Europe's thriving drugs trade or its gangsters. The gangsters are not, of course, engaging in crime out of need. As Aristotle put it in the 4th century BC: "The greatest crimes are caused by surfeit, not by want." The trouble is that the criminals never seem to believe that they have extracted enough money from the world at large.

From you and me, in other words. And so the criminality goes on, Europol notwithstanding. In other words, Archetyp Market may have gone but you could place a pretty safe bet on its replacement very soon. There is demand for drugs. They're illegal of course, so therefore very expensive, offering big profits for those able to obtain them, ship them from source to market and then sell them to the world's many, many addicts, including those living or working in Europe.

Needless to say, the drugs market, like any market involving trade, whether legal or not, is constantly subject to change. As EUROPOL itself has pointed out, how drugs are used and trafficked is constantly changing and the ways of conducting the trafficking are growing in their technical and organisational complexity. What is not changing is the profitability of the drugs trade, which is what fuels that traffic. Every year EU citizens spend tens of billions of euros on illicit drugs. I suppose the big question is: why? In any case, it seems unlikely to stop. But at least Archetyp's website now carries a banner that says it has been closed. One of the problems is that it's not just the addiction of people (often young people) to illegal substances but also to the way the business feed international terrorism and the involvement of armed groups engaged in making matters worse, sometimes for political reasons but perhaps mainly for profit. Whoever said "crime doesn't pay" clearly didn't know what he was talking about. But the way the market evolves poses enormous challenges for Europol and its partner organisations, such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) and Interpol.

Let's just take a quick look at some of the things that go into modern drugs. Not all of them will be available at your local pharmacy, of course. The *Claviceps purpurea* fungus, for instance, gives us LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), the favourite recreational substance of 1960s hippies in that decade's counter-cultural heyday.

If you take it you will forget your troubles and everything else, too, as you float around in a psychedelic wonderland with weird sounds and visions. It can be synthesized from ergot alkaloids that are produced by a fungus that infects cereal crops. Of course, that decade also gave us (in my opinion) the best pop and rock music ever, but I'm biased by my age. In any case, there are plenty of alternative psychedelic substances from which to choose, if you're interested. Psilocybin is derived from another type of fungus, the psilocybe mushroom. It's often referred to as "the magic mushroom", for reasons I don't need to elaborate, I'm sure. Good luck finding that; I don't

THIS DOMAIN HAS BEEN SEIZED



by the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA)
on behalf of the Attorney General's Office in Frankfurt am Main
in the course of a coordinated law enforcement operation.

Law enforcement agencies have seized databases and other
information relating to this domain.

operation-deepsentinel.com
















A Junkie smoking crack

believe it grows in Europe, although plenty of other things do. DMT comes from a plant called *Psychotria viridis*, but that can also form part of another narcotic, known as 5-MeO-DMT, which is made from the Sonoran Desert toad. That may reduce its appeal for some people. It would be a bit harder to pack and to conceal, too, especially if it croaks from time to time. And who would swallow a raw toad? Many of those drugs are legally produced to use against post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and they are said to work in some cases, but not all. Of course, their effective use in various types of medicine is of no interest to the dealers who smuggle the stuff into countries where its ownership is not permitted. Their only interest is in the profit it can generate, which is quite considerable, of course.

The use and consumption of psychedelics, of course, go back a long way, certainly predating today's crime gangs. It's safe to say, however, that crime itself is as old as humankind, and gangs are a natural development of criminal activity. As for the use of narcotics, that is very old, too.

They're not necessarily bad but experts agree they should only ever be administered by trained professionals. This is not, of course, an approach favoured by drug dealers and criminals. The fact that the drugs can be useful in overcoming suicidal thoughts is of little interest to them. Psychedelic drugs work by altering perception and in that way, they can cause hallucinations, which can be fun for the user or can turn out to be a truly terrible nightmare. You won't find something like MDMA for sale from a street corner dealer, but it's an interesting narcotic, being capable of delivering psychedelic effects by the unusual means of increasing the release of serotonin in the brain and recent studies suggest that it's capable of promoting what's called *synaptic plasticity* in the brain, whatever that might be.

This is all a long way from people like Timothy Leary, the American clinical psychologist who supported the idea of using psychedelic drugs, albeit cautiously. On one occasion he said: "I am 100% in favour of the intelligent use of drugs, and 1,000% against the thoughtless use of them, whether caffeine or LSD". Psychedelics have been used in the treatment of mental issues for decades, not just since the accidental discovery of LSD in 1938 by the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann. More recently, it's been viewed as a way of easing the symptoms of bipolar disorder.

In 1953, the CIA conducted a secret research project, giving unknowing Americans high doses of psychedelics without bothering to ask for consent. Naughty, naughty! The drug itself can have hallucinogenic effects, so its popularity in the 1960s is not very surprising. Nor, of course, is the use of certain plants known by native American tribes to have such properties. Their use goes back hundreds of years, not mere decades, and were usually administered by some kind of tribal healer. As far as we know the people using them or selling them, did not make fortunes from their knowledge and skills. Today's dealers in such goods, however, do, so it's hardly surprising that we now find organised crime deeply embedded in the narcotics market. Furthermore, since psychedelic drugs have an impairing effect on memory, the users are less likely to be able to identify their suppliers. Psychedelic medicines may certainly have a place in relieving the symptoms of addictions and demoralizing afflictions, including alcoholism and eating disorders, but only if properly prescribed and sensibly deployed. Use by gangs wanting to make a fast buck regardless of the consequences is not recommended, although that seems to be what is happening.



Junkies struggling with fentanyl and xylazine ("tranq") addiction

Indeed, according to Europol and the DEA, the Federal Agency charged with monitoring drugs and their misuse, the market involves a wide variety of actors in various roles connected with the trafficking and distribution of controlled substances, such as methamphetamine and cocaine hydrochloride (HCl), many of those in the United States involving Mexican criminals, who have also become major players in Europe, alongside EU drug traffickers, at least in some member states. The actors fall into various categories, such as the "cooks", who are engaged in producing the narcotics, various intermediaries who are





Spanish National Police inspecting a seized “narco submarine”, originating from Brazil and bound for Europe

responsible for purchases and transportation (including from South and Central America into Europe) and sorting out the logistics. There are also brokers, responsible for contacts between suppliers and markets, and various others who undertake money laundering and arrange illegal financial services, repatriating, according to Europol and the DEA, millions of Euros arising from the illegal drugs trade and ensuring it gets back to Mexico. Apparently, the influence of Mexican drugs cartels is deeply entrenched. If you're looking for, say, fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, heroin or cannabis, these are the people you'll have to deal with. Just don't forget that the Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel are extremely violent and powerful organisations with a long

history. They're getting stronger, too, and they were planning to establish cocaine-smuggling routes from Columbia to airport facilities in southern Italy using private jets. This is big business for the completely corrupt.

You could argue that the illicit drugs trade provides work for a lot of people. The trouble is, it kills a lot of people, too. Of course, large numbers of “workers” also cost a lot of money, but the drugs trade the gangsters run also generates massive (and untaxed) profits for the crooks. In a report published in 2019 it was reported that the illegal drugs trade in Europe alone generated some €30.56-billion, while two years earlier the trade in the United States had been valued at some €143.4-billion. The gangs can afford to pay their “workers”: it's a very profitable business (and I don't imagine that many of them would pluck up the courage to demand a rise). The gangs fight amongst themselves for supremacy, hoping to get an ever-larger share of the enormous



Seized cocaine in the Canary Islands



Montenegro seized more than a ton of cocaine hidden in a shipment of bananas

profits they make. Amazingly (and you may think stupidly) many of the gang operatives are tattooed with the names of their gangs, which is a bit like wandering about with a label around one's neck that reads "I am a crook – I kill people". It makes it a breeze for the police, you might think.

They're quite inventive when it comes to finding ways to hide the "goods" in which they trade. Mexican criminal gangs managed to smuggle 1.3 tonnes of cocaine and 2.5 tonnes of methamphetamine hidden in blocks of cellular thermal concrete, which presumably would provide an effective shield against the scanners being used by customs officials. There is a lot of cooperation between gangsters exporting their goods and gangsters distributing them at the other end (and collecting the money). The Mexican cartels most often favour maritime shipments to smuggle large quantities of drugs from Latin America to the EU, very often concealed in foodstuffs, construction materials and various other commodities whose arrival in European ports won't raise eyebrows. The onward journey is handled by local criminal gangs working in cooperation with the Mexicans. Those journeys often involve the use of ferries but also trucks with hidden compartments. They also sometimes use the postal services for getting smaller quantities to their final users, in what amount to the sorts of quantities in which children's sweets are sold. It takes a lot of careful organising but the vast profits to be made make it worthwhile for the crooks.



© DUTCH POLICE

A clandestine drug manufacturing site

Another interesting facet is the way in which the drugs trade has now spread from the big cities into the smallest rural community. Cannabis and cocaine are just as popular amongst the hayricks and grazing cattle. In rural France, for example, French police recently raided a luxury villa in the south-east of the country that had been turned into a factory producing methamphetamine.

It had been set up by a group of Mexicans who had rented the villa as soon as they arrived in France, clearly with a mind to profit from their expansion overseas. They were also recruiting and training up locals to carry out the work on their behalf. But the European Union's Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) has reported that the criminal networks have shown "remarkable agility, combining flexibility in their activities with resilience against disruption". It says they are "adept at turning challenges and geopolitical crises into opportunities." It seems they use legitimate businesses that they have set up to help them, largely by laundering their profits, which are vast. SOCTA says it's one way they have been able to retain control over long periods

of time. "The abuse of legal business structures is a key factor in their resilience," says SOCTA. Of course, they occasionally lose workers, either imprisoned or killed by law enforcement officials, but they are easily replaced. There's no shortage of putative crooks out there, eager for a fast buck.



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Salvadoran gang members

It's true to say, unfortunately, that South America seems to have become a breeding ground for criminality and corruption. Just look at Venezuela's most recent election, at which (according to The Economist) the government claimed a turnout of 43%, although the polling company Meganalisis said the real figure was more like 14%, with the overwhelming victory of one candidate being ignored by the government which is now talking about introducing a new voting procedure that would only permit a favoured few to have a vote at all. It's bad news for oil supplies on world markets (as well as for democracy), while government critics have been sent to prison. It's not a region pledged to fairness and democracy, which suits the criminal gangs perfectly, effectively allowing them to choose the government. No-one can see a way to end the current idiocy but it's helping to make rich men richer so it's likely to continue. The gangs are quick to seize on opportunities to increase and cement their power and influence. Meanwhile, various parts of South America can boast (if that's the right word) any number of criminal gangs, engaged in similar activities. SOCTA mentions several of these gangs by name: "Thieves in Law" and "Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs" are two of them, but some have branches in other countries, too. Well, they say that it pays to advertise. According to a report for SOCTA, "The threat posed by serious and organised crime remains one of the most significant challenges facing our countries today. Criminal groups are growing increasingly sophisticated." It's a worrying development on several levels, SOCTA argues. "They are exploiting technology and global networks, infiltrating legal structures, and recruiting minors to engage in a wide range of illicit activities—from drug trafficking and production to cybercrime, migrant

smuggling, trafficking in human beings and all kinds of financial frauds.” It’s an unpleasant picture of some of the world’s most unpleasant people exploiting legitimate enterprises to fund their enormous wealth and their enjoyment of a world to which they do not contribute. Indeed, as SOCTA points out, their effect is entirely negative: “Serious and organised crime has a doubly destabilising effect on the EU. It undermines the EU’s economy, rule of law and society by generating illicit proceeds, spreading violence, and normalising corruption.” Of course, for them corruption and crime are normal.

This is criminality on a massive scale. In a report from April 2024, Europol identified 821 particularly dangerous criminal networks with a total of some 25,000 criminals working for them across the 27-nation bloc. Europol reckons that around 86% of the criminal networks it has identified are capable of infiltrating the legitimate economy in order to hide their activities and also to launder their massive profits. It mentions one particular Italian businessman of Argentinian origin who was, when the case was reported, resident in Marbella, Spain. He specialised in drug trafficking and money laundering while managing a number of largely legitimate companies, including one importing bananas into the EU from Ecuador. He also owns sports centres in Marbella, along with various commercial centres, bars and restaurants. Europol says he has an accomplice in Ecuador who helps with the importation of cocaine from Columbia to Ecuador and its subsequent distribution within the EU. The report claims that Ecuadorian fruit companies are regularly used to disguise illicit activities and the movement of narcotics. It’s not even unusual activity. Europol draws our attention to the Italian crime syndicate, ‘Ndrangheta, reckoned to be one of the world’s most powerful and richest of its kind, profiting from drug trafficking but also the arms trade, and using its wealth to defraud the tax authorities while investing in Europe’s real estate, supermarkets, hotels and other legitimate enterprises. It’s an activity that certainly doesn’t recognise or respect borders. Its members are said to represent 112 nationalities, with most of them restricting their criminal activities to their own regions in order to keep a fairly low profile, whilst remaining highly profitable, of course. According to EU officials their main activities centre on drug trafficking and corruption. Not exactly “model citizens” then.



The Salvadoran Navy intercepted a Costa Rican fishing vessel, seizing tons of cocaine worth \$25.7 million and arresting four traffickers. During President Bukele's administration, law enforcement agencies have seized 61 tons of drugs worth \$1.423 billion

Europol says that record amounts of cocaine are being seized across Europe, while drug-related violent crime has been increasing throughout the EU and has become especially visible in, for instance, Belgium and France. Drug trafficking is clearly now a key activity. Furthermore, says Europol, some 70% of the crime networks engage in corruption “to facilitate criminal activity or obstruct law enforcement or judicial proceedings. 68% of networks use violence and intimidation as an inherent feature of their modus operandi”. Some things never seem to change, really; Al Capone would have approved. In Belgium, where Antwerp is the main gateway into the EU for the cocaine cartels of Latin America, gang violence has been rife for years, while drug use is on the increase throughout the country. In fact, federal authorities say trafficking is rapidly penetrating society as a whole. “Organized crime is one of the biggest threats we face today, threatening society with corruption and extreme violence,” said the European commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson. She plans to share data with the individual law enforcement agencies of member states in the hope that this will help to better target known criminals.

It’s not just Europe, of course. The United States has recently indicted a Mexican citizen on terrorism charges, although he’s actually accused of helping a drug cartel. The civilised world is taking this kind of gangsterism seriously and those apprehended as a result can expect to face trials under serious charges and, if found guilty, very heavy sentences. It won’t stop crime, of course; nothing ever will. Take the case of Mara Salvatrucha, also called MS-13, a criminal organisation that first arose during El Salvador’s civil war in the 1980s. With some 70,000 members around the world (even in Australia), its criminal activities have risen by some 70% and it’s thought to be one of the most ruthless and deadly gangs in the United States. It’s believed that they even have the backing of the FMLN, El Salvador’s ruling political party, with the US actually setting up a special dedicated branch of the FBI to tackle the crooks. The New York Times reckons their profits to run to just over €27- million per year. That’s a lot of money. Arresting gang members will be useful, but I’m sure this won’t dissuade the perpetrators from their criminal leanings although it may at least take some of them out of active circulation for a while, which must be a good thing for the rest of us. Dismantling the many gangs would be a useful adjunct, too. Meanwhile all we can do is keep our eyes open, report anything suspicious to the authorities and try to help with getting the criminals locked up. We’ll never put a complete stop to crime, of course, especially if some otherwise-innocent people take a liking to certain kinds of drug, which would hardly be surprising, especially if they’re in pain. But perhaps we can make the streets just a little bit safer.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

NHS FIRST IN WORLD TO ROLL OUT NEW 'TROJAN HORSE' THERAPY FOR BLOOD CANCER PATIENTS

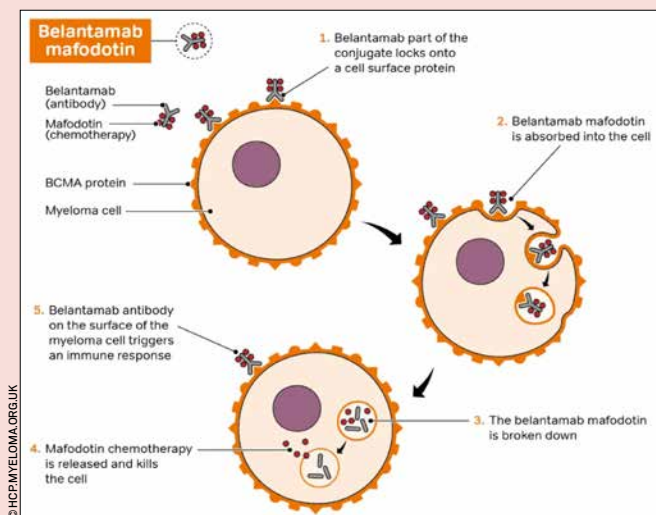
The NHS in England will be the first health system in the world to roll-out a 'trojan horse' targeted therapy for blood cancer patients which could halt the disease's progression by nearly three times as long as existing treatments.

Around 1,500 patients a year with multiple myeloma – an incurable cancer of the bone marrow – could now be offered belantamab mafodotin on the NHS in England, after it was approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).

The drug will be offered to eligible patients whose cancer has progressed or not responded to first-line treatment with another drug, lenalidomide.

Belantamab mafodotin – which was research and developed in the UK – is an antibody-drug conjugate, a type of treatment which targets and attaches to cancer cells.

The drugs have been described by researchers as 'trojan horses' as they are designed to be taken up by the cancer cell, before releasing a high concentration of a lethal molecule to destroy the cell from within.



Trials showed that in a broader group of patients with relapsed or refractory multiple myeloma, belantamab mafodotin (in combination with bortezomib and dexamethasone) delayed progression of the disease by an average of three years, compared to just over a year for patients taking commonly-used drug daratumumab (with bortezomib and dexamethasone).

Progression-free survival data for the narrower group of patients for whom the drug is being recommended by NICE is not publicly available.

NHS England is fast-tracking access to the treatment for patients, through immediate funding via the Cancer Drugs Fund.

Eligible patients will be treated via an infusion every three weeks in combination with other cancer drugs, bortezomib (injection) and dexamethasone (orally).

Multiple myeloma is a type of bone marrow cancer than often affects multiple parts of the body, including the spine, skull, pelvis and ribs. It is more common in men than women, adults over 60, those with a family history of the condition and is twice as common in black populations than white and Asian populations.

Myeloma cannot be cured, and patients often experience multiple relapses – treatment is usually about halting the cancer for as long as possible with the least side-effects from treatment. The disease can have a significant impact on quality of life, with the possibility of relapse having a major psychological effect on patients.

Each year, more than 6,000 people are diagnosed with multiple myeloma in the UK, and it is estimated there are around 33,000 people living with the cancer.

Patients must have routine ophthalmological assessments before starting treatment and after each of the first three treatments. Side effects can include ocular toxicity, difficulty seeing clearly, blurred vision, dry eyes and photophobia.

Cutting-edge treatments like belantamab mafodotin have been enabled by the country's thriving life sciences sector and the largest cluster of cell and gene therapy companies outside the US, centred around Stevenage and extending to Oxford, London, and Cambridge.

OVER £1 MILLION FOR UK TOWNS AND CITIES TO CLEAN UP CHEWING GUM STAINS

52 councils across the UK will receive funding to remove chewing gum stains and clean up our streets.

More than 50 councils across the UK will receive a share of £1.2 million to combat the scourge of chewing gum litter on the country's high streets, thanks to grants handed out by the government and charity Keep Britain Tidy.

Residents in Glasgow, Fermanagh and Omagh, Bradford and Cardiff are set to benefit from the fourth round of funding from the Chewing Gum Taskforce, delivering on the Government's Plan for Change to deliver safer and cleaner streets.

Chewing gum creates an unsightly mess and incurs huge clean-up costs. Launched in 2021, the partnership between industry, government and funds from gum producers aims to curb anti-social littering and help local councils acquire cutting-edge cleaning equipment to boost street cleaning efforts.

Innovative plans will benefit from the latest round of grants. For instance, using the latest technology, Bradford Metropolitan District Council plans to deploy specialist steam cleaners, while Cheshire Council will hire new specialists to undertake intensive cleaning in areas with high public footfall.

This initiative not only enhances community pride by improving the cleanliness and appearance of local high streets but also supports regional growth by creating more inviting

spaces for residents to visit. Cleaner streets contribute to safer environments and are essential in supporting hospitality businesses and restoring pride in our communities.

Environment Minister Mary Creagh said:

Chewing gum litter is a stain on our communities. These grants, funded by gum producers, will empower local councils to tackle this issue head-on, delivering cleaner streets for all.

This government is committed to ending our throwaway society. That is why we have already banned single-use vapes, and announced a crackdown on waste crime.

The funding marks further momentum by the Chewing Gum Task Force, with the previous three rounds of funding awarding grants worth a total of £4.88 million to 122 councils.

Last year alone, more than 3.4 million square metres of pavements were scrubbed free of chewing gum due to funding from the grant scheme.



Mary Creagh, Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

LARGEST ILLEGAL TRADING PLATFORM FOR DRUGS TAKEN DOWN

An international action week led to the disruption of Archetyp, one of the longest-running dark web marketplaces for drugs, and the arrest of its creator and current administrator in Spain. The platform had around 3 200 vendors and more than 600 000 users, who traded drugs worth at least EUR 250 million. Eurojust and Europol coordinated the investigations and operations, which led to the arrest of eight persons in total.

The dark web marketplace was active for over five years. Archetyp was one of the only platforms to allow the sale of fentanyl and other synthetic opioids. The marketplace had around 17 000 listings online, and with more than 600 000 users, it is considered one of the largest of its kind.

Investigations into Archetyp revealed that its creator and current administrator is a German national residing in Spain. International cooperation between authorities, financial tracking and digital evidence analysis led to the identification of the people behind Archetyp. Investigators discovered the location of the servers, moderators and vendors on the marketplace. A coordinated action week was planned to dismantle Archetyp and arrest those responsible for selling and operating the platform, under the coordination of Eurojust and Europol.



The action week took place between 11 and 13 June, targeting the platform's administrator, moderators, key vendors and the servers running the website. Coordinated actions in five countries, carried out by around 300 officers, resulted in the arrest of the thirty year old administrator in Spain, seven other persons and the seizure of assets worth EUR 7.8 million. By taking Archetyp offline, authorities have dealt a severe blow to drug traffickers in Europe.

Eurojust ensured the international investigation was efficient and effective. The Agency organised multiple coordination meetings, which enabled authorities to exchange critical information for the investigation. During the action days and the preliminary investigations, Eurojust coordinated the execution of mutual legal assistance and European Investigation Orders.

Europol supported the investigation from the outset, facilitating the exchange of intelligence, conducting extensive cross-checks and helping to identify high-value targets. On the action days, Europol deployed a dark web specialist to Germany and set up a virtual command post to coordinate field activities and ensure real-time deconfliction across jurisdictions.

The following authorities, with the support of the United States, carried out the operation:

- **Germany:** Prosecutor General's Office Frankfurt am Main – Cyber Crime Center; Federal Criminal Police Office
- **Netherlands:** Public Prosecutor's Office of Rotterdam; National Police, Unit Police Unit Rotterdam
- **Spain:** Investigative Court num 10 in Barcelona; International Cooperation Section of PPO Barcelona; National Police
- **Sweden:** Swedish Prosecution Authority; National Public Prosecution Department, National Unit against Organised Crime in Gothenburg; Swedish National Police; National Operations Department / Swedish Cybercrime Unit
- **Romania:** Directorate for Investigating Organised Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT); National Police

MONTENEGRO AND MOLDOVA MAKE STRIDES ON EU PATH, SAY MEPS

European Parliament commends progress while calling for deeper reforms and vigilance against foreign interference.

The European Parliament has welcomed recent progress by Montenegro and Moldova on their respective paths toward European Union membership, while urging both nations to intensify reforms and remain vigilant in the face of external threats.



Montenegro flag



Moldova flag

In two separate resolutions passed in Strasbourg, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) hailed Montenegro as the frontrunner among EU candidate countries, and praised Moldova's determined efforts to align with EU standards despite ongoing domestic and geopolitical challenges.

Montenegro: Leading Candidate, But Reforms Still Needed

MEPs reaffirmed Montenegro's status as the most advanced candidate in the EU enlargement process, citing the country's robust public and political support for EU accession, with the goal of joining by 2028. A resolution passed with 470 votes in favour, 102 against, and 77 abstentions underscored the need for significant progress in electoral and judicial reforms, and a more effective fight against organised crime and corruption.

The Parliament also welcomed Montenegro's full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy — notably its support for EU sanctions against Russia — and its consistent backing of the international rules-based order at the United Nations.

However, MEPs expressed serious concern about persistent threats from malign foreign interference, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and hybrid operations aimed at destabilising the country and undermining public trust in the EU accession process.

Moldova: Determined Progress Amid External Pressure

A separate resolution, adopted by 456 votes to 118 with 51 abstentions, recognised Moldova's unwavering commitment to advancing EU-related reforms, despite being heavily impacted by the war in neighbouring Ukraine and Russian interference in its internal affairs.

MEPs praised the Moldovan government's efforts to align its legislation with the EU acquis and noted that EU-Moldova relations have entered a new, more cooperative phase. They called on the European Commission to increase its support to help Moldova meet enlargement benchmarks and broaden the scope of accession negotiations.



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Sven Mikser

The European Parliament also welcomed the outcome of Moldova's recent constitutional referendum on European integration and the 2024 presidential election — both held professionally and with notable civic engagement — despite a massive hybrid campaign by Russia and its proxies. MEPs warned that the upcoming 2025 parliamentary elections would be pivotal for Moldova's European trajectory and are likely to draw intensified malign interference.

“Strategic Importance for Europe”

Sven Mikser (S&D, Estonia), rapporteur on Moldova, said: “We commend Moldova's strong commitment to EU integration and acknowledge the country's strategic importance for Europe. The Moldovan authorities have demonstrated remarkable determination to pursue reforms and align with EU values despite facing major challenges and external pressure by the Kremlin and its proxies.”

NVIDIA AND DEUTSCHE TELEKOM PARTNER FOR GERMANY'S SOVEREIGN AI



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Jensen Huang, Nvidia CEO

Jensen Huang, NVIDIA's founder and CEO, continued his European tour in June - which included stops at London Tech Week and GTC Paris - with a key visit to Germany. In discussions with Chancellor Friedrich Merz, they explored strategic alliances aimed at pioneering breakthroughs in the world's inaugural industrial AI cloud.

The AI factory, based in Germany and managed by Deutsche Telekom, will drive innovation in European manufacturing, enhancing efficiency in design, engineering, simulation, digital twins, and robotics.

‘In the era of AI, every manufacturer needs two factories: one for making things, and one for creating the intelligence that powers them,’ said Jensen Huang, founder and CEO of NVIDIA. *‘By building Europe's first industrial AI infrastructure, we're enabling the region's leading industrial companies to advance simulation-first, AI-driven manufacturing.’*

‘Europe's technological future needs a sprint, not a stroll,’ said Timotheus Höttges, CEO of Deutsche Telekom AG. *‘We must seize the opportunities of artificial intelligence now, revolutionise our industry and secure a leading position in the global technology competition. Our economic success depends on quick decisions and collaborative innovations.’*

A game-changer for Germany's AI ambitions, this unprecedented infrastructure—the country's biggest AI project—lays the foundation for sovereign AI and faster

industrial adoption. The initial rollout features 10,000 NVIDIA Blackwell GPUs across DGX B200 systems and RTX PRO Servers, enhanced by NVIDIA's networking and AI software.

NEURA Robotics, a German leader in cognitive robotics and physical AI, will leverage these computing resources to enhance its cutting-edge training centres for cognitive robots. This demonstrates how advanced infrastructure can accelerate the evolution of embodied AI. Central to this effort is the Neuraverse - an interconnected robot ecosystem where machines learn collectively across industrial and household applications. Functioning like an app store for robotic intelligence, this platform enables ongoing development and real-world deployment of skills for tasks ranging from welding to domestic chores.

Powering Europe's manufacturing revolution, this AI cloud marks a critical leap toward simulation-driven industry while setting the stage for Germany's ambitious AI gigafactories. When the 100,000-GPU programme comes online in 2027 through EU-German collaboration, it will transform the innovation landscape—giving businesses, startups, and research institutions equal access to world-class computing power via a growing network of high-performance centres.

NVIDIA's Deep Learning Institute provides comprehensive AI education and certification programmes worldwide. These learning resources are fully integrated into Germany's computing infrastructure, creating accessible upskilling pathways for professionals across the nation.

COMMISSION PROPOSES A PLAN TO PHASE OUT RUSSIAN GAS AND OIL IMPORTS



Berkut is Russia's largest offshore oil platform, operating in the Sea of Okhotsk

The Commission has put forward a proposal to gradually and effectively stop the import of Russian gas and oil into the EU by the end of 2027. This will help the EU become more energy independent, improve the security of the energy supply, and boost the Union's energy independence and competitiveness.

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: *"Russia has repeatedly attempted to blackmail us by weaponising its energy supplies. We have taken clear steps to turn off the tap and end the era of Russian fossil fuels in Europe for good."*

This proposal follows the REPowerEU roadmap, the EU's strategy to completely remove Russian oil, gas and nuclear energy imports from EU markets. It includes steps for phasing

out pipeline gas and liquefied natural gas (LNG), as well as measures to facilitate the complete stop of Russian oil imports by the end of 2027.

The remaining Russian gas volumes will be phased out as follows

- Russian gas imports under new contracts will be prohibited as of 1 January 2026
- Imports under existing short-term contracts will be stopped by 17 June 2026
- An exception is made for short-term contracts for pipeline gas delivered to land-locked countries and linked to long-term contracts. These will be allowed until the end of 2027.
- Imports under long-term contracts will be stopped by the end of 2027

For oil, EU countries still importing Russian oil will need to prepare diversification plans to phase out all remaining oil imports, in view of a complete stop by the end of 2027.

Dan Jørgensen, Commissioner for Energy and Housing said: "Importing gas from Russia is a security threat to Europe. This is why we are now proposing an EU ban on Russian gas imports. This will increase our energy independence while also reducing the revenues Putin uses to finance his war. The Commission will work hand in hand with all Member States, especially those that may face challenges because of this. No Member State will be left without energy as a result of this proposal".

The phase-out of Russian fossil fuels will make an important contribution to the clean energy transition and the EU's overall competitiveness. It is possible because the EU has sufficient alternative suppliers in the global gas market, a well interconnected Union gas market and the availability of sufficient import infrastructure in the EU. In addition, today's proposal has built-in safeguards to respond to the reality of the gas markets while providing companies with a solid legal framework.

CAN AN AI HELPER ASSIST SKILLED SPECIALISTS? THE SHERPA PROJECT THINKS SO

New IHI project SHERPA focuses on interventional radiologists, who use imaging technologies to guide miniature devices through a patient's body.

In interventional radiology (IR), specialists use imaging technologies (such as x-ray or ultrasound) to guide miniature devices through a patient's body and deliver the treatment where it is needed. Also known as image-guided therapy (IGT), interventional radiology is increasingly popular due to its minimally-invasive nature and rapid recovery times. However, there is a serious shortage of IR specialists. IR procedures are often complex and high-risk, and require a lot of training and experience. Furthermore, the rapid advances in IR technology make it hard even for existing staff to keep their knowledge and skills up to date. The staff shortage, coupled with the complex nature of the work, place a lot of pressure on IR specialists, and rates of burn-out are high.

An AI-powered sherpa to support skilled specialists

Now, a new IHI project called SHERPA aims to ease the workload of interventional radiologists by providing them with assistive technologies, powered by artificial intelligence (AI). By fulfilling the role of a trusted companion (or a sherpa), these

technologies will support decision-making, accelerate learning and take care of repetitive, time-consuming tasks. As a result, the IR specialist will have more time and energy to focus on the intervention itself and on their interactions with the patient.



AI generated image

The tools will focus on all steps of the treatment, starting from deciding on the best treatment pathway for each patient. During the intervention, planning software and robotic-assisted devices will reduce the difficulty of the procedure and take over repetitive manual actions, making it possible for more junior specialists to carry out some of these interventions safely. Finally, AI-based software will guide and confirm treatment success during the procedure, preventing the need for re-treatment.

A focus on brain aneurysms and liver tumours

The project will focus on two use cases: treatment of brain aneurysms, and thermal ablation of tumours on the liver. Around 3% of the population has a brain aneurysm, where a weakened blood vessel wall is at risk of rupture and subsequent haemorrhage. Treating intracranial aneurysms is highly complex, and should be reserved for high-risk patients. Interventional radiologists face significant challenges in identifying which aneurysms require treatment and which can be safely monitored. The workflow is constrained by multiple complex steps and decisions, requiring extensive expertise, focus and a long learning curve.

Many patients with cancerous tumours on their livers still undergo surgery to remove part of the liver. Another, IGT-based option exists – thermal ablation, in which heat is applied directly to small tumours to destroy them. However, the wider use of ablation is limited by workflow gaps and the extremely high level of expertise required to carry out the procedure.

The SHERPA team will validate its outputs with interventional radiologists and patients through seven clinical studies, and the validated framework methodology will be made available to the wider IR community.

THALES UNVEILS MINI ELECTRONIC WARFARE PAYLOAD FOR DRONES

- Thales has launched a lightweight, remotely controlled electronic warfare payload for deployment by small drones to detect and locate radio signals.
- Easy to use by military operators with no specialised training, the mini payload heralds a new generation of interoperable, quick-to-deploy sensors that will complement dedicated electronic warfare assets in the theatre of operations.

- The new system represents a breakthrough in terms of access to electromagnetic intelligence, offering front-line units an unprecedented operational intelligence capability for that is readily accessible, agile and discreet and can be adapted for use by land or naval forces.

At the Paris Air Show Thales presented a new electronic warfare solution to meet the need for more closely integrated electromagnetic dominance operations across all military units.

Traditionally only conducted by highly specialised units, electromagnetic dominance operations are now needed by all tactical formations as a pre-requisite for battlefield superiority.

With the growing intensity of electronic warfare operations, this new Thales solution is designed to provide all deployed forces, including non-specialised units, with an initial, autonomous detection, location and analysis capability. The development of this innovative solution follows a proof-of-concept (PoC) awarded to Thales by France's Defence Innovation Agency (AID) after a European competitive procurement process. During the PoC phase, multiple users successfully tested the solution in a range of different use cases.

"The current geopolitical context and the emergence of new threats have underscored the expanding role of electronic warfare in the theatre of operations and demonstrated a growing need for all combat units to have direct access to these crucial capabilities. Today we are able to offer a unique new solution that is discreet and easy to use by non-specialised units to enable deployed forces to gain and maintain information superiority in the field. The new solution demonstrates Thales's capacity for innovation and the ability of our development teams to respond extremely quickly to new operational requirements," said Christophe Groshenry, Vice President, Radio Communications Products, Thales.

Weighing less than 5 kg and with a power requirement of under 40 W, the new payload is optimised for deployment by light drones. It can be installed on free-flying or autonomous drones, or on tethered drones powered and connected to the ground by a cable, to detect radio sources tens of kilometres away with no active emissions, which is a major advantage in contested environments.



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UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITY ACCUSED OF SELLING 3 000 FAKE POSTGRADUATE STUDENT IDS TO DRAFT EVADERS

The Ukrainian Security Service and the National Police have dismantled a large-scale mobilization evasion scheme in Zaporizhzhia. As a result of an operation in the frontline city, the law enforcement uncovered a rector of a private university

who took bribes to enroll draft evaders in the university's postgraduate program.

In addition to the main suspect, eight of his subordinates, who were part of the criminal organization, have been identified, including his deputies and the management of the educational institution's institutes.

According to the investigation, the group made over UAH 17 million (USD 407 000) on draft dodgers.

As the investigators established, the rector's office enrolled men of conscription age in full-time programs without any entrance exams or subsequent attendance.

This scheme was used by 2 966 men, who used fake education to obtain a deferral from conscription.

The cost of such 'registration' was up to USD 5 000 in cash per person. After submitting the documents, the 'postgraduates' additionally paid the university the established amount for two semesters, almost UAH 20,000.



The Ukrainian Security Service making an arrest

Then, the organizers of the scheme withdrew the funds from the university's account and divided them among themselves.

The decisions on measures of restraint are pending. The suspects face up to 12 years in prison with confiscation of property.

The operation was carried out under the procedural supervision of Zaporizhzhia Specialized Defense Prosecutor's Office.

EU MEMBER STATES AGREE TO EXTEND TEMPORARY PROTECTION FOR REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

The Council has voiced its unanimous support for a proposal to extend the temporary protection for the more than 4 million Ukrainians fleeing from Russia's war of aggression until 4 March 2027.

"While Russia continues to terrorise Ukrainian civilians with indiscriminate air strikes the EU continues to show its solidarity with the Ukrainian people. We will continue to offer protection for millions of Ukrainian refugees for another year. The Polish presidency also initiated discussion on a strategy to phase out temporary protection once a just peace is achieved. In the near future, we will work towards common, EU-wide solutions in this area, including in the context of returns to Ukraine," says Tomasz Siemoniak, Polish Minister of the Interior and Administration.



Tomasz Siemoniak, Polish Minister of the Interior and Administration

Since March 2022 the EU has given safety and shelter to over 4 million refugees from Ukraine on the basis of the temporary protection directive. Temporary protection is due to run until 4 March 2026 and will now be extended until 4 March 2027.

The temporary protection system alleviates the pressure on national asylum systems because persons falling under this type of protection do not need to apply for asylum on an individual basis. The extension until March 2027 is a signal to displaced people from Ukraine that it is not necessary to apply for asylum.

The extension does not change the terms of the March 2022 decision as regards the categories of persons to whom the temporary protection applies or the rights they enjoy.

Durable solution for Ukrainian refugees

In addition to the extension of temporary protection member states are discussing a Council recommendation to prepare for a coordinated transition out of temporary protection (exit strategy from the temporary protection). The recommendation will address matters such as switching to other legal (residence) statuses, paving the way for a gradual return to Ukraine and stepping up the provision of information about available options.

What is temporary protection?

Temporary protection provides immediate and collective protection to a large group of displaced persons who arrive in the EU and who are not in a position to return to their country of origin.

People benefitting from temporary protection enjoy the same rights across the EU. These rights include:

- residence
- access to the labour market and housing
- medical assistance
- social welfare assistance
- access to education for children

The EU's temporary protection law sets minimum standards of protection. The actual level of assistance can vary from one member state to another.

DENMARK RATIFIES MILITARY DEAL WITH US, GREENLIGHTING AMERICAN BASES ON ITS SOIL

Denmark's parliament has passed a contentious bill authorising the establishment of United States military bases on Danish soil. The legislation, approved by a decisive vote of 94–11, expands on a previous agreement from December 2023, granting the United States broader permissions to operate within Denmark's territory.



A U.S. F-16C Block 52 is refuelled by a Royal Danish Air Force tanker at Karup Air Base

Under the new law, American forces will enjoy “unhindered access” to three major Danish airbases—Karup, Skrydstrup and Aalborg—and may station personnel, store equipment, conduct maintenance, and undertake training exercises

Importantly, U.S. military personnel will remain under American jurisdiction, meaning any alleged crimes committed in Denmark will be initially tried under U.S. law

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen defended the pact as a necessary measure to reinforce transatlantic security at a time of shifting geopolitical risks, including concern that a retreat by American forces from Europe could weaken NATO’s defence posture

Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen also provided reassurances, stating that Denmark retains the right to terminate the agreement if the U.S. were to attempt an “annexation” of Greenland—a sovereign Danish territory.

The pact endures for a maximum of ten years. Denmark may dissolve the agreement prematurely if the U.S. seeks to annex or assert sovereignty over Greenland, Denmark’s semi-autonomous Arctic province.

The bill now awaits royal assent from King Frederik X. If signed, Denmark will enter a new phase of defence cooperation, with U.S. bases on its soil but ongoing debate over the balance between strategic alliance and national autonomy.

VENTURI SPACE PRESENTS MONA LUNA, THE EUROPEAN LUNAR ROVER

Venturi Space has unveiled MONA LUNA, its 100% European-built lunar rover. Designed to support the ambitions of the European Space Agency and the French CNES, the vehicle will be built at Venturi Space France’s facility in Toulouse. The ultimate aim is to provide Europe with a lunar-capable rover by 2030.

European autonomy in lunar mobility is a major strategic challenge. Venturi Space is helping to make that a reality with MONA LUNA, its upcoming lunar rover designed to meet the needs of ESA and national European space agencies. The vehicle will further Europe’s efforts to achieve technological independence in the field of lunar mobility, enabling it to get ahead of the industrial curve and achieve its space ambitions.

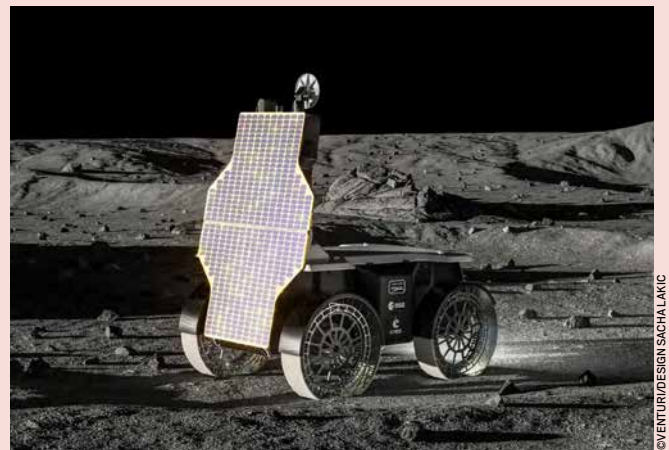
A project led by Venturi Space France

Venturi Space France will oversee MONA LUNA’s development and space qualification from its base in Toulouse,

coordinating every aspect of the process: onboard electronics, avionics, space-to-ground links, energy management systems, assembly, final integration, and acceptance testing in readiness for space flight. All with one clear objective: to deploy MONA LUNA at the Moon’s South Pole by 2030.

Backed by the ESA and CNES

The European Space Agency is supporting Venturi Space’s efforts to design and develop the critical technologies required for a large lunar rover, capable of surviving multiple lunar nights. ESA’s support validates Venturi Space’s approach and highlights its expertise. The project will draw on the experience acquired from the programmes to develop the FLIP and FLEX rovers under a strategic partnership with US-based company Venturi Astrolab, Inc. Venturi Space is currently designing and building the hyper-deformable wheels that will be fitted to those vehicles, along with the associated electrical systems (in Switzerland) and high-performance batteries (in Monaco).



Using technology made in Europe

MONA LUNA is designed to be carried into space by the Ariane 6.4 launch system and landed on the Moon’s surface by the European Argonaut lunar lander, while the rover itself will be equipped with a robotic arm to handle scientific instruments and payloads. It will be:

- electrically powered, recharging via solar panels,
- designed to move autonomously,
- equipped with three high-performance batteries,
- capable of carrying a wide range of payloads,
- designed to survive multiple lunar nights,
- capable of a top speed of 20 km/h,
- designed to weigh a total of 750 kg.

The rover could also be used in an emergency to carry an astronaut in difficulty, as envisaged by the ESA and CNES in their feasibility studies.

Gildo Pastor, President of Venturi Space:

“I’m still an explorer, first and foremost. Space is a new frontier, and MONA LUNA is how we are actually going to broach it. Alongside Europe, we aim to build an autonomous lunar exploration capability to meet the scientific, economic, and strategic challenges of tomorrow.”

Dr. Antonio Delfino, Director of Space Affairs at Venturi Space:

“Our primary focus is to make ourselves fully available to the ESA and European national space agencies. With MONA LUNA, we aim to deliver major technological breakthroughs that will pave the way for extended lunar mobility.”



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Members of the Royal Welsh Regiment as part of the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence in Estonia

SUWALKI CORRIDOR

NATO'S ULTIMATE STRESS TEST

Tucked away in the quiet, rolling hills and thick forests of northeastern Poland, the Suwalki Gap - also known as the Suwalki Corridor - isn't a place that makes headlines often. But if you were to mention its name to military strategists or NATO planners, you'd likely see their expressions tighten. This unassuming strip of land, just 65 kilometers wide, is far more than a mere geographic oddity. It's a vulnerable fault line in Europe's security that could, if tensions boil over, become the spark for a much larger confrontation between Russia and the West. The region's peaceful meadows and sleepy villages hide its grim nickname: *NATO's Achilles' heel*. And in an era where every move on the geopolitical chessboard matters, the Suwalki Gap isn't just a footnote - it's a potential battleground.

One century ago, the narrow stretch of land in western Poland known as Pomerania split Germany into two disconnected parts - the Weimar Republic to the west, and East Prussia, with its capital Königsberg, to the east. Sandwiched between them was the Free City of Danzig.

After the Second World War, Königsberg was taken over by the Soviet Union, and renamed Kaliningrad - after Mikhail Kalinin - a close ally of Lenin and Stalin. Once again, the city finds itself separated from its "motherland" - this time by the Suwalki Gap, named after a nearby Polish town.

During the Soviet era, the gap was irrelevant - Lithuania and Belarus were Soviet republics, and Poland was part of the Warsaw Pact. Even after the USSR collapsed in 1991, it remained a minor concern. But in today, following Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko's moves towards a very deep political union, the Suwalki Gap could easily become a new flashpoint.

With the heavily militarised, Russian exclave of Kaliningrad to the west, and Moscow's most loyal ally, Belarus to the east, the Suwalki Gap is the terrestrial lifeline connecting the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the rest of NATO. Its strategic importance is immense. If Russia were to seize this corridor, it would sever the Baltic states from their allies, isolate them geographically and deal a crippling, physical blow to NATO's unity.



As Russia's war of conquest in Ukraine grinds on, the spectre of Moscow's ambitions looms larger, raising an urgent question: how can NATO defend this vulnerable choke point in an era of rapidly changing tactics and strategy? The Suwalki Gap's geography is critical: stretching roughly 104 km from the Polish town of Suwalki, to the Lithuanian border, this corridor is a patchwork of flat farmland, thick woodlands and scattered lakes; a terrain that

complicates large-scale military manoeuvres. Only two major roads and a single railway line traverse this narrow strip, creating a natural bottleneck that could easily be choked off by a determined adversary.

To the west, lies Kaliningrad, a heavily militarised Russian outpost bristling with over 15,000 troops, Iskander ballistic missiles and advanced air defences. To the east, Belarus serves as a staging ground for Russian forces, its proximity amplifying the threat of a pincer movement. The gap's position makes it the only land bridge for NATO reinforcements to reach the Baltic states from Poland, turning it into a linchpin in the alliance's eastern defences.



Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges (Commanding General, U.S. Army Europe) with Serbian personnel of Balkan Medical Task Force, during mass casualty training at Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, Romania (July 16, 2017)

As early as 2015, the then commander of the US army in Europe, General "Ben" Hodges consistently highlighted the gap as a critical vulnerability and potential "ignition point" for conflict: *If Russia takes control over it, it will cut three members of the Alliance off from the supply and military assistance... the Suwalki Gap keeps top US generals in Europe awake at night!*

For Russia, seizing the gap would connect Kaliningrad to Belarus, creating a contiguous land corridor under Moscow's control and encircling the Baltic states. It's a move that aligns with Vladimir Putin's obsession with reclaiming lost Soviet territories and asserting dominance over NATO's eastern frontier. In any future conflict, the patchwork of farmland and muddy soil will limit the mobility of armoured units, while the dense forests and water barriers favour smaller, more agile forces. In practical terms, what is needed here, according to military analysts, are well-trained special operations forces, long-range missiles and drones to deliver precision strikes.

If Moscow decides to strike the Suwalki Gap, it can be expected to do so with overwhelming force. The question could be posed: would the combined forces of NATO be up to the challenge, and would the Suwalki Gap's variable terrain give NATO a

defensive edge? Well, it all depends, and the considerations here are more political than military.

Let's take those questions in reverse order: first, the variable terrain. Broken terrain, corn fields, muddy soil, dense forests and water obstacles will generally favour smaller and more mobile forces, if they are deployed to provide defence in depth. Defence in depth is exactly as the name suggests; a layered, interconnected, overlapping and interdependent network of defensive positions.

While such a defence can be improvised, last minute efforts are – at best – dangerous and highly unreliable. Especially if this is attempted under sustained enemy fire.

However, this tactic takes considerable time, effort and consequently significant financial means. From a military point of view, defence in depth is always dependent on favourable terrain, secure lines of communication and supply, and accurate anticipation of enemy tactics. But above all, it demands sustained political will to implement.



U.S. and British soldiers conduct live-fire training with NATO's enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroup Poland at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, near Toruń, Poland

Article 5: Nato's credibility gap

Effective defence of the Suwalki Gap requires more than just NATO's paper commitments. Yes, Article 5 pledges collective defence – does it kick in automatically? In theory, yes. In practice, nothing is guaranteed.

Consider Ukraine: a nation fighting and bleeding under Russian aggression, yet NATO took nearly a decade to recognise the invasion as a direct threat to Europe.

Only now, after years of hesitation, are allies scrambling to ramp up weapons production and coordinate a response.

Here's the dilemma: A decisive NATO deployment to the Suwalki Gap would probably trigger Moscow's anger, risking rapid escalation. Yet without that resolve, the Alliance's deterrent crumbles.

And then, there is another wild card: the United States. Washington, under the presidency of Donald Trump, remains an unpredictable factor. Would the US see reinforcing the Suwalki Gap as essential to European security, or dismiss it as an unnecessary provocation of Moscow? More crucially, would Congress approve the substantial funding required?

Even setting aside US involvement, critical questions remain about European NATO members. Do they have the strategic

foresight and resolve to independently secure the Suwalki Gap? Are they prepared to invest in layered defences and station troops in the corridor and its adjacent staging areas?

Many military analysts remain sceptical. More pointedly, some experts even question whether NATO should prioritise the Suwalki Gap at all, with growing concerns that the whole enterprise is economically prohibitive and politically divisive.

Can the gap be defended? Militarily, yes – but in Western democracies, ultimate authority rests with the civilian government leaders. This brings us back to the fundamental question of political will: NATO faces a binary choice – either commit fully to defending this crucial corridor or accept the strategic consequences of inaction.

But there is an even more pressing concern: is NATO truly prepared for 21st-century warfare? The conflict in Ukraine has redrawn the battlefield, shifting from large-scale manoeuvres to drone-dominated, hyper-digital combat where small units decide engagements. This new era of warfare demands skills and systems that NATO has yet to prove it possesses at scale.

Anders Puck Nielsen is a military analyst and naval Captain at the Royal Danish Defence College, as well as a NATO adviser. He doesn't mince his words when pointing out where the Western militaries have gone wrong: *'NATO slept through the drone revolution. Russia is months behind Ukraine, but years ahead of the West. In a conflict, NATO would face heavy losses without urgent reforms. Existing doctrines assume lost territory can be retaken, but without drones dominating, that's no longer guaranteed, especially for the Baltics.'*



Anders Puck Nielsen, naval officer and NATO adviser

And on the diplomatic front, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the former Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief and currently ambassador to the UK matches this bluntness with the precision of a drone strike, calling out strategic failures most military chiefs would only whisper about: *'NATO's warfare model*

is outdated. It's not just about rearmament – we need a root-and-branch overhaul of tactics, training and budgets to match Ukraine's high-tech warfare. If NATO abandoned tanks today, it would still take five years to catch up to Ukraine's drone capabilities – and by then, the tech will have moved on'.



Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's Armed Forces Valerii Zaluzhnyi during his visit to front-line positions in the south and east in January 2024

Electronic warfare and air defence have seen revolutionary change. Ground combat will likely never be the same. Consider this: when US forces last fought in Europe, the infantryman's deadliest weapon was the venerable M1 Carbine. Today, it is the FPV or First-Person View drone - an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) streaming real-time video to an operator's goggles, effectively turning every soldier into a precision air strike controller. On Ukraine's battlefields, FPV drones account for 80% of Russian casualties. NATO now faces a sobering reality: the most lethal weapon system in modern combat didn't exist four years ago. Should the alliance commit to defending European soil, it must prepare to wage a war unlike any in its doctrinal playbooks. To deny Russia the Suwalki Gap, NATO's strategy must combine traditional deterrence with ruthless adaptation to 21st-century warfare's brutal evolution.

The Alliance has already taken steps to bolster its presence in the region. It has deployed four multinational battle groups to the Baltic states and Poland since 2016, doubling troop numbers in eight eastern flank countries, and enhancing air and naval assets. Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO have further shifted the strategic calculus, turning the Baltic Sea to what some commentators call "a NATO lake". Crucially, the Baltic Sea offers alternative reinforcement routes, but these measures – while significant – fall short of addressing the full scope of the threat.

Russia's eagerness to connect Kaliningrad to its mainland via the gap is no great secret; Moscow has long viewed the exclave as a forward base to project power into Europe, and its militarisation - complete with nuclear armed missiles - underscores its intent.

The Baltic states, with their small populations and limited military resources are tantalising targets for a Kremlin that thrives on testing NATO's resolve. To deter Russia, NATO must move beyond symbolic troop deployments and Cold War-era "tripwire" strategies that depend solely on Article 5's threat of escalation. What's needed now is a substantial, combat-ready forward presence with full logistical support, positioned in the Baltic states and Poland, to hold the line from the first hour of conflict and to reduce reliance on the Suwalki Gap as a lifeline.

I Speed is critical

Russia's war games simulation in 2016 suggested that it could overrun the capitals of the Baltic states in 36 to 60 hours, leaving NATO little time to respond.

The ongoing war in Ukraine casts a long shadow over the Suwalki Gap. Russia's military has been battered with casualties reportedly reaching the 1 million mark, and vast quantities of equipment destroyed. Yet it remains a formidable threat.

Admiral Rob Bauer who served as the 33rd Chair of the NATO Military Committee from June 2021 until January 2025 was the main military adviser to the NATO Secretary General and the North Atlantic Council. He constantly emphasised NATO's shift back to collective defence since 2014: *'There is a need for higher readiness and prepositioned forces in the eastern parts of the Alliance. This overarching strategy directly addresses the vulnerabilities of areas like the Suwalki Gap. NATO is on a rise in readiness, but there's also work to be done to reach the desired force levels'.*

A significant number of NATO military officials and European Union experts assess that the Russian forces in Ukraine are heavily depleted. But relying on forecasts always carries some risk, and current indicators suggest Russia will probably not strike the Suwalki Gap in the near term.



Admiral Rob Bauer

However, a premature cease fire in Ukraine would dramatically escalate the danger to this corridor. Should Putin secure a frozen conflict - retaining occupied territories, without achieving total victory - he may well shift focus and resources towards the Baltic states.

Such a ceasefire would allow Russia to rebuild its military, replenish depleted stocks and exploit NATO's perceived complacency. Putin will almost certainly exploit NATO's war fatigue to make a move.

With Ukraine no longer draining Moscow's military resources, the Kremlin could mass forces in Belarus under the pretext of exercises -

as it did during the 2021 “Zapad” drills which involved 200,000 Russian and Belarusian troops, 760 pieces of equipment and 15 naval vessels. Such deployments would position Russia for a potential strike against the Suwalki Gap.

The scenario is not hypothetical: Russia’s reliance on Belarus as a staging ground for its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, coupled with the Wagner Group’s presence there in 2023, shows Moscow’s readiness to use proxies and hybrid tactics to destabilise the region. A ceasefire in Ukraine could embolden Putin to test NATO’s eastern flank, gambling that a war-weary West would hesitate to respond decisively.



© US ARMY

NATO personnel and officers from 2nd Bn, 8th Cav Regt, 1st Armoured Brigade, brief Lt. Col. Sebastian Hebisch, commander of NATO eFP Battle Group Lithuania, during Exercise IRON WOLF in Rukla, Lithuania. The training focuses on integrated manoeuvres, 170 Km north of the Suwalki Gap

The Suwalki Gap – already a propaganda motif for Moscow and Minsk – would become the obvious target... A low-cost, high-impact move to fracture NATO’s unity and isolate the Baltic states.

The war in Ukraine has rewritten the rules of ground warfare, and NATO appears to be lagging behind. The proliferation of drones – cheap, lethal and ubiquitous – has transformed the modern battlefield. Precision strikes, real-time reconnaissance and the disruption of enemy communications were once the work of higher military echelons; now, these tasks are performed by ten-man rifle squads.

This wasn’t an evolution in ground warfare – it was a revolution. The war in Ukraine has brought epoch-making changes in tactics, weaponry, and the invisible domain of electronic warfare. Yet the question remains: is NATO – or even the United States – fully adapting to the realities of 21st-century warfare?

Ukraine and Russia have refined drone warfare through brutal trial by fire. NATO by contrast, lacks comparable, combat-tested expertise. For decades, NATO forces trained for counter insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan – leaving them potentially ill-prepared for the high-

intensity, drone-dominated battlefields of modern war that could prove extremely dangerous in the Suwalki Gap.

Russia could wage war without crossing borders with ground troops; it could deploy drone swarms to target NATO reinforcement columns, disrupt supply networks and create strategic chaos. Long-range artillery and Iskander missiles based in Kaliningrad, enhanced by sophisticated electronic warfare to jam NATO communications, would multiply the threat exponentially. NATO’s current, Cold War mindset, relying on static defences and relatively slow-moving reinforcements offers little to counter this hyper-mobile, asymmetric approach.

NATO must urgently revolutionise its combat doctrine – equipping frontline units with layered drone defences, while developing offensive swarm capabilities of its own. Operators in forward positions, down to the squad level require networked sensor systems to detect and neutralise drone threats within seconds. Without this transformation, NATO risks being outmanoeuvred in the Suwalki Gap’s tricky and confined terrain.

I Eye in the sky

The European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), a next-generation air defence system designed to counter missiles and drones could prove decisive in securing the Suwalki Gap. First proposed by German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz in 2022, he tied ESSI to Germany’s pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence and modernise its military, to address NATO and the EU’s shortfall in air and missile defence systems.

This ambitious programme aims to create a multi-layered defensive shield, combining:

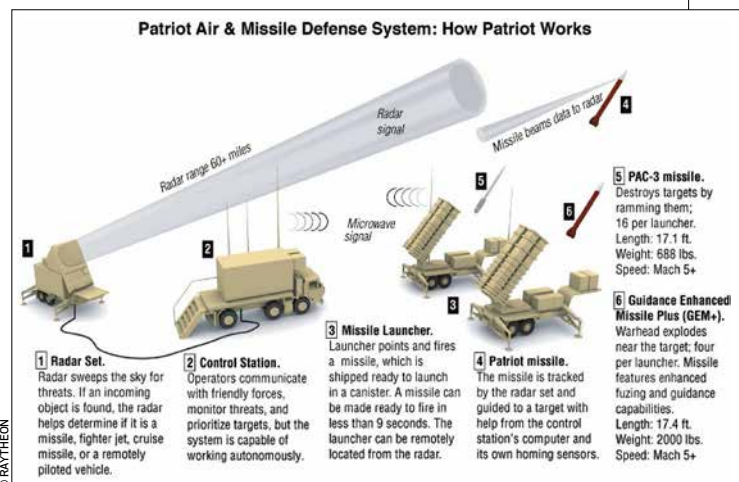
- Short-range Skyranger-30 anti-aircraft systems
- Medium-range Iris-T SLM missiles
- Long-range Patriot-104 batteries
- Very long-range Arrow-3 hypersonic-capable missiles

Olaf Scholz framed ESSI as a response to Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, emphasising the need for integrated defence systems: *‘Europe must close its air defence gaps urgently. The Sky Shield Initiative is not just about procurement – it’s about collective security against missile threats from Russia, particularly from Kaliningrad’.*



The ESSI operates separately from NATO since it includes the neutral countries, Austria and Switzerland. And many believe the real push for Greece and Turkey to join came after Donald Trump criticised NATO members not spending enough on defence.

However, France, Italy and Poland are noticeably missing – they’ve chosen not to join this defence project. So far, ESSI appears to be more of a political effort to quickly buy ready-made air defence systems and close gaps in Europe’s protection. But whether it actually works in practice still remains to be seen.



French President, Emmanuel Macron opposed ESSI for excluding the French-Italian SAMP/T system and advocated for a “European preference” in defence procurement: *‘We cannot outsource Europe’s security to non-European industries. ESSI’s reliance on US and Israeli systems undermines our strategic autonomy’.*

As for Poland, while Prime Minister Donald Tusk expressed interest in joining ESSI in April 2024, then President Andrzej Duda and the conservative opposition dismissed it as “a German business project”, preferring to prioritise US-compatible systems like Patriot and AEGIS Ashore.

Meanwhile, Andrius Kubilius, the EU’s Defence Commissioner linked ESSI to the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP), urging joint borrowing to bear the enormous cost and to accelerate capabilities: *‘ESSI is a cornerstone of the EU’s defence industrial strategy, but funding remains a challenge. A European sky shield alone could cost up to €500 billion’.*



Andrius Kubilius

In this context, the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen criticised Hungary for vetoing EU defence funds that could support efforts linked to the ESSI. She cited Budapest’s

opposition to the €6 billion that was destined to Ukraine via the European Peace facility (EPF), the EU’s off-budget fund designed to strengthen the bloc’s defence and security role globally:

‘ESSI aligns with the EU’s Strategic Compass, but we need faster decision-making. Unanimity rules cannot block critical defence projects’.

War of narratives

But as both Russian and Ukrainian forces learnt it the hard way, 20th-century air defence systems are not entirely effective against modern FPV drones – their small radar cross-sections and low-altitude flight profiles evade traditional detection.



Anton Alikhanov, Russian Minister of Industry and Trade

ESSI is essentially a shield against jet fighters, bombers, cruise and ballistic missiles, but not FPV drones. And that’s precisely where the danger lies. Sky Shield is not a panacea; it’s still in development, with full deployment still some time away. And its focus on air threats does little to address ground-based assaults or hybrid tactics. Russia is capable of exploiting this window of vulnerability and strike before the system becomes fully operational. What’s more, the Suwalki Gap’s narrow geography limits the effectiveness of large-scale manoeuvre elements.

In this terrain, it is hard-hitting, mobile and flexible forces that are needed to hold the line. Sky Shield must be paired with a robust and modern ground presence, as well as drone counter measures to truly safeguard this vital piece of terrain.

The Suwalki Gap is truly a test of NATO’s resolve and adaptability. Both military and civilian authorities within the EU are unanimous: to prevent Russia from seizing it, the Alliance must

act decisively. It must bolster forward defences, preposition supplies and master the drone-driven warfare that defines modern conflict.

Meanwhile, Moscow keeps insisting that it has no strategic interests in this region.

In 2023, Russian Minister of Industry and Trade, Anton Alikhanov, who, at the time, was the governor of Kaliningrad Region declared in an interview with the RIA Novosti news agency: *'The Suwalki Corridor is not interesting, no matter what anyone tells you. Even if the experts will say something about the fact that this is the most important area and it is necessary to take it under control. No need... Because there's nothing but a two-lane highway winding through the woods. It is extremely inconvenient from the point of view of logistics - both conventional and military. Who needs this territory in terms of logistics and rapid transfer of troops or something else? No one.'*

The Kremlin is also keen to point out that western media "keep fuelling the hype around the Suwalki Corridor". They make reference to an article published by Politico in 2022, with the title: "The most dangerous place on Earth". It noted that "Western military planners warn that if the Russian president ever decides to escalate the war in Ukraine to a kinetic confrontation with NATO, this area (the Suwalki Corridor) will probably be one of its first targets."



Sergey Ermakov

However, according to Sergey Ermakov, an expert at the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISS), the Suwalki Corridor has long attracted the attention of NATO military leaders, because it is one of the most vulnerable places for a supposedly, hypothetical Russian attack on NATO countries. Hence the plans for conducting exercises in this area. In an interview with RT,

he declared: *'This notorious myth of the Russian threat is being inflated by NATO members to maintain the solidity of their ranks and to extract more and more money for military spending. This is why such horror stories are drawn. The persistence of this myth is facilitated by the fact that from the point of view of military geography, this place is really considered quite vulnerable to the NATO military.'*



Russian S-400 Missiles at a victory parade in Kaliningrad

I Time bought in blood

Be that as it may, the war in Ukraine has allowed the West to buy time. But that time has come at a horrific cost - paid in Ukrainian and Russian blood. Every day of fighting weakens Russia's immediate military strength, grinding down its forces in a war of attrition. Yet if the West pushes for a premature ceasefire now, that hard-fought advantage could vanish overnight. Moscow would seize the chance to regroup, rearm, and return deadlier than before.

NATO's forces have not been tested in this new era of warfare - not like Ukraine has. The lessons being learned on the bloody battlefields of Bakhmut and Avdiivka cannot be ignored. NATO must absorb them, adapt, and close the experience gap before it's too late.

The stakes couldn't be higher. This isn't just about Ukraine. Should Russia breach the Suwalki Gap - whether through relentless pressure or Western indecision - and establish a land bridge between Kaliningrad and Belarus, the strategic consequences would be very grave. The Baltic states would be isolated, NATO's credibility shattered, and Vladimir Putin would see proof that brute force works. Decades of deterrence, carefully built since the Cold War, would unravel in an instant.

This isn't some distant, theoretical threat. The Suwalki Gap is real - a quiet stretch of land, just 65 kilometres wide, dotted with forests and farmland. But it's also the front line of Europe's future. If NATO isn't ready to defend it, the next war won't be fought on Ukraine's soil. It'll be fought on ours. The clock is ticking, and time, as Ukraine has shown us, is never free.

Hossein Sadre

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‘WHAT’S
ON YOUR
TABLE?’

**EUIPO CALLS OUT
COUNTERFEIT FOOD
AND BEVERAGES IN
THE EU**

- **Authorities seized counterfeit food products worth € 91 million in a single EU-wide operation**
- **Wines and spirits face one of the highest counterfeiting rates compared to other products, with annual losses in sales of € 2,289 million and nearly 5,700 jobs in the EU**
- **Fraudulent foods and beverages found containing dangerous substances including methanol, mercury and toxic pesticides**
- **Geographical Indications are a mark of authenticity. The European Union has over 3 600 registered geographical indication products**

"What's on your table?" That is the question the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) is asking, as part of its campaign for World Anti-Counterfeiting Day, which exposes the concerning threat of counterfeit food and beverages across the EU. The initiative comes as recent reports indicate counterfeiting in the food and drink sector continues to pose significant risks to the health of consumers, while harming Europe's economies as well as its culinary heritage.

Counterfeit products are often associated with luxury goods or the clothing and fashion sector. However, according to the 2022 Intellectual Property Crime Threat Assessment, foodstuffs – particularly cookies, pasta, crisps and sweets – were the second most seized category of products at the EU's external borders in 2020.

Recent findings reveal the alarming scope of this criminal activity. The 2025 European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) Report from Europol highlights that the growth of e-commerce has provided counterfeiters with new avenues to distribute fraudulent food items, making it increasingly difficult for consumers to identify authentic products. Criminals manipulate food labels and packaging and also adjust manufacturing processes, targeting high value products.



João Negrão, Executive Director of the EUIPO

Law enforcement operations on the ground have also exposed the scale of the problem. The joint Europol-Interpol OPSON operation, carried out annually, resulted in the seizure of counterfeit and substandard food products worth € 91 million in 2024.

The Executive Director of the EUIPO, João Negrão, said:

"Counterfeit food and beverages are a major public health concern. Our campaign aims to equip consumers with the knowledge to protect themselves while supporting legitimate businesses that uphold EU quality standards. This is a battle we must fight together: authorities, producers and consumers alike."

Health risks remain a primary concern. The 2021 SOCTA Report warns that fraudulent food products have been found to contain dangerous substances such as methanol, mercury, fipronil and various insecticides or pesticides.

The counterfeiting of beverages, particularly alcoholic drinks, remains a significant issue, with organised crime groups employing sophisticated methods to deceive consumers. Counterfeiters frequently reuse original bottles or print fake labels to place on empty bottles, making it harder for consumers and authorities to distinguish between legitimate and fraudulent products.



Seized counterfeit liquor bottles

The economic impact is also substantial. According to the EUIPO data, the wines and spirits sector was one of the most affected sectors by counterfeiting during the 2013-2017 period. In total, € 2 289 million were lost in sales and nearly 5 700 jobs were destroyed annually in the EU due to counterfeiting. The loss in taxes of these products was also significant, amounting to € 2 068 million.

China and Turkey were among the most frequently reported countries of origin for counterfeit food and drinks seized at the EU's external border in 2019 and 2020.

Geographical indications, a mark of authenticity

The food and beverage industry is a cornerstone of the EU economy, contributing significantly to regional development, employment and job creation. From wines to traditional food products, geographical indications (GIs) enable consumers to trust and distinguish quality products while also helping producers to market their products better. These designations protect the names of products that originate from specific regions

and possess qualities or characteristics essentially due to that geographical environment.



Seized counterfeited ham

The EU's system of GIs includes Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) labels. These certifications preserve Europe's rich culinary heritage and provide consumers with assurance of authenticity and quality. Currently, the European Union has over 3,600 products registered as geographical indications.

France, Italy and Germany lead in both production and consumption of GI products, with France alone accounting for nearly 32% of EU GI product sales. Wine constitutes 54% of the total EU GI consumption, which makes it particularly vulnerable to counterfeiting. Other products heavily impacted by counterfeiting include olive oil, beer, meat, cheese and dairy products.

How consumers can protect themselves

The EUIPO campaign "What's on your table?" provides practical advice for consumers on how to protect themselves against counterfeit products. Consumers are strongly encouraged to buy

from official retailers and distribution channels, as well as official brand websites, to avoid counterfeit goods. Verifying product labelling and its origin and checking for certification logos can help confirm the product's legitimacy. In particular, consumers should look for official EU Geographical Indication (GI) labels, such as PDO, PGI, and TSG, to ensure the authenticity of the products they purchase.

It is also important to carefully examine the packaging and the product itself, as counterfeits often have finishing flaws or spelling mistakes. Making use of authentication tools, such as QR codes and holograms, can further aid in verifying a product's authenticity. The EUIPO has released an anti-counterfeiting and anti-piracy technology guide that includes over 40 technologies that can assist business owners in safeguarding their brands.



Seized equipment used to manufacture labels for counterfeit food

Taking down fake goods in Europe

The counterfeiting of food and beverages, and the abuse of geographical indications, pose a

About geographical indications

Geographical indications (GIs) protect the names of products that originate from specific regions and possess qualities or characteristics essentially due to that geographical environment.

The EU's system of GIs includes labels of:

- Protected Designation of Origin (PDO)
- Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)
- Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG)



These certifications preserve Europe's rich culinary heritage and provide consumers with **assurance of authenticity and quality**. Currently, the European Union has **over 3,400 products** registered as geographical indications.



Aerial view of the Euiipo headquarters Alicante, Spain

significant and serious crime which needs to be tackled on an international level. The EUIPO is actively engaged in combating counterfeiting across the EU. As part of its efforts, it collaborates with various organisations and law enforcement authorities, including police officers and rights holders, to enhance cross-border cooperation and enforcement in Europe.

High-profile operations like OPSON – which means ‘food’ in ancient Greek – help remove counterfeit and substandard food and drinks from the market. In its 2024 edition, the OPSON Operation, coordinated by Europol and Interpol in collaboration with various law enforcement authorities in 29 countries in Europe as well as food and beverage producers, led to the seizure of 22 000 tonnes of food and around 850 000 litres of (mostly alcoholic) beverages, worth € 91 million. The operation also resulted in 11 criminal networks dismantled and 278 people reported to judicial authorities in connection with the counterfeits. As part of these operations, the EUIPO provides expertise on intellectual property rights – particularly trade marks and geographical indications – while also offering training and working closely with enforcement authorities to combat counterfeiting.

As evidenced by the EUIPO reports, the production and distribution of counterfeit products is often linked to organised crime – activities that undermine legitimate businesses, endanger consumer health and help finance other types of serious crime, such as drug trafficking, money laundering, cybercrime, fraud, and even terrorism.

OPERATION OPSON XIII (2024)

Fake goods valued at EUR 91 million were taken off the market



22 000 tonnes of food



850 000 litres of (mostly alcoholic) beverages

Olive oil and wines featuring a protected designation of origin (PDO) were the most affected types of products

The operation led to the dismantlement of **11 criminal networks** and **278 people** reported in connection with the counterfeits

| About the EUIPO

The EU Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) is one of the largest decentralised agencies of the European Union, based in Alicante, Spain. The EUIPO has managed the registration of EU trade marks since 1994 and designs since 2003, both of which are intellectual property rights that cover the 27 Member States of the European Union.

The agency added another IP right, craft and industrial geographical indications, to its portfolio in 2023. The EUIPO also carries out cooperation activities at EU and international level to create a level playing field in the world of IP and hosts the European Observatory on Infringements of Intellectual Property Rights. In 2024, the EUIPO was ranked as the most innovative IP office in the world for the fifth time.



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The SCF Turgut oil tanker owned by Sovcomflot,
a Russian state-owned shipping company

OILING THE WHEELS OF TRADE

**How Russia Sidesteps
Sanctions to Sustain Critical
Oil and Gas Revenue**

We merrily pump it into the fuel tanks of our vehicles without really giving a thought to where it comes from. We should, perhaps, stop and think. After all, oil, or petroleum, originates from long dead plants and microorganisms that were, over the course of millennia long past, buried under layers of sediment. Trapped there, and subjected to enormous heat and pressure, they were turned into hydrocarbons, and thus into that useful and valuable stuff we call oil. Not for nothing do we refer to it as “a fossil fuel”, although it’s mainly composed of carbon and hydrogen, the universe’s commonest elements, as well as being among its most useful. As we all know (or should do) the universe is expanding, just as the American astronomer Edwin Hubble proved back in 1929, when he calculated that the velocity at which a galaxy is seen to move increases according to its distance from Earth. It became known (and still is known) as “Hubble’s Law”, although it had been first stated by Georges Lemaître, a Belgian Catholic priest, theoretical physicist and mathematician, two years earlier. It should really be known as “Lemaître’s Law”, I suppose. But I digress.



Kuwaiti firefighters combat a well fire in southern Kuwait's Rumaila oilfield, ignited by retreating Iraqi forces during the 2003 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'

The plain fact is that it’s very valuable, if not exactly pretty, at least not in its liquid form, to which we’ll come later. It’s more appreciated when it takes the form of diamonds. Without

carbon we could not exist. It helps to power the nuclear reactions of the Sun which give us heat and light, as well as providing the raw materials so vital to all sorts of things, from building materials to the clothes on our backs. Carbon comes in many forms and is the 15th most abundant element in our planet’s crust. But of course, the oil we use to fuel our vehicles and other things isn’t just carbon.

It also contains, as I mentioned earlier, hydrogen, the number one element in the periodic table of chemicals. It accounts for 88% of all the atoms in existence, so it’s hardly rare. Indeed, it’s what powers the Sun (and all the other stars, of course) and it’s responsible for the tan you get while lying out in its welcoming rays. There is a lot of hydrogen in the Earth’s crust, of course, in the hydrocarbons that have been formed from decaying organisms to become our modern fuels, turning into such wonders as crude oil and natural gas. Indeed, scientists now think that hydrocarbons may have been formed deep in the Earth, from methane that has been subjected to very high pressures and temperatures.

It’s such useful stuff, as well as being versatile to the point of ubiquity, that you might think people wouldn’t fall out over it. But, of course, they do. Humans can fall out over anything, but especially if it has a monetary value. And oil most certainly does. Russia is fortunate in being well-supplied with lots of the stuff. Many Western countries tried to block the purchase of Russian oil, because its sale helps to fund its aggressive activities in Ukraine, which many Western politicians would like to end. Western sanctions were supposed to damage the Russian economy, but they have, in reality, simply made it more difficult for it to sell its oil. As it is, Russian oil still flows into the EU (and elsewhere, of course), earning Moscow millions of euros. Despite all the sanctions, the EU paid some €140-billion for Russian oil and gas in 2022, including an impressive €80-billion



G7 Summit, Canada (Anti-clockwise, from bottom centre) Ursula von der Leyen, Friedrich Merz, Keir Starmer, Donald Trump, Mark Carney, Emmanuel Macron, Giorgia Meloni, Shigeru Ishiba, Antonio Costa

for oil, according to a report in Britain's Financial Times. That has helped to pay for the weapons Russia shoots at Ukraine.

Back in May 2022, a mere two months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine had begun, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised a complete import ban on Russian oil arriving by sea. That notwithstanding, witnesses have reported Russian oil tankers arriving in EU ports, especially in Romania and Bulgaria. We should not be surprised, nor even horrified. Trade and commerce are hungry for oil, so it's a never-ending demand and businesspeople over the years have found innumerable ways around whatever restrictions are put in place. Needless to say the trade is not conducted openly and nor are tankers bearing Russian oil often seen in European ports. In one case, a Russian tanker was spotted off the Romanian coast near the port of Constanta before the arrival of the Panama-registered *Melihat*, which specialises in ship-to-ship transfers of oil: a useful way of disguising a cargo's point of origin. It had clearly happened before and would do again. I need hardly explain that it was not the Russian-registered vessel that docked but rather the one listed as Panamanian. It happens quite a lot with the oil being transferred to a vessel registered in a neutral country that could bring the oil to shore and unload it without problems. It seems as if EU governments (or some of them) are quite happy to disguise the true origins of their oil supplies while Russia, of course, is very happy to find a safe market and to be paid. In 2023, it's believed that one refinery processed almost 5-million tonnes of Russian oil, which brought the Kremlin almost a billion euros in direct tax revenue. When western governments talk about putting the financial squeeze on Moscow they are being somewhat disingenuous. They all want to get their hands on Russia's oil and each other's money.



© FACEBOOK

Mykhailo Tkach

Romania and Bulgaria seem to be favoured destinations for the stuff. The ships that carry it are known as the "shadow fleet", or even the "ghost fleet" of ageing and frequently uninsured vessels, now responsible for carrying about a third of Russia's oil exports. Back in 2023, Bulgaria passed a new law banning the import of Russian oil, but a ship-to-ship transfer only takes around 24 hours and safely offshore, out of the views of watchers. Once the stuff has been moved to a different vessel, who's to say where it came from originally? Oil is oil and looks the same wherever it came from, a yellowish-brown liquid. In November 2024, according to *Ukrainska Pravda*, journalist Mykhailo Tkach watched two Russian oil tankers as they arrived at EU ports, albeit fairly minor ports. He saw them, one flagged in Liberia and one in Panama, carrying 160,000 tonnes of crude oil to EU ports after sailing from the Russian port of Novorossiysk. Ironically, he reported, the oil arrived on a day on which a Russian bombardment of Ukraine lasted for more than fifteen hours. So, when Vladimir Putin talks of peaceful solutions, he's lying, of course.



© WILL ROSE/GREENPEACE

Greenpeace activists intercept the *Waikiki* (Aframax, 112,800 dwt), operated by TMS Tankers, in a protest against Russian oil exports

One commentator noted that it's easy to tell when Putin is lying: his lips are moving and there is sound coming out.

Tkach points out other examples of Russian duplicity to bypass bans and restrictions, all seemingly carried out with the covert blessing of Western governments (which they would deny, of course). He mentions another vessel, the *Altai*, registered in the Marshall Islands, which sailed from Novorossiysk in Russia to Constanta in Romania with a crew of 19 Russians and two Georgians, bringing crude oil to both Romania and Bulgaria. It docked at its European destination, the Romanian port of Midia, on the same day that Russia launched one of its biggest missile assaults on Ukraine, aimed at its energy sector, while Romanian tugs were towing the *Altai* a mere 10 kilometres off Romania's coast. According to text messages sent to Ivan Bogdanov, a Russian sailor serving on the *Altai*, but intercepted by *Ukrainska Pravda*, the *Altai* had been anchored in Romanian waters for nearly a week before returning to Novorossiysk for reloading. According to Tkach, the texts show that the vessel's crew were all well aware of what they were doing.

It seems that after sanctions were imposed in February 2023, more than five million tonnes of Russian oil, with a value of €3-billion, were shipped into Europe through Turkey. Turkey seems to have been playing a very significant part (if that's an appropriate description) in Russia's determination to break European sanctions while Europe's nations have seemingly allowed it, happily turning a blind eye to what's been going on.



The Port of Constanța, Romania

You may be interested to learn that although tighter sanctions could slash the Kremlin's income by 20% per year, they don't because of all the profit-driven cheating that goes on, and imports of Russian oil currently exceed all the financial aid that we in the West have sent to Ukraine. Typical of politicians, eh? Promise one thing but actually do something totally different. Additionally, Putin is getting assistance of a sort from his pal, Donald Trump, who has refused to impose a price cap on Russian oil, as the EU would like. Furthermore, Russia has been benefitting from a spike in oil prices that results from Israel's attack on Iran, which is itself a major oil producer. Of course, it's revenues from Russian oil that underpin that country's economy. However, Bloomberg reports that Washington will not back the move. Of course, it's not all in the hands of the EU since it involves a wider range of countries, and EU plans to target Russian businesses and banking would require the support of all 27 member states, while effective economic action would require the support of all G7 nations, which would have to include a currently unwilling United States. At the same time Israel was launching attacks on Tehran, Putin was holding telephone calls with the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu and with the President of Iran, Masoud Pezeshkian. Israel has claimed that its attacks on Iran were aimed at preventing it from developing

its own nuclear weapon, an ongoing project with a regrettable target to which it's said to be getting close, or at least "closer". According to Newsweek, in his call with Netanyahu, Putin reminded him of the risks of war. "The importance of resuming the negotiations and resolving any issues pertaining to Iran's nuclear programme (must be conducted) exclusively via political and diplomatic means," he said. In speaking to Pezeshkian, Putin is said to have "stressed that Russia condemned Israel's actions, which had been carried out in violation of the UN Charter and international law." The Institute for the Study of War, based in Washington, reckons that rising oil prices can only benefit Putin, helping Russia to fund its continued strikes on Ukraine and its global ambitions. It will help Putin to afford more weapons. The EU may try to impose its oil price cap without the United States, but there's no doubt that a fear of hostilities between Israel and Iran is having a serious effect on oil prices.

It's worth remembering that EU imports of Russian fossil fuels in the third year of its illegal invasion came to more than all the financial aid sent to Ukraine. In February 2025, Russia's annual earnings were anticipated to reach around €237-billion. It makes continued sanctions more important than ever, according to centre-right Lithuanian MEP Rasa Juknevičienė, of the EPP group, "Sanctions are not just a policy tool; they are a strategic necessity," she says; they must be maintained. "Now is the time to keep calm and carry on – holding firm against pressure to lift them. Easing sanctions prematurely would only strengthen authoritarian regimes and undermine the very principles we seek to uphold. Persistence is the key to real impact." It's also being argued that tighter sanctions could cut the Kremlin's revenues by some 20% per year. If you want to hit someone where it most hurts, hit them in the pocket.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Rosneft Oil Company Chairman, Igor Sechin

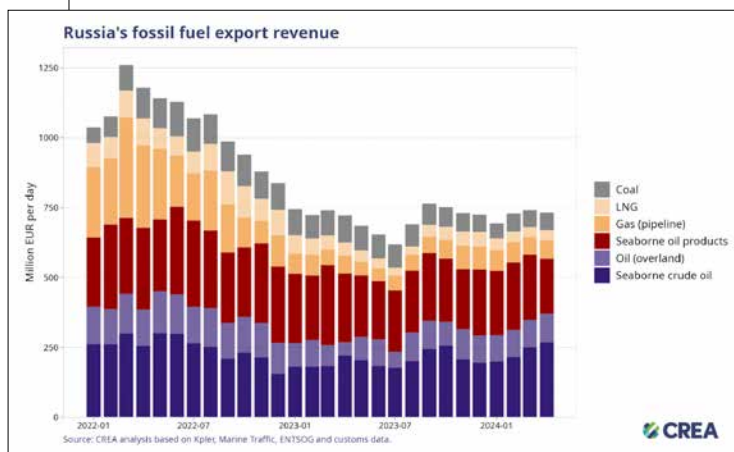


The Eagle S tanker believed to be part of the Russian shadow fleet

It may seem ironic that despite the various sanctions imposed, in this, the third year of Russia's wide-ranging invasion of Ukraine, EU imports of Russian fossil fuels remain virtually unchanged, worth an annual €21.9-billion. That is, in fact, a 6% year-on-year drop in value but only a 1% drop in volumes. Certainly, the amount the EU spent on buying Russian fuels exceeded the €18.7-billion given in financial aid to Ukraine. The invasion has been going on for three years but Russia's so-called "shadow fleet" continues to transport the oil Europe theoretically wants to block (but needs), re-routing it to countries that don't impose sanctions. Russia's earnings from selling its oil make interesting reading. In the year immediately before the invasion, the revenue reached €264-billion. In the first year of the actual invasion, that figure rose to €356-billion. The following year the figure fell to €250-billion and it fell again the following year to a "mere" €242-billion, in each case involving mainly crude oil, with gas as the next most important commodity while coal came last. Russia's famous "shadow fleet" carried most of it, transporting 167-million tonnes or 61% of all Russia's seaborne crude oil shipments.

Europe's dependence on Russian fossil fuels has decreased since the invasion, but not by as much as you might think. Imports of Russian oil and gas may have gone down considerably – from 45% in 2021 to 18% in 2024 – but a quarter of Russia's earnings from its exports of fossil fuels still come from Europe. Many people have said that it's well past the time to change that, with the aim of completely eliminating any European dependence on Russia's fossil fuels while investing heavily in

greater energy efficiency and renewable energy. It sounds like a great idea, but Europe still needs ever-more energy and it will have to get it from somewhere. The current alternatives appear unlikely to meet demand.



Meanwhile, Russia continues to make billions from its valuable natural resource. Campaigners have argued that Europe and the United States must do more to prevent Russia's oil and gas from fuelling the war with Ukraine. Oil and gas account for almost a third of Russia's state revenue and form more than 60% of its total exports. According to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), Russia has made more than €883-billion from its fossil fuel exports since it first staged its invasion. Quite a lot of it, a surprising €209-billion came from EU member states. The volumes in transit are rising year by year, too. According to CREA the volume rose by 26.77% in January and February 2025 over the same period in 2024. Meanwhile, Hungary and Slovakia continue to receive Russian gas through a pipeline that goes via Turkey.



Christophe Trebesch

One of the authors of a report into Russia's ongoing gas export business, Vaibhav Raghunandan put it plainly: "Purchasing Russian fossil fuels is, quite plainly, akin to sending financial aid to the Kremlin and enabling its invasion." He also pointed out that it's "a practice that must stop immediately to secure not just Ukraine's future, but also Europe's energy security." In 2024, the EU spent 39% more on importing Russian fuels than it set aside to help Ukraine. That aid figure doesn't include military or humanitarian contributions. An economist at IfW Kiel, Christoph Trebesch, has pointed out that there is a large gap between how much aid donors had raised for Ukraine when compared with previous wars, with European donors giving on average less than 0.1% of GDP each year. He said that Germany, to take one example, mobilised more aid and more quickly for Kuwait's liberation in the 1990-91 conflict than it has for Ukraine over a comparable length of time. It's also reported that according to one report Russia had earned €242-billion from exporting its fossil fuels during the third year of its full-scale invasion, with its revenues since the war began now getting close to a trillion euros. According to research for CREA, Russian oil revenues could be cut by around 20% if the current sanctions were properly applied and all the current gaps were to be plugged. EU ambassadors have agreed quite recently to tighten up the various restrictions, such as Europe buying oil that has been refined in a neutral country, as happens now, or restricting gas flows through the Turkstream pipeline, but Russia has become quite adept at bypassing the rules.

The report also called for a reduction in the use of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which has grown dramatically since the Russian invasion and the subsequent war began. Russia has taken second place in the export of LNG to Europe since 2024. What's more, Putin has an "unofficial" ally in Donald Trump, who uses his high office to stop the media from publishing critical stories. He's not alone, either: the global threat to press reportage goes beyond Trump, who, along with Hungary's Viktor Orban, would like to silence it and will continue their endeavours to silence it forever. Money in their pocket (however dishonourably

acquired) seems to them far more important than the freedom and welfare of us ordinary people. Attempts to overcome those obstacles are under weigh, such as The EU authorities planning to require that European companies importing Russian gas will have to disclose the details of contracts in order to introduce clear restrictions on supplies by the end of this year and completely stop them by the end of 2027. Both France and Belgium have said they will challenge any such ruling, while Hungary and Slovakia are also expected to make an attempt to derail the plan.

In 2024, four countries imported 16.77 million tons of Russian LNG, according to the Kpler commodities platform, representing 97 percent of the EU's total imports and more than half of Moscow's global exports. Together, they spent more than €6-billion on buying the product. The ban would pose problems for Spain and the Netherlands too, although they're unlikely to oppose it.

The EU is publishing a roadmap of its plan to end the import and sale of Russian gas completely by 2027, an idea that has been scorned in Moscow. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told Reuters that it would mean Europe "shooting itself in the foot". EU member states have been asked to outline strategies for ending their reliance on Russia not only for oil but for uranium, enriched uranium and other nuclear materials. The EU hopes to move away from Russian gas by "enhancing energy efficiency, accelerating the deployment of renewable energy and diversifying supplies", according to the European Commission.



Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov

We are entering uncharted territory. Nobody likes the idea of having to rely on the trustworthiness of Vladimir Putin whilst also shovelling money into his pocket, but neither does Europe want to be without oil and all the benefits it provides. How can that balance be struck? Nobody has really come up with a one-size-fits-all solution yet, but they will in time. The determination is there, but unfortunately so in Putin and, it seems, his chum, Trump. We know Trump likes oil and wants to seek more within the United States. You may recall that his campaign slogan for the last presidential election was "drill, baby, drill". He said he wants to scale up oil and gas production whilst rolling back green alternatives, which he seems not to like. It means, I presume, that if he goes ahead he'll be pumping more oil and gas, as long as his country continues to exist. Of course, if his actions lead to war, then lots of people will need to "drill, baby, drill," and in uniform.

Jim Gibbons

Jim.Gibbons@europe-diplomatic.eu



AI GENERATED IMAGE

“Money is a terrible master but an excellent servant”. (Phineas Taylor Barnum)

DIGITAL HOUSE OF CARDS

Europe's Fragile Payment Infrastructure

Money wasn't born overnight. It evolved from trust, necessity, and shared belief in value. Long before coins and paper banknotes, people exchanged goods, but as societies grew, it became too complicated. What if you didn't need what the other person offered? To solve this, early civilisations began using objects with agreed upon, such as shells, salt, or pieces of metal as a medium of exchange. These items were practical, portable, and recognised and approved within the community.

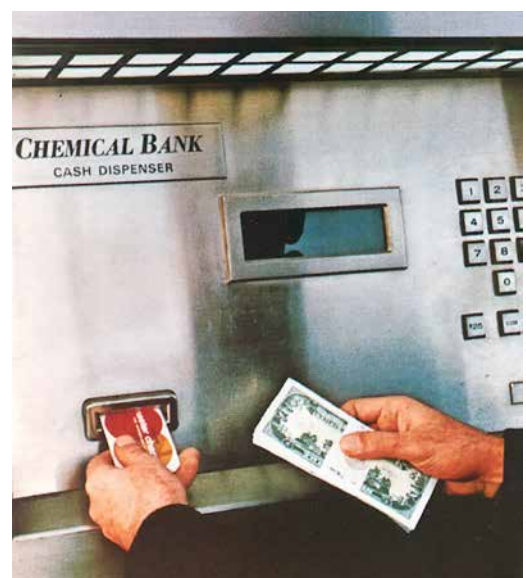
The first real money, as we understand it today, appeared around 3,000 BC in Mesopotamia, where silver bars were weighed to match the value of goods. This system introduced the idea of a standard unit of value. Later on, around 600 BC, the first minted coins were made of electrum, a natural mixture of gold and silver, stamped with official symbols to guarantee authenticity and value. This invention changed everything. Coins were easier to carry, more durable, and trusted. They helped empires grow, trade expand, and economies flourish.

While coins ruled the world for centuries, the idea of paper money came much later in China, during the Tang Dynasty in the 7th century, and became more widely used under the Song Dynasty, around the 11th century. As coins were heavy and hard to carry in large amounts, merchants needed a lighter, safer, and more practical way to handle money. Chinese traders began depositing their coins with trusted shops and received paper receipts in return, which could be exchanged back for metal money when needed.

Banknotes didn't appear in Europe until much later, around the 17th century—first in Sweden, before spreading throughout the continent. They became popular for the same reasons: convenience and security. Over time, banks and governments guaranteed their value, building public trust. Every printed banknote was backed by a certain amount of gold stored in the national bank, and in theory, you could exchange paper money for physical gold.

among business travellers and was accepted at an increasing number of locations.

The first true credit card issued by a bank came shortly after. In 1958, Bank of America introduced the BankAmericard in California, which allowed users to buy now and pay later, with the option to carry a balance over time. It was the forerunner of what we now know as Visa.

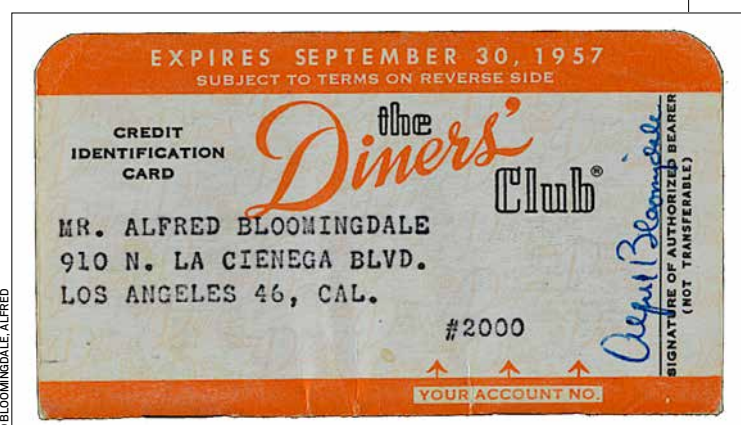


Cash withdrawal from an ATM in 1969

Curiously enough, debit cards were only developed later, in the 1970s, as banks began to introduce ATMs. By the 1980s and 1990s, debit and credit cards had become widespread, thanks to improved technology, security features, and international networks like Visa and Mastercard. Suddenly, the old saying that 'cash is king' started to fade... Bank cards completely transformed how we pay today. Many argue that it is not the same and even harms the way we see and value our money. *'When you pay with cash, you feel the loss. With a card, it's painless... and that's the danger.'* (Dave Ramsey, financial adviser)

Globally, non-cash transactions reached approximately US\$1.3 trillion in 2024, "with projections showing a 15% annual increase, reaching US\$2.3 trillion by 2027" (Source: Zimpler.com). The shift from cash to card payments has accelerated rapidly across Europe, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which drove widespread adoption of contactless transactions. However, the pace of this transition varies considerably between countries.

Nordic nations lead the cashless revolution. In Norway, around 98% of consumers use debit or credit cards, with cash accounting for just 3% of point-of-sale (POS) transactions. Sweden has seen cash usage decline to roughly 10% of all POS transactions (The Guardian). Similarly,



Diners' Club card used by its president, Alfred Bloomingdale in 1957

Today, however, most countries no longer use the gold standard. The value of money comes from trust in the government and the strength of economies themselves, not from actual gold reserves. Printed money is no longer limited by the amount of gold central banks hold, though they still retain gold as part of their reserves.

In the 1950s, another idea emerged: the bank card – a plastic tool to access your money without using cash. It all began in the United States with the launch of the Diners Club Card. It wasn't a bank card in today's sense but rather a charge card, meant for paying at restaurants. It quickly became popular

Finland and the Netherlands report high card usage rates of approximately 70% (Source: European Central Bank).

Ireland demonstrates particularly strong adoption of digital payments, where 87.1% of all card transactions are contactless. Notably, mobile wallets like Apple Pay and Google Pay represent over half of these contactless payments (Source: The Times).

Despite the surge in digital payments, several European nations – including Malta, Austria and Slovenia – continue to rely heavily on cash. Even Germany, despite its reputation for technological innovation, conducts approximately 71% of transactions in cash. For instance, not so long ago, in Berlin, many shops displayed 'Cash Only' signs or imposed a €20 minimum for card payments.

Switzerland similarly maintains a strong cash culture, with 92% of retail outlets accepting physical currency – a notable figure given the growing popularity of mobile payment apps (Source: Swiss National Bank).

Across the Eurozone, card payments now account for 39% of transactions, while mobile payments have doubled to 6% in recent years (Source: Reuters).



On 4 June 2025, Payments Europe hosted a conference in Brussels, bringing together experts and stakeholders to examine the latest developments in the payments landscape. The event unveiled groundbreaking research drawing on insights from over 13,000 consumers and more than 3,750 businesses across 15 European countries.

Key findings revealed that 72% of merchants now favour digital payments over cash, 87% of consumers feel current payment options meet their needs adequately, and 91% of businesses view digital payments as essential. Also, 61% of consumers believe digital payment acceptance should be mandatory.

These statistics demonstrate a decisive shift towards digitalisation, highlighting rising expectations for seamless, secure, and inclusive payment systems across Europe. (Download the full report here <https://www.payments europe.eu/truevalue-european-report-2025/>).



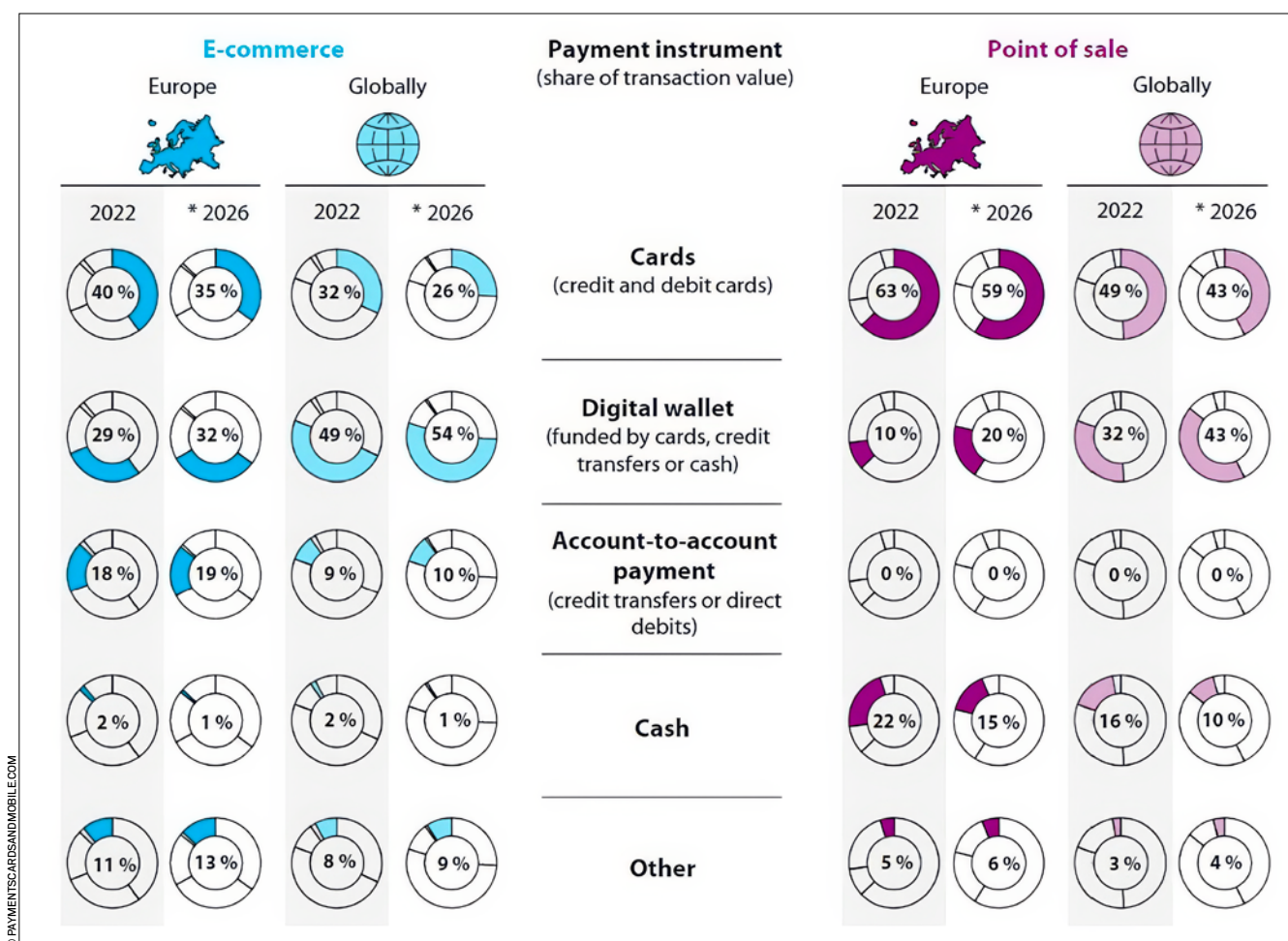
While digital payments offer undeniable convenience, they also introduce significant security risks and systemic vulnerabilities. The European Central Bank (ECB) has highlighted weaknesses in current digital payment systems, stressing the urgent need for EU-controlled payment infrastructure to mitigate these threats. Meanwhile, countries like Sweden and Norway actively advise citizens to maintain cash reserves for emergencies, recognising the potential for widespread digital disruptions.

Recent power outages have laid bare the inherent vulnerabilities of digital payment systems, with both card transactions and online payment platforms experiencing severe operational disruptions during blackouts. While this digital transformation has streamlined Europe's financial infrastructure, it has done so by sacrificing systemic resilience – creating critical exposure to unexpected infrastructure failures.

Several incidents have revealed the fragility of digital payment infrastructure. In November 2024, Italy suffered significant disruptions to electronic payments after strategic fibre-optic cables in Switzerland were damaged during gas pipeline installation works. The incident impacted Worldline, a leading European payment processor, causing widespread ATM failures and POS system outages across Italy.

In March 2025, the European Central Bank's TARGET2 system – the €3 trillion daily lifeline of Eurozone transactions – suffered a seven-hour complete outage caused by a critical hardware failure. The disruption froze interbank payments across 19 member states, delayed securities settlements worth €420 billion, and blocked financial transfers for thousands of businesses across the Eurozone. This unprecedented failure in Europe's core payment infrastructure has sparked urgent debates about system redundancy and financial contingency planning. (Source: Reddit).

On 28 April 2025, a massive blackout affected tens of millions across Spain and Portugal, disrupting daily life, halting transport and causing traffic chaos. Internet and mobile communications were also disrupted, leading to widespread failure of ATMs and electronic payments. Most businesses were unable to process card transactions, forcing a temporary return to cash-based



payments. Many people were caught unprepared for such a scenario.

The widespread blackout resulted in significant economic losses, estimated for Spain alone at approximately €1.6 billion, with broader assessments placing the total economic impact at up to €4.5 billion (Source: Iberian Energy Regulatory Report, May 2025).

In May 2025, Estonia faced a brief but impactful card payment outage. The hour-long incident affected roughly 50% of the nation's retail outlets. While authorities continue investigating the precise cause, officials stressed the critical need for alternative payment options – including cash – during such disruptions.

On 24 May 2025, Cannes suffered a significant power cut that affected the final day of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. The blackout, reportedly caused by an arson attack on an electrical substation in Tanneron and sabotage of high-voltage lines in Villeneuve-Loubet, lasted around five hours. Approximately 160,000 households in the Alpes-Maritimes region – including Cannes and Nice – were impacted. The outage resulted in failed traffic light systems, closed shops and restaurants, and suspended train services. This incident underscored both the vulnerabilities of digital-only payment systems and the crucial need to maintain cash-based alternatives.

Recognising the growing risks associated with over-reliance on digital payments, several Nordic countries – including Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Estonia – are actively developing offline-capable card payment systems. These

innovative solutions enable payment terminals to store encrypted transaction data during internet outages, automatically processing transactions once connectivity is restored. (Source: Reuters)



An offline-capable card payment terminal

Many years ago, Mark Twain observed that “the lack of money is the root of all evil.” In times of chaos and major disruption, we can certainly see the truth in this. Therefore, to prevent such situations, we must be better prepared. Recent events have demonstrated that maintaining a balanced approach to payment systems -



© DANIEL VORNDRAN/WIKICOMMONS

The European Central Bank in Frankfurt, Germany

embracing digital advancements while ensuring adequate safeguards and alternatives are in place to handle unforeseen disruptions - is absolutely crucial.

These recent blackouts and incidents should serve as a stark reminder of the critical need for resilient infrastructure and robust contingency plans to mitigate their impact on essential services and daily life. Simultaneously, such events have reignited crucial debates about the vulnerability of Europe's energy infrastructure, particularly regarding renewable energy integration. Energy experts now overwhelmingly emphasise the urgent requirement for substantial investments to strengthen grid stability and prevent future system failures.

The European Commission estimates that annual investments of approximately €70 billion will be required over the next 25 years to modernise local electricity grids and support the green transition. Through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the EU plans to assist member states in upgrading and securing power grids, while simultaneously developing cross-border energy connections to ensure system stability. These efforts will include implementing smart grid technologies to improve demand management capabilities, creating a more resilient and efficient energy infrastructure across Europe.

In response to recent large-scale power outages that disrupted digital payments across Europe, the EU has implemented comprehensive measures to bolster financial system resilience. The Digital Operational Resilience Act (DORA), effective since January 2025, requires all financial institutions to conduct regular vulnerability assessments of their systems, ensure compliance with stringent security standards, and develop robust contingency plans to maintain operations during potential ICT disruptions. These provisions aim to safeguard Europe's financial

infrastructure against both cyber threats and physical system failures.

The Digital Euro represents a collaborative initiative between the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission to create a digital complement to physical cash. This central bank digital currency aims to provide a secure, universally accessible, and efficient payment solution across the eurozone. Designed with three core objectives, the project seeks to accelerate the EU's digital transformation, enhance financial inclusion, and reinforce the euro's global standing. Its architecture incorporates critical features such as offline functionality, robust privacy safeguards, and cost-free basic services for citizens.

Currently in its preparatory phase, the initiative reached a significant milestone in June 2023 when the European Commission proposed legislation to establish its legal foundation. While the European Parliament and Council continue negotiations, the ECB anticipates finalising the political framework by early 2026, potentially enabling launch within two to three years thereafter (Source: Finance Europa).

Recognising the inherent vulnerabilities of digital-only payment systems, the EU actively advocates preserving cash as a critical backup during technological disruptions. This strategy promotes three essential safeguards: businesses maintaining multiple payment options, consumers understanding the value of payment diversity, and governments ensuring infrastructure resilience.

The approach creates a financial ecosystem capable of both withstanding major shocks and recovering rapidly – transforming resilience from a theoretical concept into operational reality. Europe's recent blackouts have painfully demonstrated the fragility of digital systems when power and connectivity fail.

In our increasingly cashless society, the EU's balanced vision – embracing digital innovation while safeguarding traditional payment methods – has become not just prudent but essential. For when crises strike, what matters most isn't technological sophistication, but the fundamental reliability of our payment infrastructure.

Alexandra Paucescu
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Going for a coffee? ... Lock your desktop first!

TO VISIT

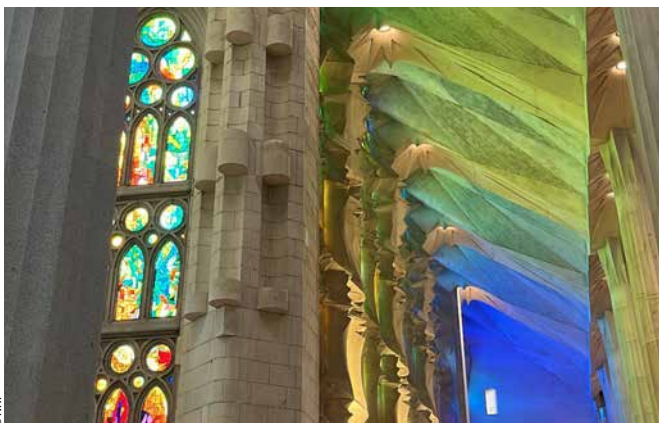
SAGRADA FAMÍLIA - Barcelona's Perpetual Masterwork



© WIKICOMMONS

Sagrada Família

The Basílica de la Sagrada Família epitomises the essence of Barcelona while aspiring towards the heights. Conceived by the architectural prodigy Antoni Gaudí, this basilica serves not merely as a site of prayer but as a dynamic, changing testament to faith, artistry, nature, and innovation. Over a century after its cornerstone was placed in 1882, the Sagrada Família continues to be under construction, symbolising the perpetual quest for beauty and transcendence.



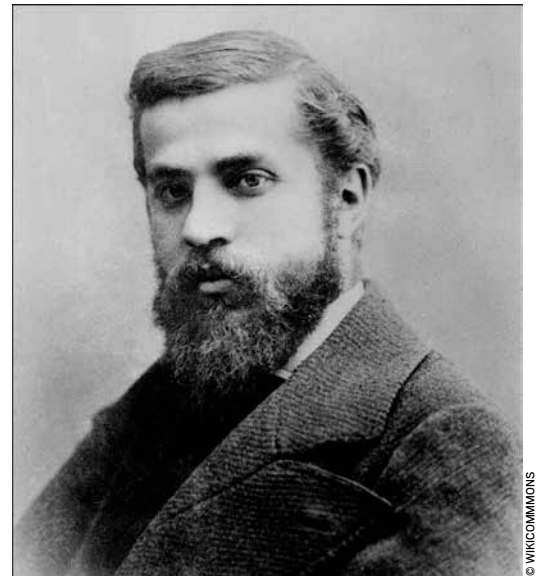
© NRF

Light entering the Sagrada Família

Standing before the Sagrada Família evokes an indescribable sense of wonder. Its intricate spires ascend like heavenly guardians, while its façade are adorned with religious symbolism and organic shapes. Within, it immerses guests in a forest of stone, colour, and illumination. The allure of this location beyond its design; it embodies human tenacity, the potency of vision, and the collective aspiration to forge something lasting.

The Genesis of an Icon

Upon its groundbreaking in 1882, the Sagrada Família was conceived as a traditional neo-Gothic church. One year later, Antoni Gaudí assumed control of the project and fundamentally reinterpreted it. He amalgamated Gothic traditions with Art Nouveau embellishments and a profound respect for the forms and proportions of nature. His plan was very groundbreaking.



© WIKICOMMONS

Antoni Gaudí

Gaudí conceptualised 18 spires: twelve symbolising the apostles, four for the evangelists, one for the Virgin Mary, and the tallest—measuring an impressive 172.5 meters—dedicated to Jesus Christ. His design integrated mathematics, spirituality, and organic inspiration, employing hyperboloids, paraboloids, and catenary arches to replicate natural harmony.

Although Gaudí dedicated the last 43 years of his life on the Sagrada Família, with the final 15 years almost entirely focused on it, he passed away in 1926, leaving behind intricate models, designs, and visionaries to advance his vision.

A Sanctuary of Symbolism and Illumination

Each of the basilica's three majestic facades narrates a unique episode of Christ's life. The Nativity Façade, finished during Gaudí's lifetime, is a celebration of existence, replete with vegetation, wildlife, angels, and the Holy Family. Conversely, the Passion Façade, characterised by its austere lines and evocative figures crafted by sculptor Josep Maria Subirachs, addresses the harsh realities of pain and mortality.

The Glory Façade, presently under construction, will be the largest and most magnificent, illustrating the way to salvation. Upon completion, it will function as the principal entrance of the basilica.



Sagrada Família Glory Façade

The nave resembles a forest, with towering columns spreading like trees, directing the gaze upward in a natural expression of awe. Stained-glass windows refract sunlight into a spectrum of colours that evolves throughout the day, producing a radiant cadence of time and essence.

Gaudí characterised the basilica as "a temple created by the people for the people." It is imbued with accessible beauty, profound depth, and a narrative language comprehensible to both believers and non-believers.

The Pursuit of a Vision

Numerous individuals enquire: why remains the Sagrada Família incomplete? Gaudí was aware that he would not witness its completion. His renowned philosophical response: "My client is not in haste."

The project has endured conflict, political instability, and economic difficulties. The Spanish Civil War resulted in the

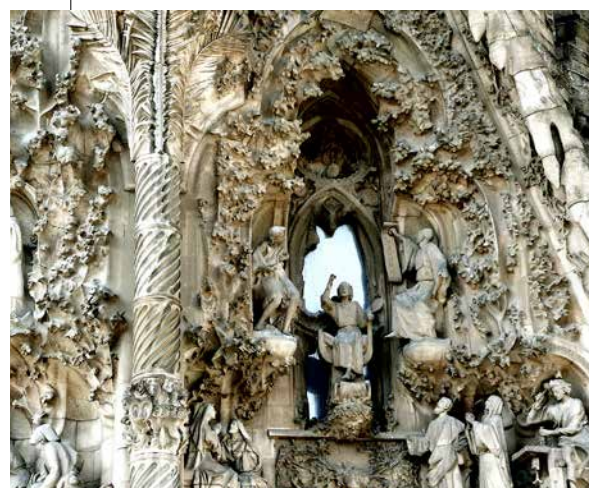
destruction of a significant portion of Gaudí's workshop. For decades, growth was gradual, supported by private contributions and the dedication of architects, artisans, and volunteers.



Photograph showing the differences between the older and newer parts of the Sagrada Família, Barcelona

In recent years, digital technology has transformed the construction process. Due to 3D modelling, laser scanning, and sophisticated materials, the basilica has expanded more rapidly in the last two decades than in the preceding century.

The project aimed for completion by 2026 to commemorate the centennial of Gaudí's demise. Nonetheless, difficulties attributable to the COVID-19 epidemic have postponed that date, and a revised timeframe is currently under evaluation. The basilica is nearing completion, with the central towers ascending in accordance with Gaudí's original design.



The Nativity façade

A Comprehensive Guide to Visiting the Sagrada Família

Whether you are a novice traveler to Barcelona or a returning enthusiast, a visit to the Sagrada Família is an indelible experience. Presented below are few pragmatic suggestions:

Advance Reservation: Tickets frequently become unavailable, particularly during peak season. Reserve online well ahead of time to ensure your desired time window.

The optimal times for visitation are early morning or late afternoon, as these periods provide superior lighting and reduced people. The stained glass is especially stunning during these hours.

Guided Tours: A guided experience, whether in-person or audio, elucidates the meaning and intricacies of Gaudí's design.

Tower Access: To obtain magnificent vistas of Barcelona, contemplate reserving a tower visit. Access entails small stairways and may be inappropriate for individuals with mobility impairments.

Honour the Space: Although a prominent tourist destination, the Sagrada Família continues to serve as an active site of prayer. Attire oneself modestly and exhibit courteous conduct.

Beyond the Basilica: Gaudí's Barcelona

The Sagrada Família is the premier attraction, although it is not the sole Gaudí landmark in Barcelona. Your visit may transform into an extensive pilgrimage via the city's architectural marvels:

Park Güell: An imaginative park embellished with mosaics, serpentine benches, and eccentric buildings, providing exceptional vistas of the city.



Casa Batlló

Casa Batlló: An extraordinary dwelling influenced by aquatic organisms, characterised by sinuous forms, vivid hues, and creative intricacies.

La Pedrera (Casa Milà): A modernist masterpiece featuring an undulating stone façade and an ethereal rooftop, exemplifying Gaudí's inventive essence.

Collectively, these sites narrate the tale of an architect who perceived buildings not merely as static structures but as dynamic entities, imbued with form, function, and purpose.

A Heritage Etched in Stone

Antoni Gaudí was beatified by the Catholic Church in 2003 and may eventually be canonised as a saint. His sainthood is already etched in stone. The Sagrada Família is a testament to faith: faith in God, in beauty, and in the limitless capacity of human creativity.



The top of the Virgin Mary's Spire (completed in December 2021)

For others, the concept of an incomplete church may appear impractical. For others, it symbolises hope—a perpetual quest for the divine within the ordinary, the eternal amidst the transient.

Concluding Reflections: Reasons for Participation

One need not be religious to be affected by the Sagrada Família. It constitutes a spiritual experience in the most comprehensive sense. It encourages you to elevate your gaze, to contemplate profoundly, and to experience a connection to a greater entity beyond your individual existence.

In a day of ephemeral fads and disposable culture, the Sagrada Família serves as a juxtaposition: a masterpiece that requires generations for completion, where each stone is meticulously placed with reverence and every detail conveys a transcendent purpose.

The Sagrada Família is not simply a structure. It is an invitation to marvel.

TIMELESS CHIC

STANDOUT FASHION AND BEAUTY TRENDS

READY,
STEADY,
RELAX !

Whether you're planning to lounge by the pool, catch waves at the beach, or simply enjoy a sunny day outdoors, these summer essentials will make every sun-filled moment feel stylish.

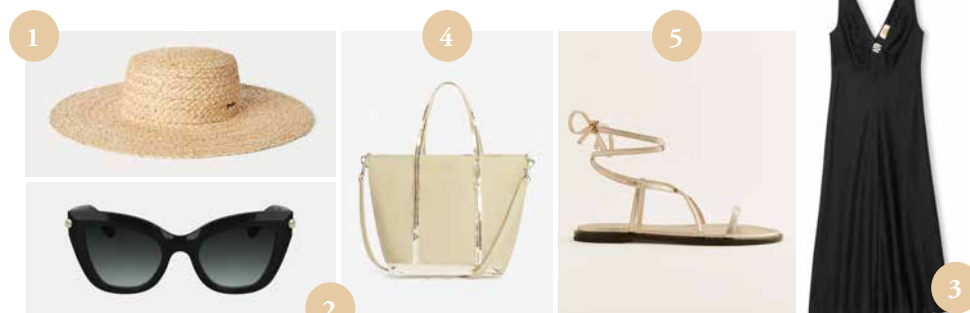


© RAILS X SPACE

Sunset elegance

A flowy dress is the easiest way to go from a day in the sun to a stylish evening out. Light, effortless, and elegant. It's perfect for a sunset dinner or a stroll on the beach.

- 1/ Braided raffia straw hat (ralphlauren.com)
- 2/ Black cat-eye sunglasses (Longchamp.com)
- 3/ Linen midi-length dress with v-neckline and gold hardware detail at the bust (rails.com)
- 4/ Linen and sequins tote bag (vanessabrubo.com)
- 5/ Metallic flat sandals (Reformation)



© MARC O'POLO

Effortless chic

Posing at the beach, Gisele Bündchen fronts Marc O'Polo's summer 2025 campaign. The Brazilian model stuns in a striped top, exuding a relaxed sophistication. A navy blue windbreaker paired with white loafers adds a sporty touch.

- 1/ Stripped slim-fit tank top made from pure organic cotton (marcopolo.com)
- 2/ Pure cotton cap (Tommy Hilfiger)
- 3/ Iconic waterproof jacket "Le vrai Claude" (k-way.com)
- 4/ High-waist skirt with a wrap front and belt (zara.com)
- 5/ White leather boat shoe (timberland.com)

If you're shopping for swimwear last minute, these 5 suits are a perfect 10/10.

Escape to Mallorca with the exclusive Rails x LSPACE Collection, where California cool meets the timeless charm of the Spanish coast. Inspired by the sun-soaked shores of the Mediterranean, this collaboration is a love letter to effortless coastal style and the spirit of adventure.



EDITOR'S CHOICE : TOP NEW RELEASES

Fashion and beauty
spotlight : Some
brands offer collector's
pieces, while others
draw inspiration
from summer's
seasonal treasures.



© MANGO X KAIA GERBER

When MANGO meets KAIA

The model and actress Kaia Gerber (Cindy Crawford's daughter) picks up the baton from the long list of top models and actresses who have previously collaborated with Spanish fashion brand Mango. In this first collaboration, Kaia presents the new edition of Caspule, the most elevated collection to dress up at the most special events.

Among our top picks, this asymmetrical satin dress with fringes (worn by Kaia).
(mango.com)



© PANDORA

PANDORA welcomes summer

As summer begins to cast its golden glow, jewellery brand Pandora unveils its latest campaign—a radiant ode to the beauty of the natural world. The new collection channels the effortless elegance of the season, capturing that unmistakable feeling of summer freedom: gentle breezes brushing the coastline, sunlit waves shimmering with every movement.

Each piece is a tribute to nature's poetry—delicate, sculptural, and infinitely wearable.



© BOBBI BROWN X PAC-MAN

BOBBI BROWN meets PAC-MAN

Level up your glam game with the Limited-Edition BOBBI BROWN x PAC-MAN Collection.

This playful collab, channels the electric spirit of the '80s arcade era, re-imagined with beauty icons, like the PAC-MAN Power Play Eye Palette and embossed Highlighting Powder.

Expect bold shades, nostalgic packaging, and glow-boosting multitaskers like the Vitamin Enriched Face Base and Extra Plump Lip Serum.

Beauty meets game night—collect them all before they vanish.

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**Smoking causes
lung cancer**



**World Health
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