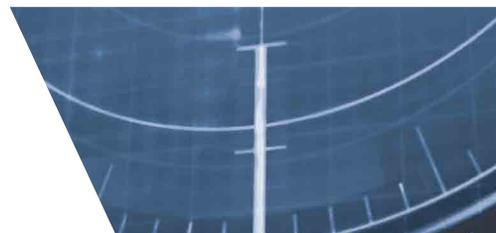


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Risk monitor 2026

The end of order?



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The end of order?

Vienna, 2026

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Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Christoph Bilban

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine that began in 2022 has fundamentally changed the geopolitical situation in Europe. Although a change in dynamics was predicted with the start of Donald Trump's second term as President of the United States, as of the end of 2025 the war's end is still not in sight. An agreement between Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is much more likely to be reached in 2026. The continuation of the Russian war in Ukraine will continue to dominate the situation in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus in 2026.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which began in 2022, changed the geopolitical situation in Europe and will remain a determining factor in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus in 2026. The situation in Ukraine is currently deteriorating due to recruitment difficulties, but also due to declining EU support in the second half of 2025 and the absence of US arms deliveries. It was foreseeable that

Ukraine's situation would deteriorate with the start of Donald Trump's second presidential term.

However, Russia did not achieve any military breakthroughs in 2025 either, although Russian President Vladimir Putin did succeed in initiating negotiations with the United States. Nevertheless, US mediation between Kyiv and Moscow has not yet led to a breakthrough. An agreement between Putin and Zelensky appears much more likely for 2026, as the existing military and economic problems are unlikely to improve on both sides.

Russia's non-military attack on Europe

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 made it clear that it has both the capability and the will to pursue its goals in international conflicts by military means. According to the definitions of war in Russia's 2014 military doctrine, Russia is engaged in a "regional war" in Ukraine, even though it officially continues to refer to it as a "special military operation". Russia's military and political objectives remain the "demilitarisation" and neutralisation of Ukraine as a security threat, as well as a regime change. Another goal Moscow is pursuing is the creation of a security buffer zone extending to Central Europe, which it will continue to pursue by all means except military force in 2026.

Russia's hybrid measures range from physical attacks on critical infrastructure and cyber operations to sabotage and espionage. Moscow is also committed to influencing both ruling and opposition parties, waging targeted information warfare against the population, and supporting radical groups across the political spectrum – both in Europe and the United States. The question of whether Russia will "attack" EU member states is therefore only relevant to a limited extent. It is already pursuing its goals in three of four categories of power: Diplomacy, economy and information. It is likely that these activities will increase in 2026, particularly in light of recent election victories by pro-Russian politicians.

War as an option

An armed attack on an EU member state remains a conceivable option in the foreseeable future. In 2026, Russia's self-perception as a great power will continue to be at the heart of its foreign policy. Donald Trump's attitude towards the war in Ukraine, which can be characterised as increasingly irritated, showed Putin that he can achieve his goals through this "special military operation". This is not just about military victory over Ukraine, but also about Russia's desire to regain influence as a hegemonic power in Europe. A US withdrawal into a new "splendid isolation" would pave the way for Putin.

Since 2025, it has been unclear how the US understands its role in NATO and Europe. Russia's assessment of the United States' role in Europe therefore remains the decisive factor in Russia's willingness to attack an EU member state. As long as NATO's mutual defence clause remains in force and, in particular, the US continues to make its military assets fully available for the defence of the alliance, such an attack would probably only be considered by Russia if it were to achieve a "fundamental objective". This includes, for example, the very survival of the state. For such a situation, referred to as a "great war", Moscow could probably mobilise its remaining economic, military and human resources as early as today – even if the prospects of success may seem slim. There appears to be little motivation for such a "great war" among Russia's military and political leadership, as far as can be discerned. Nevertheless, since 2012 and even more so since 2022, propaganda has been preparing the Russian population for this eventuality. Therefore, the risk cannot be ignored.

Risk: Dysfunctional NATO

The probability of this risk occurring increases significantly in line with NATO's dysfunctionality, as assessed by Moscow. A withdrawal of the US from defence structures or an increase in pro-Russian governments in NATO member states could reinforce this assessment in Moscow. If a limited attack on an EU and NATO member state did not provoke a military response but instead caused a split within NATO, Russia might consider an attack to be possible as things stand today. In addition to

a limited military operation, nuclear threats and extensive sabotage operations in Europe could be expected.

A collapse of NATO, and possibly as a consequence the EU, would allow Russia to achieve its desired security buffer and political sphere of influence extending to Central Europe. For such a scenario to occur, however, Russia would first have to end the war in Ukraine, at least temporarily, in order to regain its full military threat potential. European and North American experts assume that, following a ceasefire, Russia will need between five and ten years to regenerate and realign its armed forces. It is already apparent today that not all newly produced armaments and ammunition are being used in the war against Ukraine – new reserves are already being built up.

Due to its central location in Europe, Austria would be particularly affected by this risk, as it serves as a key transit hub for military troop movements between southern and northern Europe and between western, central, eastern, and south-eastern Europe. To reduce the likelihood of this scenario constantly, armament and rearmament measures should be continued. In addition, the EU must develop its own defence capabilities independently of the United States. Flexible European military command structures and a comprehensive air defence system are an essential part of this. Diplomatic support measures should also not be disregarded.

Vulnerable region between the power blocs

The countries between the EU and Russia remain particularly affected by the weakness of the rules-based world order. In the South Caucasus, the authoritarian governance in Georgia is likely to be further consolidated in 2026. The Georgian Dream party government has thus denied itself the prospect of EU accession for the time being. This primarily has humanitarian consequences for the unresolved conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Together with the disbanding of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the discontinuation of aid programmes primarily affects the population impacted by the conflict. Russia's de facto control over these two regions is accepted by Tbilisi. Moscow shows no intention of annexing the territories. Tbilisi is

continuing to strengthen its relations with Moscow, particularly in the economic sphere. This trend is expected to continue in 2026.

The outlook is more positive for the Republic of Moldova. Following the 2024 presidential elections and 2025 parliamentary elections, pro-European President Maia Sandu and her ruling party were able to hold their ground at the ballot box despite Russian influence. The key factor for further development in 2026 will be whether the government can resolve the existing societal polarisation. In 2026, however, a progress could be made towards resolving the conflict with the Transnistria region. The pro-Russian regime in Tiraspol has been under increasing pressure since Russia stopped supplying gas via Ukraine in early 2025. Nevertheless, Transnistria remains a lever for Moscow in its attempts to destabilise the Republic of Moldova. The EU can actively contribute to strengthening the country's resilience through its CSDP mission and the EU accession process.

After the signing of the Washington Declaration in August 2025, brokered by US President Trump, a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan seems highly likely. However, the timeline for this is not entirely clear. There are positive signs, but difficult issues could still be postponed in 2026. In 2025, Baku achieved its goal of establishing a corridor through southern Armenia to its exclave of Nakhchivan – now known as the Trump Road for International Peace and Prosperity. The corridor is already being implemented.

The biggest uncertainty factor in whether Armenia will be able to accept a peace treaty in the long term is the Armenian parliamentary elections in 2026. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has indicated his willingness to sign such an agreement, while Azerbaijan may still wait for the Armenian elections. In Armenia, a conflict between the government and the opposition emerged at the end of 2025, which Russia could still exploit to destabilise the country. If a lasting peace were to be achieved in the South Caucasus, Moscow would have to worry about its military base in Armenia. The Armenian elections in 2026 should therefore be observed with particular attention. Consequently, Armenia will continue to expand its multi-vector foreign policy, which is designed to avoid future dependencies. The EU is one of Yerevan's many partners.

Key Messages

- In 2026, the erratic US foreign policy and Europe's ability to continue providing support to Ukraine will be key factors in the outcome of the war in Ukraine.
- It will become increasingly difficult to find a joint EU position on security policy issues towards Russia and Eastern Europe.
- Austria should therefore contribute to strengthening a united European foreign and security policy in 2026 within the scope of its legal and political possibilities.
- In light of the ongoing hybrid attacks in Europe, Austria should further strengthen its cooperation with European partners in 2026 to identify and counter these threats.
- In 2026, EU policy towards most of its neighbours in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus will be shaped primarily by pragmatic cooperation. Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova will continue to receive special support as candidates for EU membership.



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Security Situation in the Sahel

Russia's Imperialist Gambit on Europe's Southern Flank

Will Brown

Russia is exploiting the power vacuum in the Sahel following the withdrawal of the West to create new dependencies through mercenaries, propaganda and economic influence. The resulting instability is threatening Europe's security through migration, disinformation and regional conflicts.

The West's withdrawal from the central Sahel has left a vacuum that Moscow is now filling – with a potent mix of hired forces and information warfare. Libya serves as a gateway and crossroads to the Sahel; meanwhile, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have replaced their partnerships with the West by cooperating with Russian contractors and propaganda mills. The result: A belt of fragility stretching across West and

North Africa, reaching as far as Sudan and influencing Europe through migration, transnational organised crime and information operations.

Current situation in the Sahel

The Russian Africa Corps, which consists largely of remnants of the Wagner Group, comprises around 10,000 people and has ambitions to grow. Despite the Wagner Group's formal "withdrawal", around 2,000 Russian mercenaries are still active in Mali. The record is devastating: The massacre in Moura in 2022 claimed around 500 civilian lives, while accidents in airspace and outdated equipment contradict the Malian junta's claims of security improvements. The Tinzaouaten debacle in July 2024, in which a convoy of the Malian army and the Wagner Group was ambushed, resulted in heavy losses for both Mali and Russia. As a result, the junta's cohesion began to weaken, leading to numerous arrests.

In Burkina Faso, jihadist groups have been able to establish themselves in rural areas, while the government is slowly retreating towards the capital Ouagadougou and investing its meagre resources in the creation of online myths. Niger's "pivot" from France and the US meant that it now has to rely on fewer partners and trainers. It is now following the same path as Burkina Faso and relying on members of so-called "patriotic militias", which is likely to result in difficulties in governance and the spread of violence.

Regional instability

Are the regimes in the Sahel stable? They control cities, order air strikes and dominate the internet. Nevertheless, they find it difficult to control roads, markets or the country. Loss-making operations, corruption relating to contract awards and the outsourcing of tasks to militias pose major challenges for the armed forces and undermine them from within. Regional instability is spreading. Togo drew closer to Moscow for support against jihadist groups infiltrating the country across its northern border. It will probably soon allow operations by the Russian Africa Corps. Meanwhile, Guinea is adopting a hedging strategy, whereas Equatorial Guinea is already allowing Russian troops to operate in the country to protect the regime.

At the same time, the Joint Force of the Sahel States Confederation led to an official break with the West African Economic Community ECOWAS and deepened the strategic realignment of the region. Although ECOWAS has lost some of its relevance and credibility, particularly after its failed policy of deterrence following the coup in Niger in 2023, it has not become irrelevant. The organisation still plays an important role in sanctions, mediation and trade. Its biggest challenge is to regain influence among the region's juntas.

The Republic of Chad deserves special European attention. Located between the Sudanese civil war, the Libyan militias and the mercenary corridor of the Central African Republic, the country faces particular challenges. Following France's withdrawal, Chad is courting Türkiye for possible drone deliveries and the United Arab Emirates for financial support. At the same time, it is testing Russian offers. This fragility has recently attracted other European actors as well. Hungary, for example, is considering establishing a presence in Chad, officially for migration control and to support Christian groups. This would be consistent with its tolerant foreign policy towards Russia. Whether this will stabilise Chad or embroil the EU in another questionable security deal remains to be seen.

Displacement and propaganda

Displacement is currently only occurring regionally. Most refugees from the Sahel tend to move within West Africa rather than to Europe. However, the figures are alarming. In 2024 alone, over 127,000 Burkinabés fled to the West African coastal states. Around mid-2025, there was a further influx of refugees from Burkina Faso to Mali. These refugee flows remain intra-regional, mainly due to the costs, community cohesion and the dangers of the northern routes. However, that could change soon. If the capitals and coastal states of the Sahel continue to come under pressure, more people are likely to head for North Africa and Europe. Some reports also indicate that Russia is exerting influence on various migrant smuggling networks in Libya.

In any case, smuggling and jihadism thrive in areas where there is a power vacuum. Libya's ports and desert routes connect the chaos of the Sahel with the Mediterranean, which also affects refugee flows. Arrivals in Italy from the Libyan corridors are already on the rise again. Russia un-

derstands the politics of these refugee flows, and one of its core objectives is to gain influence over coastal hubs and routes in the Sahel. That would give Moscow influence over internal European debates.

Discourses on sovereignty and information architecture

The juntas of the Sahel region follow a discourse of sovereignty, leveraging legitimate African discussions on pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism, and sovereigntism through extensive Russian-trained propaganda networks. These efforts are supported by Russian narratives in various languages, including French, English, Arabic and other widely spoken African languages. These channels have been carefully cultivated to appear organic and local. The impact of this network is difficult to quantify, but it undoubtedly influences perceptions of Western engagement negatively. In turn, it boosts Russia's appeal. Another objective appears to be to influence the Afro-Caribbean diaspora in Europe and North America.

Russia is attempting to use its policy towards the Sahel to orient these countries towards Moscow. Disillusioned by Western conditionality, some governments see the BRICS+ model as a source of financing and diplomatic cover. Moscow's narrative of sovereignty strikes a chord with the respective populations – even where elites remain cautious towards Russia, as the West is perceived as moralising when it comes to human rights and governance. The risk for Europe lies not only in the possibility of further coups, but also in a long-lasting information architecture that firmly entrenches alienation between Europe and Africa.

Possible courses of action for Europe

Europe's credibility can be bolstered by adopting a more robust security response in the region, which would counter Russian influence. The European Peace Facility is on the right track here, but Europe still lacks an effective antidote to hostile State actors. For example, European ammunition can only be used for training purposes in Benin, which has led to criticism of European hypocrisy. Supplies that bring about genuine change on the battlefield are relevant in this regard: Training with

real equipment, enablers for rapid response capability and tracking of harm to civilians – in collaboration with African partners.

Russian influence and financing chains should be treated as transnational criminal enterprises. Those who enable these activities should be consistently sanctioned by the EU, the UK, the US, Canada, Switzerland and Norway. Pressure should be increased on propagandists who operate unhindered on European soil. Furthermore, Europe should begin to defend itself in the information space. Funds should not be spent on conferences, but rather on African media such as local radio stations and trustworthy cable providers. Similarly, trustworthy fact-checkers and local influencers can be funded to expose Moscow's corruption, abuses and security weaknesses in the region.

Key Messages

- The West's withdrawal from the Sahel has created a power vacuum that Russia is attempting to fill with military means and information warfare.
- Moscow is using mercenaries, propaganda and rhetoric about sovereignty to bind governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and to expand its influence in the region.
- The combination of fragile regimes, militias, migration and Russian influence is destabilising West Africa and affecting Europe through Libya.
- Europe's response must include credible security support, sanctions against Russian networks and an offensive information strategy.



Protracted War in Sudan and the Danger of Regional Consequences

Sara de Simone and Lucia Ragazzi

The consequences feared in the early stages of the war in Sudan are now increasingly materialising, 31 months after the conflict began. Sudan is experiencing one of the world's most serious humanitarian crises, which is also leading to mass displacement. This poses massive challenges for both Sudan and its neighbouring countries. Diplomatic efforts are often limited by developments on the ground. If the conflict continues, its shock waves will be felt throughout the Red Sea region and beyond.

The war in Sudan has escalated into one of the worst humanitarian crises worldwide, the extent of which is underreported. The conflict has spread beyond key regions, turning urban centres and the agriculturally based heartland into a battlefield. In 2025, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) estimated that a stag-

gering 30 million people were in urgent need of humanitarian aid – over half of Sudan's population. Around twelve million people have been displaced; eight million are internally displaced and four million have sought refuge in Sudan's neighbouring countries, particularly Chad, South Sudan and Egypt.

Situation on the ground

The collapse of essential services has led to acute shortages. Health-care has largely ceased to function, and large regions are facing catastrophic food shortages. In the north of Darfur province, a famine has already been confirmed, and other regions are at significant risk. This crisis is intensified by reports of widespread killings of civilians, sexual violence and the destruction of infrastructure.

The fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) began when the fragile alliance between their leaders, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohammed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo, collapsed. The actual aim of this alliance was to regain control of post-revolutionary Sudan after Omar al-Bashir was removed from power. Since then, the conflict has gone through several phases in which both sides have allied themselves with various local militias. The SAF appeared to gain the upper hand for months at the end of 2024 and beginning of 2025, managing to capture the capital city of Khartoum, for example. However, the RSF launched offensives in Kordofan and the few areas in Darfur that were still not under their control. The most significant of these was the capital of North Darfur, al-Fashir.

After an 18-month siege, the last SAF garrison town in Darfur fell to the RSF. Although access to this area remains strictly restricted, both UN agencies and aid groups reported numerous atrocities, ethnically motivated targeted killings and a mass exodus to neighbouring Tawila. The RSF's breakthrough strengthens the position of the paramilitary group, which now controls almost all of Darfur. The RSF will now likely focus on consolidating its presence in the region, while the fighting will shift to key areas in North and South Kordofan.

Partition under consideration

The current distribution of power, with the RSF controlling the west and the SAF controlling both the east and north of the country, is raising fears of a de facto division of Sudan. This is reinforced by the fact that the two sides have formed parallel governments. The SAF has formed a government in Port Sudan, while the RSF has established a parallel civilian government (Tasis) in Nyala, led by Hemedti.

Such a partition would create considerable uncertainty both for the region and for Sudan's already severely affected population. These incidents, including repeated drone strikes in Kordofan and around Khartoum in November 2025, suggest that neither al-Burhan nor Hemedti consider this scenario to be optimal. Both are likely to try to achieve military victory in order to establish their authority over the entire country.

New peace initiatives have been introduced in recent months. Although African-led diplomacy has lost momentum, a quadrilateral group consisting of the United States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) issued a joint statement on 12 September 2025 calling for a ceasefire in Sudan. Indirect negotiations followed, but these were interrupted by military developments at the end of October 2025.

The composition of this initiative reflects the role of regional dynamics in Sudan. Allegedly UAE supports RSF, which Abu Dhabi has repeatedly denied. The SAF allegedly receives security-political support from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. A proposed humanitarian ceasefire, which the RSF accepted on 6 November 2025, did not come into effect due to the SAF's refusal to negotiate directly with the RSF. In this context, and despite repeated attempts to break the stalemate, strong external alliances have created a situation in which both parties to the conflict favour a military solution over a negotiated settlement.

Implications far beyond Sudan

In light of the ongoing violence, there are concerns about the instability of further developments. The large number of refugees is already putting pressure on vulnerable neighbouring countries, as can be seen in the border areas with Chad and South Sudan. There, the economic

impact of the war has exacerbated an already volatile political situation. Regional neighbours are also concerned about the indirect consequences of continued conflict. Weak governments within such a vast area could foster criminal networks involved in activities such as arms smuggling and human trafficking, and provide a safe haven for terrorist groups. This would further jeopardise regional stability.

Sudan's long coastline gives it strategic importance, both for the countries bordering the Red Sea and for Europe, in terms of security and maritime supply chains. This area is affected by extreme volatility due to its proximity to the Gaza war in the north and Houthi activities in the south. However, the crisis in Sudan also has repercussions for the Mediterranean region, for example due to the large number of refugees seeking refuge in Libya and Egypt, although most Sudanese refugees remain within the region.

In this context, European engagement has primarily been visible through humanitarian aid, particularly through initiatives such as the London Sudan Conference in April 2025. Humanitarian aid is essential, but insufficient. A military solution seems increasingly out of reach due to the lack of clear superiority of either side on the battlefield. A ceasefire agreement is therefore more urgently needed than ever.

Key Messages

- The situation on the ground increases the risk of Sudan partition while the fighting continues.
- New diplomatic initiatives are being developed, although they cannot keep pace with military developments.
- Continued fighting threatens the stability of the entire region and could contribute to the formation of an ungovernable zone in neighbouring countries and across the Red Sea.
- Humanitarian aid and a long-term ceasefire are essential.



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Security Concepts and the Global South

Oliver Keßler and Siddharth Tripathi

Dominant security concepts in international politics focus on Western experiences and models. In particular, the intensification of geopolitical rivalries, which results in an increasingly fragmented international security order, affects the Global South in different ways. The ambivalent positioning of powers such as Brazil, China, India and Russia reinforces this complexity. Their relationships with other countries combine rhetorical support for transformative change with active participation in the broader geopolitical competition for influence and normative authority in the international system.

The new international constellation, which increasingly includes powers such as Brazil, China, India and Russia, is giving rise to a multitude of ideas and projects. If Western countries continue to follow established patterns of interpretation, these will remain incomprehensible to them. Instead, Western countries must understand and appreciate security concepts from the Global South, even if these may seem foreign to West-

ern experts. This necessity arises not only from the Western aspiration to confront its own past, but also from an interest in securing its own future.

Security from the perspective of the Global South

With the rise of countries in the Global South, independent regional and ideological understandings of security have emerged. For many postcolonial countries, security extends far beyond an absence of military threats and includes agency, autonomy, development and resilience within a structurally unequal international order. From a postcolonial perspective, the Global South's understanding of security reflects historical experiences of colonialism, subjugation, marginalisation and dependence. For example, reference could be made to Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey's article "The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies" or Peter Kragelund's article "South–South cooperation". The persistence of unequal trade relations, debt hierarchies and political conditions imposed by great powers and multilateral institutions is considered a structural form of insecurity.

It follows that security in the Global South has a different focus than is customary in the West. For the US and Europe, global stability is bound up with the preservation of a liberal order based on democratic governance and open markets – an aspiration that is often contested, however (see "Contestation in a World of Liberal Orders", 4(2) *Global Studies Quarterly*). From the perspective of the Global South, however, this liberal order was never truly liberal. There, Western security strategies are often perceived as instruments of coercive influence that subordinate development priorities to geopolitical calculations.

Non-Western security projects

Compared to the US and Europe, China is positioning itself as a partner of the Global South, for example through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to promote infrastructure development and joint development in Asia and Africa. Many developing countries see China's involvement as an opportunity to diversify economic partnerships and reduce their dependence on Western institutions – despite concerns about debt dependency, environmental

standards and asymmetric political influence (see Georg Lammich's article "China's evolving security engagement in Africa").

Russia asserts its influence in a similar way through arms deliveries, energy diplomacy and political support for anti-Western regimes, particularly in Africa and parts of Latin America. India's concept of comprehensive security and its policy of multi-alignment, which encompasses economic growth, energy access, technological independence and maritime stability in the Indo-Pacific, reflect its desire to maintain autonomy and the capacity to act. For its part, Brazil represents the Latin American version of the Global South's understanding of security, which focuses more on peaceful conflict resolution, regional integration and development-oriented sovereignty, and calls for an approach that centres on poverty reduction, climate justice and the equitable management of global commons.

Conclusions

The Global South's advocacy for a multipolar, inclusive order reflects the broader consensus that genuine security requires the democratisation of global decision-making processes and a rebalancing of institutional authority. If Western countries want to continue to be seen as legitimate partners, they must understand how heightened geo-economic and geopolitical rivalry results in specific repositioning both within countries in the Global South and within international institutions.

At the same time, Western countries must understand that security and the economy are inextricably linked. The colonial past of the Global South is not merely a subject of historical research, but shapes everyday experiences and the region's self-perception – and therefore also the way in which security policy concerns are formulated.

Key Messages

- The accepted liberal order has never really existed outside the West; elsewhere, there are different histories and narratives about world politics and its transformation.
- Geo-economic rivalry is leading to a multitude of internationalisation projects – including from the Global South itself.
- Colonialism is not purely a historical issue, but continues to have a structural impact on security issues.
- Security concerns in the Global South are not only military in nature, but are closely linked to issues of autonomy, development, hierarchies and capacity to act.

4

Risks and challenges for the EU





Risks and Challenges for the EU

Klaus Anderle

Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, which violated international law, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the EU has been facing a historic turning point. The war destroyed the illusion of lasting peace in Europe and highlighted the urgent need to strengthen defence and deterrence capabilities. Europe's security can no longer be exclusively reliant on transatlantic guarantees. The EU must be capable of protecting itself.

Just two years after Russia's occupation of Crimea on 27 February 2014, which violated international law, the European Union sought to gradually expand its strategic autonomy in security and defence. The publication of the EU Global Strategy in 2016 created, for the first time, a coherent framework calling on the Union to "take responsibility for its own security". This reorientation was a response to profound geopolitical changes: the increasing withdrawal of the US from its role as guardian of international order, the UK's exit from the EU, which

changed the EU's security architecture, and new threats at the EU's external borders.

Since then, the aim has been to reduce dependence on external security guarantees, develop own crisis management, deterrence and defence capabilities, and meet the required burden-sharing requirements within the transatlantic alliance. With initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Strategic Compass adopted in 2022, the Union has taken concrete steps to strengthen its military capacity to act and lay the foundations for the European Defence Union in the long term.

Return of war

The start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which violated international law, marked a turning point. War returned to Europe, and with it the realisation that security is neither a given nor free of charge. The Union was confronted with a reality that many had long considered to be a thing of the past: Power politics, deterrence and military strength are once again key parameters of international order. In this situation, the Union had to recognise that peace is not a given, but a project to be constantly defended. In a way, what Virginia Woolf once said applies to the Union: „Growing up is losing some illusions in order to acquire others“. The Union has lost the illusion of an inviolable peace order and at the same time acquired a new, more realistic perspective – the conviction that only determination, strength and strategic independence can preserve peace.

The Union's response was profound and resolute. Within a few weeks, the Union coordinated arms deliveries to Ukraine, mobilised billions to support defence capabilities, strengthened the defence industry and initiated a strategic reassessment of its security architecture. This development marks a paradigm shift. The Union is no longer striving to merely cooperate on security policy, but to achieve genuine autonomy and strategic capacity to act as an expression of its political maturity and responsibility in an increasingly multipolar world. The war in Ukraine became the catalyst for a shift in security policy, the starting point for the establishment of a European Defence Union.

From strategic realignment to a European Defence Union

At the same time, the path to strategic autonomy remains fraught with considerable challenges. The security policy interests of EU member states continue to vary, and military dependence on NATO and, in particular, the United States will remain for the foreseeable future. Industrial and financial fragmentation hamper the establishment of a coherent European defence architecture. Nonetheless, the war in Ukraine clearly demonstrates that political will is growing to redefine the EU's security role and to view the defence union no longer as an abstract goal but as an urgent security policy necessity.

In European capitals, there is a growing awareness of the fragility of peace and the vulnerability of the European security order in a world in which the rules-based international order is increasingly replaced by power politics and military force. The long-standing demand that the Union must become capable of taking action in the area of security and defence, defend itself and deter potential adversaries is now being pursued with renewed vigour by the Commission and the member states.

War has returned to Europe. Currently, a fair peace between Russia and Ukraine or a stable ceasefire are not in sight. There have been no military or diplomatic breakthroughs, while the conflict continues unabated. This once again illustrates that the Union cannot and must not allow itself to be a passive observer. The time to establish an effective, strategically autonomous European security and defence architecture is long overdue – because security is neither a given nor negotiable.

Security as a priority

At the start of Ursula von der Leyen's second term and the inauguration of the new European Commission on 1 December 2024, it was already clear that the EU's security and defence would be key priorities in the coming years. President von der Leyen declared the years 2024–2029 to be the era of European defence and security. In doing so, the Commission made it unmistakably clear that its primary concern is to ensure greater security for citizens – in particular by establishing

a European Defence Union as the basis for preserving and advancing the European way of life and the European model of values and society.

Without a militarily secured peace, i.e., without the ability to credibly deter potential aggressors, this model cannot be sustained in the long term. The Union's defence capability should therefore be fully secured by 2030. This will lay the foundation for the announced European Defence Union, which is intended to enable the EU to protect its own security and contribute credibly to global stability. The creation of the position of the new Commissioner for Defence and Space was an important step. The Commissioner heads the Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, which was established in 2019, and coordinates the development of joint European defence capabilities.

One of the first tasks of this new Defence Commissioner, Lithuanian politician Andrius Kubilius, who took office in 2024, was to draft the White Paper on European Defence 2030. This constitutes the strategic basis for establishing a European Defence Union. The White Paper defines the Union's long-term strategic vision in the field of defence. It identifies military capability gaps in key areas and defines the objective that the Union should have the full spectrum of military capabilities at its disposal – to deter aggression and defend its borders on land, in the air, at sea, in cyberspace and in outer space. The € 800 billion ReArm Europe programme is intended to finance the expansion and modernisation of European defence capabilities. The aim is to increase arms production, achieve economies of scale and promote joint procurement.

Roadmap for maintaining peace and establishing defence readiness

On 16 October 2025, the European Commission presented its roadmap entitled Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness 2030. This is a roadmap for maintaining peace and establishing defence readiness by 2030, which translates the strategic objectives set out in the White Paper into concrete operational measures. In addition to the priority capability areas, the roadmap includes four further flagship projects:

- The European Drone Defence Initiative, which envisages the development of an EU-wide drone network for border surveillance and threat detection by the end of 2027,
- Eastern Flank Watch, an integrated surveillance system to protect the EU's eastern border, including airspace defence, ground defence systems and drone defence, by the end of 2028,
- the European Air Shield, an integrated, NATO-compatible European air and missile defence system, with implementation scheduled to begin in the second quarter of 2026, and
- the European Space Shield, a protection mechanism for satellites and communications infrastructure, with implementation scheduled to begin in the second quarter of 2026.

Outlook for 2026

The year 2026 and beyond will be marked by efforts to strengthen European defence readiness in the military domain. The concrete implementation of the four flagship projects, which will form the basis of the European Defence Union alongside other EU-wide defence projects, will begin as early as the first quarter of 2026. Further significant measures to consolidate the European Defence Union are being pursued as well. These include the EU internal market for defence, the promotion of defence technology alliances, strengthening the role of the Commissioner for Defence and Space, and enhancing military mobility, which remains the Achilles heel of European defence capabilities.

Military mobility will be the backbone of an operational European Defence Union. Without the ability to move troops, materials and equipment quickly and in a coordinated manner across national borders, all efforts to establish credible European defence capabilities will remain incomplete. Strengthening military mobility is therefore a crucial step towards an EU that coordinates and guarantees its security collectively. In this context, military bases and supporting infrastructure should be specifically promoted in order to enable and maintain in the long term an increased deployment and permanent presence of armed forces in EU member states.

To this end, the Commission will present a comprehensive military mobility package consisting of an action plan, a draft EU regulation and

a simplification regulation on military mobility. Its implementation is planned for 2026 and will be supported by the EU's European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) regulation. The ECF plays a central role in the implementation of the roadmap for maintaining peace and establishing European defence readiness by 2030. At the same time, it will contribute to the establishment of a credible European Defence Union. With initial funding of € 131 billion from the EU budget, the ECF will enable the targeted financing of joint defence projects. Furthermore, the promotion of research, innovation and technical superiority, the expansion of industrial capacities, joint procurement projects and the assurance of logistical readiness are being encouraged. The ECF will therefore ensure that the objectives set out in the White Paper are put into practice.

Key Messages

- Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has triggered a turning point in security policy and highlighted the need for independent European defence capabilities.
- The EU Global Strategy, PESCO, the European Defence Fund and the Strategic Compass have laid the foundations for strategic autonomy and a future defence union.
- The White Paper on European Defence 2030 and the ReArm Europe programme (€ 800 billion) form the strategic and financial basis for the development of joint military capabilities.
- The Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness 2030 roadmap translates strategic goals into operational measures and includes flagship projects such as Drone Defence, Eastern Flank Watch, Air Shield and Space Shield.
- The years 2024–2029 have been declared the era of European defence; by 2030, the EU's defence capabilities will be fully secured.
- 2026 will see the start of the implementation of key projects, including an EU internal market for defence and enhanced military mobility as the backbone of collective defence capabilities.
- The European Competitiveness Fund (€ 131 billion) finances research, innovation, procurement and logistical readiness to ensure the implementation of defence objectives by 2030.



Confrontation between Russia and the EU

Franz-Stefan Gady

A potential military confrontation between Russia and the EU would expose fundamental weaknesses in EU's unity and defence readiness. Russia is relying on a tried-and-tested "salami tactic" consisting of minor provocations to systematically undermine the unity of the EU and fuel fears of nuclear escalation. The immediate danger in 2026 lies not in a large-scale attack, but in targeted hybrid operations and information warfare that strengthen supposed "peace parties" and movements critical of the EU and erode European solidarity.

Over several decades, Russia has perfected its so-called "salami tactic" – a method of gradual provocation that remains below the threshold of a strong Western response. These tactics were already evident in Moldova, Georgia and in Ukraine in 2014. Recent drone operations, attacks, acts of sabotage and cyberattacks reveal this strategy, although it is important to caution against viewing everything as part of a compre-

hensive Russian military strategy. Every single action must be assessed coolly and objectively and contextualised accordingly.

Each individual provocation, whether it involves airspace violations, cyber attacks or acts of sabotage, appears too minor to warrant a military response when viewed in isolation. However, this systematically weakens the credibility of both NATO and the EU. This method is particularly effective because it exploits uncertainty about the appropriateness of responses and, above all, plays on EU citizens' fears of escalation. It should be emphasised here that Moscow will increasingly rely on nuclear deterrence in the coming years, while the conventional Russian armed forces are being rebuilt and reconstituted.

Major threats and minor provocations

EU policy to date shows a clear pattern. The Union responded with unity to major threats such as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but its unity crumbles in the face of minor provocations. Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) has only been invoked once, following the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015. Although Article 42(7) TEU is considered to be stronger in terms of wording than Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, it is very difficult to apply in practice. For example, the new (and far too weak) EU crisis response capacity, with around 5,000 soldiers, has been operational since May 2025, but its activation requires the unanimous consent of all member states. This institutional weakness makes the EU vulnerable to Russian attempts at division by deliberately exploiting differences between member states.

Information warfare

Russia's information operations aim to deepen these divisions within the EU. This is achieved by supporting alleged "peace parties" and movements critical of the EU in Germany, Austria and other member states. These operations exploit existing social divisions and reinforce them through targeted disinformation about Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and other issues.

Particular attention is paid to supporting politicians who represent pro-Russian positions – in countries such as Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia, but also in France, Italy and Poland. The documented financing of left-wing and right-wing parties in the EU by Russia serves to weaken liberal democracy and the institutions of the European Union.

Increasing threats to Austria

Russia will pursue a “carrot and stick” strategy towards Austria to create maximum uncertainty. The chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, threatened Austria with both “countermeasures” were Austria to join NATO and the relocation of international organisations from Vienna. On the other hand, Russian authorities emphasise the special relationship between Austria and Russia and the alleged value of Austrian neutrality as a mediating authority and special diplomatic actor. These threats are not coincidental, but part of Russia’s hybrid warfare against Austria. Russia is systematically testing reactions and exploiting domestic debates on neutrality. In the event of a war between Russia and NATO, it is highly probable that Austria would also become a target of Russian sabotage operations and strikes by cruise missiles, ballistic missiles and drones, given its significance in terms of strategic depth and as an important transport hub for NATO forces.

Timeframe for Russian military operations

The pace of Russian military operations in Ukraine is expected to slow down in 2026. It is unlikely that Russia will achieve a decisive victory in 2026. It is likely that economic and military resource constraints will take effect, forcing Russia to slow down. At the same time, it can be assumed that the Russian war economy will be maintained, as structural change will no longer be possible in the coming years.

Russia would need around four field armies to attack the Baltic states, which equates to approximately 80,000 to 100,000 soldiers, 800 to 1,200 armoured vehicles and the corresponding artillery and other support units. The deployment of four field armies could most likely be realised by 2029, although there are no concrete indications that Russia is planning such an operation. However, Moscow is already working to

undermine the legitimacy of both NATO and the EU in the event of a defence scenario involving the Baltic states.

European defence readiness

Contrary to popular belief, surveys show that the European population is highly willing to defend itself. 77% of EU citizens support a common security and defence policy. In Germany, 65% are in favour of higher defence spending, and 54% of men indicate a personal willingness to defend their country. In Austria, the Austrian Armed Forces (AAF) enjoy high approval ratings. 80% of the population express confidence in the Austrian Armed Forces, with 70% of Austrians in favour of retaining national service. However, only between 13% and 25% of Austrians would defend their country. The problem lies in the abstract nature of how military threats are perceived. As long as the threat does not appear concrete and immediate, mobilisation remains difficult. Younger Europeans in particular see the threats as distant, which naturally makes recruitment and public support more difficult.

Impact on Austria

Austria's neutrality is increasingly seen as an anachronism within the EU and isolates the country in terms of security policy. As one of the last neutral EU states, Austria is under increasing pressure to take a clearer stance. From a military perspective, a small country like Austria cannot protect itself optimally, as not being part of a military alliance has operational disadvantages – especially in countering airborne threats, but also with regard to hybrid threats.

The reality is: With the exception of Switzerland and Liechtenstein, Austria is effectively surrounded by NATO countries and continues to rely on their protection. This constitutes security-political “free riding”, which becomes problematic in the event of concrete threats. Russian threats have the potential to intensify the debate on neutrality in Austria, as neutrality offers no effective protection against hybrid threats. Similarly, they could trigger a new wave of support for neutrality, as long as the majority of the political class continues to cling to the myth of “neutrality” as a guarantee of protection for Austria.

Key Messages

- Russia's "salami tactics" systematically exploit the EU's inability to respond uniformly to minor provocations.
- Russian disinformation and support for alleged "peace parties" and EU-critical fringe parties are weakening European unity more effectively than purely military threats.
- An absolute military victory for Russia in Ukraine remains unlikely in 2026. However, this increases the risk of hybrid threats and nuclear sabre-rattling, fuelling fears of escalation into a world war.
- Russia would need four field armies to attack the Baltic states. This is moderately likely from 2029 onwards. At present, there are no concrete indications that this is the intention.
- European citizens are certainly willing to defend their countries, but the abstract nature of the perceived threat makes it difficult to mobilise them and gain their concrete support for the armed forces.
- As one of the last neutral EU states, Austria is becoming increasingly isolated and marginalised in terms of security policy.



A New Era in Transatlantic Relations

Josef Braml

Transatlantic relations between the EU and the United States are at a turning point. Donald Trump's re-election in 2024 and the election of the new German federal government under Friedrich Merz in 2025 mark the beginning of a phase of geopolitical realignment that holds both risks and opportunities for 2026.

Geopolitical shifts

US President Donald Trump's second term in office has been dominated by a transactional style of politics that prioritises national interests over multilateral commitments and traditional alliances. The US is increasingly orienting itself towards the Indo-Pacific, while Europe is losing strategic priority. The EU must therefore become more autonomous in terms of security policy. Higher defence spending and the modernisation of European armed forces, such as the German Bunde-

swehr, mark a turning point. A massive rearmament programme and a strategic focus on European autonomy are a reaction to the change in transatlantic relations.

NATO continues to play a central role in European security and defence policy, but the US is calling for greater financial contributions from European member states. Germany has committed to spending two per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on defence and is investing heavily in modernising its armed forces. The German government presented a comprehensive armament and procurement plan worth up to € 83 billion. A total of 154 major armament projects are planned between September 2025 and December 2026.

A key feature of the plan is the clear prioritisation of European manufacturers: Only about eight per cent of the funds are to go to the United States, e.g., for Patriot missiles and torpedoes for Boeing aircraft. The majority of orders go to companies from Germany and other EU countries – a deliberate step towards strengthening the European defence industry and reducing dependencies on the United States. France is also focusing on European armament projects and has warned against excessive dependence on US technology. Nonetheless, US President Trump will continue to exploit Europe's military and intelligence dependence in order to secure concessions on economic and trade policy issues.

Economic tensions and protectionism

The economic policy agenda of the United States under Trump 2.0 is focused on self-sufficiency and protectionism. Punitive tariffs on European products and import restrictions are straining transatlantic trade relations. At the same time, pressure is mounting on German companies to bring their supply chains in line with US requirements. The EU must prepare for tougher international trade negotiations and realign its industrial policy.

Despite its common trade policy, the EU has hardly used its market power and has given in to US President Trump. On 27 July 2025, the US and the EU announced a provisional trade and investment agreement in Turnberry, Scotland. While the US unilaterally imposed tariffs on EU

imports, the EU was expected to increase its investment in the US and purchase US energy.

Agreements with President Trump are unlikely to last long, given his history of broken contracts. Shortly after the “deal”, Trump made another threat, this time over EU digital laws (Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act) designed to ensure competition and content moderation on digital platforms. US tech companies continue to wield excessive market power, exercise too little content control and disregard data protection rights – with serious consequences for European society and democracy.

Technology and digital sovereignty

In terms of technology policy, the US is focusing on national standards, innovation and technological leadership by large companies, while the EU emphasises data protection, digital sovereignty and ethical rules. Differences are particularly evident when it comes to AI, big tech and cloud policy: The US relies on proprietary solutions, while the EU suffers from fragmentation and a lack of hyperscalers. With the Quantum Act, the EU aims to pool research and infrastructure in order to become more competitive, and is reinforcing this with legislation such as the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act.

However, there are opportunities for cooperation, for example in the development of common standards in the field of cyber security or quantum computing. Cyber security threats, such as “harvest-now-decrypt-later” attacks, are forcing both sides to develop quantum-secure encryption systems. The EU is working on its own cybersecurity strategy for quantum threats, while the US is already testing initial commercial applications.

Climate policy and energy issues

New technologies such as AI and quantum computing are energy-intensive and require a change in thinking on energy policy. While the US is increasingly turning to nuclear energy, Europe faces significant tensions regarding the assessment of nuclear power and electricity

market reforms. The transition away from Russian gas and the search for new energy partners such as Qatar illustrate Europe's geopolitical reorientation. Indeed, in Scotland, the EU committed to increasing its purchases of US energy sources, particularly liquefied natural gas, to the tune of 750 billion US dollars over three years. However, due to a lack of capacity on the US side and the resulting costs, further transatlantic disputes are inevitable.

In addition, Trump's climate policy is causing tensions with the EU. While the US wants to withdraw from international climate cooperation and pursue its own interests, the EU is committed to its climate targets: By 2040, emissions must be reduced by 90 per cent, the use of renewable energies must increase and fossil fuels must decline – even under pressure from the US. The US, on the other hand, is pushing ahead with exporting fossil fuels to Europe.

Between adaptation and autonomy

The transatlantic relationship is more than an alliance of interests – it is a reflection of different political cultures. Europe's normative, often moralising foreign policy clashes with a US strategy that, under Trump's transactional logic, focuses on bilateral deals and power projection. Europe must learn to represent its interests in a united manner, develop strategic autonomy and, at the same time, maintain dialogue with the US. The coming year will be crucial for Europe's role in the world order – and for the future of transatlantic relations.

Key Messages

- The re-election of Donald Trump as US President and the election of the new German Federal Government mark a period of geopolitical realignment that presents both risks and opportunities for Europe.
- Europe must become more independent in terms of security and defence policy and continue to invest in its own defence and arms industry.
- Under Donald Trump, the US is pursuing a protectionist economic policy, which is leading to trade conflicts and pressure on European companies.
- Transatlantic relations are currently characterised by differing approaches to data protection, AI and cloud policy, as well as climate policy and renewable and fossil fuels.
- Europe's normative foreign policy clashes with the transactional US strategy. Europe must learn to defend its interests in a united manner.
- 2026 will be crucial for Europe's role in the world order and for the further development of relations with the US.



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Europe's Post-Colonial Legacy

Between Partnership and Colonial Continuities

Dorothy Makaza-Goede

The next few years will be crucial with regard to Europe's global position, as changing global dynamics result in a shift in centres of power. Renewed demands from the Global South are redefining the post-colonial order. Europe's relations with Africa, Latin America and Asia are being recalibrated under pressure from climate change, debates on reparations and geopolitical realignments. These developments will put Europe's credibility to the test and shape future policies – this also applies to smaller EU member states such as Austria.

Global shifts and the return of the colonial question

The trend identified by Nelson Maldonado-Torres in 2017 in his book co-edited with Robert Cavaoris, as the “decolonial turn”, continues and is transforming the global landscape. He used this term to describe political, artistic and epistemic movements that seek to dismantle colonial power structures and knowledge systems. From a regional perspective, the expansion of the BRICS and efforts to de-dollarise through new credit systems and trade in national currencies mark a shift in the economic centre away from the West. Countries across Africa are asserting their historical agency. On 9 October 2025, Mali removed the French Revolution from the curriculum and replaced it with Malian and African history. This represents a clear expression of epistemic sovereignty within the broad context of decolonisation in the field of education.

At the same time, the debate on reparations and restitutions has intensified. April 2025 marked the 200th anniversary of Haiti's forced payment of reparations to France. This fuelled global debates on colonial debt. In 1825, France forced Haiti to compensate former slave owners, plunging the country into a debt spiral. The Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) ten-point plan gained traction at the CARIFESTA XV Caribbean arts festival on 27 August 2025. Finally, some European museums accelerated the return of looted artefacts.

These developments show that colonial injustices are no longer merely abstract parts of history, but sites of contention that shape diplomacy and soft power. Europe's credibility will now be measured by its willingness to address these concerns and demands transparently. For Austria and the EU, this means a reassessment of material restitution and intellectual practices that continue to propagate Eurocentrism. In this context, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is an important starting point. Women from formerly colonised societies, who are often the guardians of cultural and ecological knowledge, must be recognised as key actors in reparative processes. Their continued marginalisation reproduces gendered colonial patterns of silence that weaken and delegitimise reconciliation and efforts towards restorative justice.

Climate change and new frontiers of justice

Three legal opinions issued by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice in 2024 and 2025 reveal an unprecedented consensus. Countries are legally obliged to prevent damage caused by climate change and to remedy any damage that may occur. Largely initiated by countries and groups in the Global South, these reports highlight the colonial origins of CO₂ injustice – where Europe's industrialisation was based on extractive economies. They also repositioned the Global South as standard-setters in the field of international environmental and climate law.

This trend also strengthens claims for climate reparations and is likely to influence the structure of the Loss and Damage Fund. European credibility will depend more on concrete and equal contributions and on the transfer of technology than on mere declarations of intent. For Austria, proactive engagement in equitable climate finance as well as gender and intersectionality-sensitive climate change adaptation would strengthen its legitimacy.

EU's credibility and continuity of power

EU's self-perception as a normative power is increasingly at odds with external perceptions. Colonial legacies persist through asymmetrical trade, paternalistic security partnerships and migration regimes that externalise borders to third countries. The joint agreement between the United Kingdom and Mauritius of 22 May 2025 concerning the Chagos Islands embodies these contradictions. This agreement cemented the 99-year British lease of the Diego Garcia base, including an option to extend it by 40 years. While Europe debates the right of return for displaced Chagossians, though not for those from Diego Garcia, it is consolidating its own borders and denying migrants from formerly colonised territories similar dignity. Freedom of movement therefore remains a privilege reserved for the metropolis, not a universal right.

Further discrepancies in credibility arose in October 2025, when the Democratic Republic of Congo accused the EU of double standards. The reason for this was the continuation of a minerals agreement with

Rwanda, despite accusations that Rwanda was supporting armed groups in Congo. This is in sharp contrast to the EU's comprehensive sanctions against Russia. In the context of the new race for rare earths, from lithium in the Sahel to cobalt in Central Africa, this demonstrates a replication of extractive colonial patterns, this time under the banner of the European "green transition". Europe's weak response to the Gaza war has also undermined its moral authority, as fundamental principles of international law appear to be applied selectively depending on geopolitical convenience.

For smaller EU countries such as Austria, such contradictions pose both risks and opportunities. The risk is that they may appear to be complicit in replicating and reinforcing structural inequality. The opportunity is that they can act as credible bridge builders in terms of intersectional inclusion, equitable governance and decolonial partnerships.

Outlook

Europe today is not truly post-colonial. The end of imperialism did not abolish the hierarchies of power or knowledge, even if Europe's global relations are presented as equal partnerships. As the Global South reclaims its narrative, economic and normative space, Europe's credibility depends on transforming historical privileges into equal cooperation. In 2026 and beyond, legitimacy will have to be based not on rhetoric but on reciprocity, on recognising unequal histories, supporting intersectional restorative justice – including WPS, climate action and more. In addition, mutually beneficial security architecture should be established. Austria can serve as an example of what a truly decolonial Europe could become.

Key Messages

- EU's global role is changing in the wake of a worldwide decolonial shift.
- EU's credibility is undermined by colonial continuities.
- Reparations and restitutions remain contentious issues shaping Europe's soft power and legitimacy.
- The WPS agenda offers transformative starting points for gender-equitable, restorative cooperation.
- Climate justice is a new frontier of global legal responsibility.
- By carefully weighing up opportunities and risks, Austria can become a model for decolonial global partnership.



Asylum in Austria and Europe

Judith Kohlenberger

Granting asylum in Europe must be based on clear responsibilities, the rule of law and the sharing of responsibility. Instead of national jurisdiction and instrumentalisation, it would therefore be more effective to transfer responsibility for asylum procedures to the EU-level, supported by an expanded asylum agency and a Union-wide right of residence. When distributing refugees, both European and nationwide needs-based matching models and incentives for local governments can be used to promote integration and reduce secondary migration. Finally, gender-specific vulnerabilities must be taken into account.

Asylum as a European responsibility

Within Europe, certain asylum-related responsibilities have been transferred to the EU: It determines the criteria for asylum and, through the

Dublin III Regulation, establishes which member state is responsible for the process. However, this leads to a paradoxical situation. While member states and their citizens increasingly feel that they are losing sovereignty when it comes to asylum matters, the EU establishes rights and standards but is unable to ensure that these are implemented.

A key challenge is therefore to establish clear responsibilities. This also involves changing the political discourse from the interests of individual nation states to a federal structure of responsibility between the EU and its regions. To this end, new social welfare, residency and legislative powers must be developed and implemented at the EU-level. Consequently, the goal must be to relieve the burden on member states and transfer responsibility for asylum procedures entirely to the EU-level. This would, to a certain extent, deprive national actors of the opportunity to exploit the issue; debates on “burden sharing” or quota distribution would thus become obsolete.

To support pan-European responsibility, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) should be developed into an efficient, centralised authority that brings together the expertise and experience of national asylum authorities. Robust digital infrastructure is essential to enable the EUAA to act efficiently and in a timely manner across the EU. The EUAA should therefore be given greater powers to determine asylum status, which would mean that both legislative and executive responsibility for asylum procedures would lie with the EU. This would contribute to the effective standardisation of asylum procedures and quotas in the EU. At the same time, an EU-wide right of residence must be established that is independent of national regulations and applicable throughout the EU.

Fair distribution?

The EU continues to rely on the territories of its member states for the accommodation and care of asylum seekers during the asylum process. However, this distribution does not necessarily have to focus on nation-states, but could focus on a level below, i.e., cities, municipalities or regions – where integration actually takes place. This would rule out both a system modelled on the Dublin III Regulation and a “free choice” model, which is only practicable to a limited extent for regulatory and administrative reasons. If asylum seekers are unable to cover their own

living expenses, either through sufficient personal funds or sponsorship by third parties, access to social assistance may be subject to a residence requirement.

Former best practice examples from Europe, such as Norway and Sweden, show that incentive models for host communities linked to private accommodation and social integration have positive effects and can increase the population's willingness to accept refugees. Matching models can play a role here, bringing together the structural, demographic and economic requirements of regions with the skills and needs of refugees. Urban networks that are particularly committed to taking in refugees can be specifically supported and promoted through EU funds and programmes.

Within Austria, a fair distribution of asylum seekers would entail adherence to the federal state quotas established under Article 15a of the Federal Constitutional Act (B-VG), combined with the effective enforcement of sanctions for non-compliance. This would ensure an initially balanced nationwide distribution. The matching models mentioned above can then be applied. One example would be the algorithm-based mechanism "Match'In", developed by scientists at the University of Hildesheim and Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg. Models such as these enable better matches to be made between the individual circumstances of those seeking protection and the resources available in local communities. This will enable the potential of migration for local and regional communities to be better utilised, improve integration and reduce secondary migration, for example to the federal capital.

Gender-equitable access to asylum

Female refugees face gender-specific risks that increase their vulnerability compared to men. Women and girls may experience violence and coercion from border police, smugglers, camp staff and other refugees, but also from their own partners, acquaintances or relatives. Healthcare for women refugees is also precarious, for example in terms of access to toilets, menstrual hygiene and pregnancy care. In the autumn of 2015, during the refugee crisis, the aid organisation CARE International reported that adult women in refugee camps on European soil wore nappies or refrained from drinking enough fluids so that they

would not have to use the toilet at night. Both on the way to and in the unprotected wet rooms themselves, they were exposed to an increased risk of sexual assault and violence.

Due to gender-specific vulnerabilities, protection of women centres on their “membership in a particular social group” which makes them subject to persecution in their country of origin. Social discrimination and gender-based persecution (mostly female) are therefore grounds for granting asylum. In January 2023, the EUAA also argued that women and girls under the Taliban were generally at risk of persecution and could therefore be granted protection in the EU, meaning that individual case assessments were not necessary. This conclusion should be understood not only as a response to factual changes following the Taliban’s power takeover in 2021, but also as an expression of foreign policy interests, as it denies the regime its legitimacy and reinforces the Western emphasis on human and women’s rights.

However, before protection can be guaranteed, access to protection must be ensured. In general, it is clear that legal and safe escape routes disproportionately benefit women and children. In addition to resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes, family reunification plays an important role. Due to the demographic (self-)selection effect of those who enter the country independently, it is primarily female and underage family members who can be rescued from crisis and conflict regions in this way. In order to make migration to Europe more gender-equitable, family reunification for persons entitled to protection, which is currently suspended, should be made possible again.

Key Messages

- Responsibility for asylum procedures should be transferred to the EU-level in order to avoid countries acting unilaterally, to establish clear responsibilities and to achieve standardisation of approval rates.
- The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) could be expanded into a central, efficient authority with legislative and executive powers to ensure uniform and efficient asylum procedures across the EU.
- Cities, municipalities and regions could be more involved in the distribution and integration of refugees, supported by matching models and targeted EU funding.
- At the national level, a more balanced distribution of refugees can be achieved by complying with and enforcing the basic care agreement and, once the asylum process has been completed, by imposing residence requirements tailored to local needs.
- The special protection needs of refugee women and girls must be taken into account by providing safe access to asylum, for example through humanitarian asylum programmes and family reunification.



“Gendered Disinformation” as a Hybrid Tool

Thilo Geiger

Hybrid threats target the internal stability of Western democracies by exploiting societal fault lines. A key instrument for this is exerting influence in the information space. One particularly effective form of this is ‘gendered disinformation’, which refers to targeted misinformation that seeks to discredit women in public roles, reinforce traditional gender roles, and ultimately undermine women’s political participation. Such strategies contribute to the fragmentation of European societies and are deliberately promoted by Russia. The safeguarding of democratic stability in the long term requires a holistic security strategy that promotes information sovereignty, critical media consumption, and societal resilience.

Hybrid threats represent an integral part of the contemporary security reality. They target not only military structures, critical infrastructures and economic dependencies, but also the leadership capacity of

states. In democracies that means they target the substance of the political system: the trust in institutions and the willingness to participate in the political process.

Key actors in hybrid actions aimed at weakening Western democracies are Russia and China. Particularly in autocratic systems, the line between state and non-state actors is blurred. The latter rarely act independently in such contexts. They are generally integrated into networks of state control that ensure their effectiveness in terms of achieving strategic goals.

Influence in the information space

One mechanism of hybrid influence is foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). FIMI is effective where specific target groups can be reached. This may sound trivial, but in practice it has an enormous reach. Different generations form their own echo chambers with specific information channels, interests and vulnerabilities.

Media consumption has shifted from traditional formats to digital platforms and social media. Parts of the Baby Boomer generation, Generation X and the Millennial generation are already moving between these two worlds and are therefore susceptible to hybrid forms of credible information and subtle disinformation. Social media dominates among Generations Z and Alpha, and can be used specifically for manipulation.

Patriarchal gender roles as a tool

FIMI is not a one-dimensional tool. It unfolds via multi-layered approaches and targets areas where social fault lines exist. One form of this is “gendered disinformation”. It aims to use targeted disinformation to exclude women, especially those in politically and socially relevant positions, from the public discourse and thus exclude them from political participation in the long term. Personal qualifications or the motives behind political actions are questioned, as is their identity as women themselves – as was the case, for example, with former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, and former New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. A democracy that structurally excludes

women and other gender perspectives loses legitimacy and thus a core element of its stability.

A growing area of tension is particularly evident among the younger generations. In parts of Generations Z and Alpha, exaggerated notions of masculinity and a return to “traditional” gender roles are becoming apparent. In these discourses, people perceived as female are reduced to “traditional” roles. This is happening within the “manosphere”, a sprawling, male-dominated online milieu. FIMI is therefore also exerting an influence in the context of a broad and seemingly ever more irreconcilable culture war.

This development is by no means coincidental and builds on socially learned, established role models that suggest security. Nationalist, reactionary movements in Europe are using this foundation, supported by targeted Russian influence, to consolidate a counterpoint to a liberal social model characterised by diversity. Russia benefits from the resulting multifaceted fragmentation of European societies, because democratic nation states with populations divided by conflict appear less threatening to its own geopolitical ambitions than closed alliances of stable states.

These trends are supported by content from the US, which, at the latest since the Trump administration, has been combating non-traditional gender identities. Such narratives find resonance in parts of the bourgeois-conservative milieu in Europe. Once this resonance is achieved, the effectiveness of disinformation increases significantly, because it is no longer perceived purely as external influence, but as a legitimate part of the social debate.

Stability in democracies: a challenge for the future

These developments are affecting a young generation that is growing up amid multiple crises: war in Europe and the Middle East, the dynamics of the AI revolution, the tangible effects of climate change, and the transformation of the world of work and social welfare systems driven by demographic change. When it comes to gendered disinformation, the content is effective regardless of the gender identity of the target

group, as everyone has been socialised with the same gender roles and the associated expectations and promises.

Young people are aware of the existence of disinformation, but it is difficult for them to recognise and classify individual narratives. This is precisely where FIMI develops its influence. Not through open contradiction, but by deliberately sowing doubt and insecurity and presenting simple, reassuring narratives. This presents a clear mandate for social and state institutions. Information sovereignty, critical media consumption and a vigilant public are also part of a state's defence capability. The hybrid dimension of this threat forces us to now consider security in holistic terms and no longer purely in military terms.

The strategic message is clear: security in the 21st century means safeguarding democratic stability internally as well as the capacity to act externally. Those who divide society promote nationalism and thus weaken international cooperation and alliances in the long term. And that is precisely the goal of such hybrid influence operations.

Key Messages

- Hybrid threats target the trust in and legitimacy of democracies.
- The influence in the information space is multifaceted and target group-oriented.
- “Gendered disinformation” aims to push women out of political and social participation.
- Russian influence amplifies social division.
- National stability in democracies calls for a high degree of information sovereignty.



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Cyber defence in Europe

The current threat scenario

David Song-Pehamberger

The growing digitisation of society also enables threats in cyberspace to continue to increase rapidly. Cyber-attacks on EU member states have increased dramatically, especially since the start of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Russian cyber actors are primarily targeting those states that show solidarity with Ukraine.

Threat actors

In recent years, numerous acts of cyber sabotage and cyberattacks have been attributed to the Russian state actors. In 2025, for example, France published an official attribution assigning several serious cyberattacks, including attacks against French institutions involved in hosting the 2024 Olympic Games, to the Russian military intelligence agency, GRU. However, Russia also uses a number of state-affiliated

and non-state cyber actors for sabotage and espionage networks beyond its state networks. This makes it considerably more difficult to find clear evidence and to attribute responsibility.

However, Russia is not the only threat actor. Chinese actors have been known for decades for their espionage campaigns in cyberspace. In addition, an increasing number of cases of malware being planted in critical US infrastructures, presumably with the intention of sabotaging energy supplies and telecommunications in the event of a future conflict, have become known in recent years.

China has also repeatedly attacked public institutions in European cyberspace. In May 2025, for example, the Czech Republic attributed a cyber espionage attack on its Foreign Ministry that had been going on for three years, to the Chinese Ministry of State Security. China's obvious cyber-espionage-campaigns continue to increase in the EU, while the estimated number of unknown attacks is probably also enormous. Unlike Russian actors, who have become increasingly ruthless in recent years, Beijing continues to attach importance to remaining undetected in its espionage activities. China is striving to assume a global leadership role in cyberspace as well. To this end, it exploits the grey areas of cyberspace to a large extent and rejects any attempts at attribution by Western states, condemning them as politically motivated.

North Korea is another prominent threat actor whose ransomware campaigns and crypto thefts have already brought in several billion euro for the authoritarian regime. According to estimates, it probably earned over USD 1.3 billion in 2024 from crypto thefts alone. In February 2025, the North Korean hacker group "Lazarus" stole another USD 1.5 billion from the crypto exchange ByBit, the largest crypto theft to date. Unlike Chinese cyber actors, North Korean actors are relatively indifferent to whether they are caught in the act. North Korea is already largely isolated internationally and subject to heavy sanctions, which is why state-sponsored cybercrime is a significant source of income for Pyongyang.

Cyber defence at Union level

Countering this multifaceted threat posed by cyber sabotage, espionage and crime requires a multi-layered approach that goes beyond

the capabilities of any single state. Recognising the need for EU-wide cooperation, the 27 EU member states have decided to tackle the cyber threat situation together.

In March 2022, shortly after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence was adopted, setting out the strategy for establishing joint defence measures. Cyber defence was also taken into account. To this end, the EU Cyber Defence Policy was drafted subsequently, setting out the strategic framework for capacity building in this domain.

Strengthening European cyber defence

The Cyber Defence Policy connects and expands existing strands of cybersecurity and defence in the EU. New initiatives include the establishment of a network of all military cyber emergency response teams (CERT), the creation of a joint cyber situation and coordination centre (EU Cyber Defence Coordination Centre) and the development of a framework for regular cyber emergency exercises (CyDef-X). In addition, further measures are planned to improve joint interoperability, protect critical infrastructure and increase investment in cyber defence capabilities. As part of all the initiatives, both civil and military measures have been identified to ensure cross-sector implementation.

The strengthening of existing structures has also been taken into account, such as the existing attribution mechanism of the EU member states, the “Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox”. Under this mechanism, cyberattacks on EU members have been attributed and sanctioned with increasing frequency in recent years. This included both the Russian cyberattack on 24 February 2022, which marked the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the joint condemnation of the aforementioned cyberattack on the Czech Republic.

The EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) has also had its competence strengthened. In addition, the EU Cybersecurity Competence Centre was opened in 2023 and tasked with the strategic management of EU funding to strengthen national cybersecurity initiatives. Furthermore, a number of legislative initiatives are also worth mentioning, such as the revised Network and Information Security Directive (NIS-2), which extends regu-

lations for cybersecurity in all EU states and thus strengthens cyber resilience across the Union. NIS-2 is currently being implemented at national level. There is also the Cyber Resilience Act, which introduced strict cybersecurity requirements for digital products, and the Cyber Solidarity Act, which provides for a joint EU “cyber shield” and the establishment of a cyber reserve.

Outlook

In 2026, these and other legal norms will be gradually implemented at national level, and initiatives to improve cyber resilience and defence will be implemented and expanded. The EU Cyber Defence Coordination Centre will also enter its first phase of implementation at the beginning of 2026. European cyber security and defence is thus on a positive path towards joint, EU-wide cyber resilience. Implementation will take several more years, and it remains to be seen whether it will progress quickly enough, as the threat situation continues to grow rapidly and malicious cyber actors exploit any vulnerability that arises within increasingly digitised societies.

Key Messages

- Cyberattacks on EU states have increased significantly since Russia’s attack on Ukraine, with pro-Ukrainian countries being the particular focus of Russian, Chinese and North Korean actors.
- Russia uses a network of state, state-affiliated and criminal groups, making a clear attribution and countermeasures difficult.
- China relies on covert, long-term espionage in cyberspace to secure geopolitical and economic advantages and consolidate its global leadership role.
- The constant threat posed by cyber sabotage, espionage and crime requires a comprehensive solution that goes beyond the resources of individual states.
- The EU member states have agreed on a multi-layered approach to increase cyber resilience across the Union.
- The goal is to achieve joint, EU-wide cyber resilience, but implementation will take several years yet, while threats continue to evolve dynamically.



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International Organised Crime in Europe

Focus on youth

Daniela PISOIU

European networks in the area of organised crime are increasingly involving minors in low-threshold, high-risk and sometimes violent activities. Recruitment takes place openly via social media, through coercion of vulnerable groups and via age-based hierarchies. At the same time, areas of crime are shifting to the digital space. These include cyber fraud, grooming and sextortion. The latter functions as an independent criminal economy and as a lever for recruitment, control and monetisation. Multidimensional, evidence-based strategies that combine early intervention, school and community-oriented measures, digital resilience and the targeted disruption of recruitment chains are effective.

The involvement of young people in organised crime structures is growing in several fields of crime simultaneously. These include violent and knife crimes, drug-related offences, including darknet procurement and party drugs, damage brokered online and exploitative recruitment via various platforms. European situation reports point to the targeted recruitment of first-time offenders, in some cases as part of violence-as-a-service models. Key geographical hubs are ports on the North Sea and Atlantic coast, nightlife areas and urban fringe locations, where logistics, sales premises and digital contact initiation are concentrated. In all settings, digital blackmail through sextortion is increasingly becoming a factor in entry or acceleration.

Push factors such as poverty, dropping out of school and family pressure meet pull factors such as status, quick profits and group affiliation. In terms of perpetrator economics, minors are considered “low risk”, facilitating recruitment and shielding hierarchies. Loosely connected but hierarchically controlled networks have been observed where older youths train and supervise younger ones, binding them through economic incentives or blackmail (including sextortion). Growing drug markets, competitive pressure and the availability of weapons are increasing the severity of offences and reducing the opportunities for exit.

Digital vectors and data landscape

In terms of individual trajectories, platform affordances such as direct messaging, recommendation algorithms and anonymous payment methods lower the barriers to entry. Recruitment takes place in social media, messenger and gaming environments, accompanied by gamification, influencer mimicry and supposedly legitimate “jobs”. Sextortion has a cross-cutting effect: compromising content is used to extort payments, further material or operative cooperation. Control and payment are increasingly encrypted; overlaps with extremist and misogynistic online milieus reinforce the normalisation effects of violence and devaluation.

In terms of data collection and analysis, comparability suffers from heterogeneous definitions, age limits and data protection requirements. Data evaluations often underestimate the dark areas, especially in the case of online exploitation. Evidence-based control would require mixed-method approaches, front-line surveys and integrated data pools across police,

justice, education, social services and health. Helpline and platform data on sextortion can be used as early indicators, but must be transferred to monitoring and evaluation systems that map the development (entry, retention, exit) and the effects of measures.

Prevention, policy and outlook

Effectiveness is particularly evident in early-intervention, multidimensional programmes. These include high-quality early fostering, family-based support, social and emotional learning in schools, multi-component community approaches and the development of digital resilience. Co-responder models between the police, health and social services, diversion instead of imprisonment for first-time offenders, and local alliances at hotspots reduce harm, but require stable funding and consistent evaluation of outcomes.

At the EU level, platform responsibility and child protection online are growing in importance; priorities include disrupting digital recruitment, expanding protection architectures at ports and hubs, specific sextortion prevention (education, reporting channels, rapid takedowns) and indicator-based longitudinal monitoring for the scaling of effective models.

Three priorities are central to the situation in Austria. First, the prevention of digital recruitment channels and the securing of logistical corridors through administrative requirements, platform cooperation and the situation-based presence of interdisciplinary teams. Sextortion cases must be systematically recorded and processed via helplines, schools and youth welfare services. Secondly, the expansion of early prevention in schools and open youth work, including digital resilience and specific modules on grooming and sextortion, flanked by diversion and graduated alternatives to imprisonment. Thirdly, the institutionalisation of the cooperation between law enforcement, public health and social services (LEPH). This requires standardised interfaces with child and youth welfare, migration and the labour market, as well as the introduction of harmonised indicators, longitudinal monitoring and consistent evaluation of outcomes for the reliable scaling of municipal models.

Key messages

- Across the EU, minors are increasingly being drawn into risky and violent activities. Ports, nightlife areas and urban peripheries are central hubs.
- Recruitment takes place digitally, through coercion and within age-graded structures. Sextortion acts as a lever for recruitment, control and monetisation.
- Early, multidimensional interventions, cooperation between law enforcement, health care and social services, and administrative and situational barriers at hotspots are effective.
- Data gaps require integrated data systems, longitudinal designs and consistent results evaluation for scalable prevention.
- Political priorities are shifting towards prevention, rehabilitation and platform responsibility – with a focus on digital resilience and practical application.

5

Risks and challenges for Austria





BMLV/Daniel Trippolt

Risks and challenges for Austria

Silvia Angerbauer

The Western-influenced, liberal world order has come under severe pressure. The global security and defence policy is characterised by a veritable vacuum of authority. Europe must succeed in positioning itself as a powerful actor that is capable and willing to act. The stronger the EU's comprehensive defence capabilities, the greater the security gains for Austria. Decisive, nationwide measures will therefore have to continue to be taken in order to strengthen Austria's own security in this complex situation, to make a credible contribution to European security and thus to be taken seriously.

The era of the Western-dominated liberal world order seems to be coming to an end in the medium term; hopes for its continuation are unlikely to be fulfilled in the longer term. Major powers are vying for the prerogative of interpretation, strategic advantages and coalitions. International organisations, above all the United Nations and the OSCE, are virtually

incapable of acting due to the unwillingness of the great powers to accept them as authorities and in view of the need for global policy-making.

Against this backdrop, the strategic deficit of Europe is also becoming particularly critical. The “change through trade” model that is now proving to be ineffective, coupled with the EU’s inability to exert geopolitical influence, reduces the Union’s capacity to react and act and only reinforces its loss of credibility. If the US implements its plans and withdraws around half of its troops from Europe, the EU will be forced to turn words into actions. Tedious consensus-building processes in line with the rules, political conclusions and strategy documents will then no longer suffice. In order to survive the current power constellation unscathed, investment in comprehensive defence readiness and effective military capabilities is no longer an option, but a necessity. Austria will also be called upon to contribute to this system of collective security in Europe.

Paths to success

In conceptual terms, the EU continued its presentable strategic work in the field of security policy in 2025. At the target level, the strategy for establishing a “Preparedness Union” to strengthen the general crisis response capabilities of citizens, society and state institutions was adopted. On the other hand, the White Paper on Defence – Preparedness 2030 was accepted that aims to expand Europe’s defence capabilities and military autonomy.

The European Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 adopted in autumn 2025 now sets out measures for how the EU intends to achieve its defence readiness goal by 2030. This roadmap (including targets, indicators, deadlines, etc.) aims to ensure that the EU Defence White Paper of March 2025 is implemented in a structured manner over the next five years. An annual report to the Council of Europe underlines the commitment of the member states to its implementation. The focus of this document is on closing critical capability gaps in nine priority areas, for which, among other things, four flagship projects have been proposed: an initiative on drone defence, protection of the Eastern flank, an air shield and a space shield. The sovereignty of the EU member states regarding national defence will of course be preserved – the

move towards European defence, although enshrined as a possibility in the Treaty on European Union, is not being actively pursued.

Finally, the “ReArm Europe” resource initiative is intended to mobilise up to EUR 800 billion for the expansion and modernisation of European defence. The aim is to close structural gaps and strengthen Europe’s strategic autonomy in order to reduce its dependence on external security guarantees. To this end, the EU budget will provide member states with secured loans, for example, and enable the coordinated activation of the national escape clause by all member states in order to create additional flexibility for higher defence spending. In addition, the European Investment Bank now also finances military equipment, infrastructure, services and technology to make the EU secure and more resilient. Weapons and ammunition, however, will not be financed.

And Austria?

Austria has shown solidarity in supporting all EU decisions. Accordingly, “active participation” in the “development of the European Defence Union” is also enshrined in the 2025-2029 government programme. In April 2025, the Council of Ministers further emphasised Austria’s EU orientation in joint foreign, security and defence policy issues.

The new Austrian Security Strategy should therefore firstly set out the national objectives regarding the implementation of the EU resolutions. Secondly, concrete measures to achieve Austria’s overall national “readiness” should be laid down in sub-strategies and other planning and implementation documents, such as a new resilience plan. Thirdly, budget planning and resource allocation for achieving European and national security preparedness and defence readiness should be secured in the Federal Finance Framework Act and the Federal Finance Act.

It will also be particularly important to educate the population in a low-threshold and target group-oriented manner about existing risks, correct behaviour in crisis situations and the need for comprehensive defence. An assessment in the context of the COVID-19 crisis leads to the basic assumption that organisations that have already dealt intensively with diversity and inclusion, and the associated challenges and opportunities, may have been better prepared for the crisis and de-

veloped a higher degree of resilience – and that this advantage could perhaps also prove its worth in other future crises.

Economic opportunities

For the European and national industrial sector, too, geopolitical and European-political change is much more than a theoretical concept. In future, strategic decisions will have to be assessed more in the light of geopolitical developments – whether they concern the choice of location, the procurement of raw materials or cooperation partners. Anyone investing in new tooling lines today, for example, should not only assess economic factors, but also keep an eye on secure access to raw materials and supply chains.

The geopolitical shift also brings opportunities, both for the economy and for security policy. In terms of security policy, greater independence in Europe offers a higher degree of strategic autonomy. A reasonable degree of open strategic autonomy would in turn offer the opportunity to “act independently whenever and wherever necessary, and to act together with partners whenever possible”, as laid down in the Council Decision of November 2016. With regard to the industrial sector, comprehensively planned, resilient value chains can bring economic advantages. Similarly, the expanding requirements in the security and defence sectors are also increasing demand. This can help to boost the German automotive industry, which is in crisis, and hence the Austrian automotive supply industry.

Conclusion

The Western-dominated international order is undergoing a profound transformation. National security policies as well as companies are facing enormous challenges. Long-winded strategies and entrenched structures and processes must be replaced by agile models that are forward-looking and can cope with unpredictability, political crises and upheavals – in other words, resilient. Anyone who wants to survive internationally today needs a deep understanding of geopolitical dynamics and must recognise that political stability within the EU can no longer be taken for granted. It is clear that if the US policy continues,

the responsibility for security policy will weigh more heavily on European shoulders. Austria will also be called upon to make an appropriate contribution to the changing European security model.

Key messages

- The era of the Western-dominated liberal world order has come under severe pressure.
- For the EU, comprehensive defence readiness and effective military capabilities are no longer an option, but a necessity.
- The stronger the EU's comprehensive defence capabilities, the greater the security gains for Austria.
- The geopolitical and European-political change presents challenges and also opportunities for security policy, but also for the industrial sector.
- Austria is called upon to make an appropriate contribution to the changing European security model.



BMLV/Daniel Trippolt

The Return of National Defence

Bruno Günter Hofbauer

The Russian war of aggression has again shown the importance of conventional warfare and credible deterrence. With its AAF Development Plan 2032+, Austria is effectively focusing the Austrian Armed Forces on military national defence. This requires greater combat capability, rapid mobilisation, a strengthened ready reserve and whole-of-nation defence readiness. In order to counter threats ranging from the cyber sector to conventional threats, adaptations to the legal system and a defence budget of two per cent of GDP by 2032 are necessary.

The list of buzzwords that have accompanied us for several years in the context of security and defence policy could go on forever: war of aggression, turning point, deterrence, annexation, drones over NATO territory, espionage, airspace violations, medium-range missiles, military provocation, large-scale manoeuvres in Eastern Europe. The consequences of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine have also not

failed to leave their mark on Austria. On the contrary: central concepts of warfare from the Cold War era have come to the fore again. These include elements such as nuclear weapons, artillery, main battle tanks, air defence, long-range weapons and mobilisation. These concepts are supplemented and reinforced by new developments such as the proliferation of cheap, unmanned systems with lethal effects, precise situational awareness that makes the battlefield even more transparent through the use of open sources and artificial intelligence and quantum technology.

Focus on national defence

With its Armed Forces Profile “Unser Heer”, the Austrian Armed Forces (AAF) had already placed the medium and long-term focus on the national defence in 2021, one year before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This also involves a shift away from the primary focus of the AAF on international stabilisation operations and domestic assistance operations. The Defence Staff implemented the guidelines laid down in the Armed Forces Profile with the “AAF Development Plan 2032+”. However, this cannot be reduced to hardware alone, such as new weapon systems or infrastructure. It is more a question of realigning the military thinking and actions of the entire organisation towards military national defence and combat in Austria against a possible external aggressor.

The speed with which political intentions can change and existing potential can be utilized to achieve political goals was unequivocally demonstrated in 2022. It was also evident that there is usually little time for preparation. If you do not prepare to defend your own country, failure is inevitable should a defence situation arise. The AAF must therefore be able to react quickly to the threats which can be expected in the future. Even though Austria is currently in a relatively safe position, there are several things to consider regarding the future.

- A future military confrontation on the fringes of Europe will not be without its military implications for Austria.
- There is no certainty that Austria’s currently comfortable geostrategic position will continue to offer protection in 10- or 15-years’ time.
- All potential developments in Europe and its environs must be taken into account in the long-term orientation of the AAF. This inev-

itably includes defence against a conventional attack on Austrian territory.

This means that the scope of medium to long-term threats ranges from hybrid threats of various kinds to various forms of sub-conventional military actions and attacks with conventional means.

Requirements for a credible national defence

A credible national defence requires, first and foremost, high-quality forces and resources that possess high combat capability and can effectively counter these comprehensive threats. However, they also need to be sufficient in number, because mass again plays an important role. In order to meet the military challenges of the future, the size of the armed forces has to be increased in the medium term. The AAF must again be enabled to work together in their entirety as armed forces and to be effective in combat involving all branches in all domains. This means strengthening combat power, readiness and responsiveness, information and decision superiority and sustainability and protection.

This entails expanding existing capabilities and, at the same time, bringing new ones into the AAF. In addition to the need of credible air defence and cyberspace warfare capabilities, the ability to deliver long-range firepower is required. It must be possible to hit an enemy where it hurts most. This needs to be supported by comprehensive reconnaissance and command capabilities, but also by excellent logistics. Catching up on shortcomings in this area will take time: at least a decade must be estimated for the first essential steps of re-equipping and equipping the AAF with resources adequate to the threat.

The AAF is a ready reserve army; the ready reserve should therefore be given a new status. The ability to mobilise quickly is one of the essential prerequisites for a successful operation. Mobilised forces must be able to deploy as quickly as possible, as the time available in the event of a conflict is extremely limited. Mastery of military skills is therefore indispensable for both stand-by forces and forces to be mobilised. High-quality national service of sufficient duration, supplemented by regular recalls to maintain qualification levels, is indispensable. The

preparation time currently still available must also be used intensively for training and exercises.

National defence is not just the responsibility of the armed forces; it is a whole-of-nation task, with political leaders, the population and the economy all playing key roles. This requires coordinated, whole-of-nation cooperation. The capacity to act in a crisis or conflict situation requires a strengthening of the will to defend the country; a precondition for this is the revitalisation and modernisation of comprehensive national defence, as enshrined in the constitution. A potential aggressor must be made aware that there will be no surrender without a fight. On the contrary, we are willing and able to resist aggression and to fight back. That is the core of deterrence, which in turn must be based on credible military capabilities.

Framework conditions

The importance of military national defence has not changed in essence. Neither has an “end of history” come about, nor have wars between states disappeared. Clausewitz’s assertion that war is an act of violence in which one opponent seeks to impose their own political will on another by rendering them defenceless through physical force has also not changed. Accordingly, it is imperative to create the necessary legal and budgetary framework conditions to ensure the necessary security of action for the future.

One of the essential conditions for ensuring military national defence is to stick to the two per cent target until 2032 – in other words, to increase the budget for military national defence to two per cent of GDP. Likewise, adaptations to the legal framework must be made in good time in order to be able to effectively counter threats in areas such as the information environment, cyberspace or from unmanned systems.

The AAF Development Plan 2032+ has the clear objective of restoring Austria’s comprehensive military defence capability. However, shifting the focus to national defence does not mean abandoning the ability to cooperate with other armed forces. On the contrary: interoperability is essential for survival, both in international cooperation and in the event of war. In order to achieve these objectives, the first step is to “repair”

the existing AAF, i.e., to quickly eliminate existing shortcomings. At the same time, capabilities must be consolidated and expanded from the end of the 2020s onwards.

Key messages

- The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has demonstrated that conventional warfare is once again of central importance – flanked by new technologies such as drones and artificial intelligence.
- With its Development Plan 2032+, the AAF are refocusing on military national defence rather than international operations and assistance operations.
- Effective national defence calls for high-quality forces in sufficient numbers, including modern air defence, cyber defence and long-range firepower.
- National defence is not just a matter for the AAF; it is a whole-of-nation task. It requires a willingness to defend the country, political leadership and credible deterrence. Strengthening the ready reserve in order to be able to deploy forces quickly is crucial.
- Increasing the defence budget to two per cent of GDP by 2032 and making legal adaptations are essential to ensure the military capacity to act.



Austria's Neutrality and the risks of avoiding the debate

Martin Senn

After joining the European Union in 1995, Austria adapted the legal framework of its neutrality, thereby laying the groundwork for solidarity within the Common Foreign and Security Policy. However, the tension between neutrality and solidarity was never discussed publicly. As a result, the population is not sufficiently prepared for the demands of Austria's military defence or for a potential obligation to assist another EU member state.

Even nearly four years after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the debate about the nature and value of Austrian neutrality has barely begun. In light of the profound changes in the European and global security order, however, there is an urgent need to engage both the public and the policymakers in the debate about neutrality. This concerns both its relationship to European solidarity in the area of the

Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), as well as its armed dimension.

It would be misguided, however, to limit the discussion purely to neutrality – no matter how relevant this may be. What is needed is a comprehensive and ongoing debate about Austria's foreign, security and defence policy in the 21st century.

Differential neutrality

The end of the East-West conflict marked a turning point in the history of Austrian neutrality. During this phase, a gradual shift towards differential neutrality, i.e. neutrality with limited validity, was introduced. In view of the end of the deadlock in the UN Security Council and the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, Austria turned to a reinterpretation of its neutrality obligations and its obligations arising out of UN membership. Obligations under the United Nations collective security system were henceforth to take precedence. In this context, Austria also participated in enforcement measures against Iraq and subsequently against other states.

The second, even more far-reaching step was Austria's accession to the European Union in 1995. In order to provide a legal basis for participation in the CFSP and thus the CSDP, the National Council adopted Article 23f (later Article 23j) of the Federal Constitutional Act (B-VG). This not only enables participation in missions and operations within the framework of the "Petersberg tasks", but also, according to prevailing legal opinion, participation in common defence on the basis of Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). Article 23j B-VG thus "overrides" the Neutrality Act of 1955 and allows Austria to suspend its neutrality for measures within the framework of the CFSP/CSDP. However, Article 42(7), with the "Irish clause" offers neutral EU states the option of refraining from measures that they consider incompatible with their neutrality.

Solidarity and armed neutrality

How Austria would act after a trigger event within this legal framework is ultimately a political question. The Austrian population, however, is not prepared for this question. There has been neither public debate nor a discussion with the public, about what solidarity means in EU foreign, security and defence policy, nor about how Austria could use the room for manoeuvre created by its differential neutrality. The absence of a public debate on these issues increases the risk that, in the event of a mutual assistance case, the government would come under considerable pressure between the domestic public resistance and the expectations of solidarity from the EU member states.

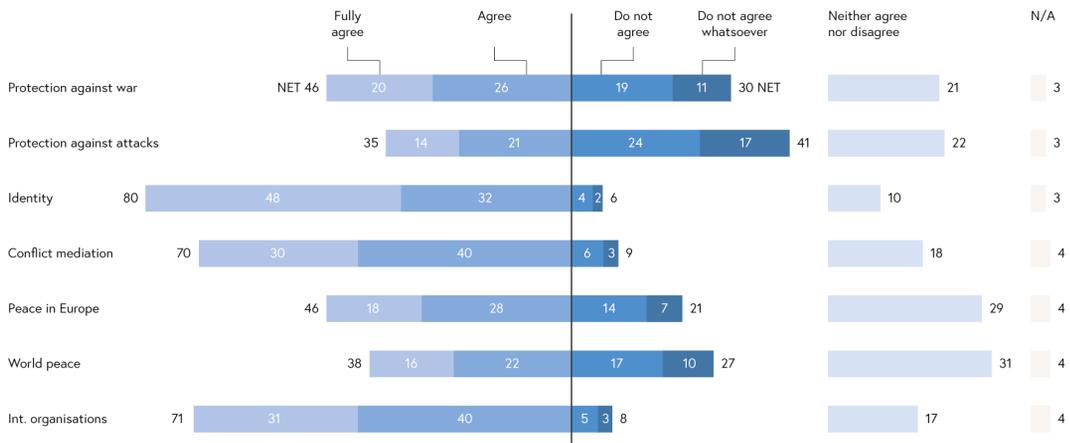


Illustration 2: Functions of Austria's neutrality. Austrian Foreign Policy Panel Project (<https://afp3.at/>, 3rd wave 2025, n = 3,000). Question: With which statement regarding neutrality would you agree?

The neglect of the armed nature of neutrality also poses a significant risk. In the course of its political interpretation, Austria has consistently emphasised the non-military dimension of its neutrality, i.e. international engagement and good offices. However, military national defence has been neglected as a result. The fact that so little attention was paid to the defence of neutrality was due to the role of the US as Europe's security guarantor after 1945.

Although the US is increasingly withdrawing from this role and taking an increasingly antagonistic stance towards Europe, this “protected phase” of neutrality still seems to be resonating. Surveys conducted by the Austrian Foreign Policy Panel Project (AFP3) show that protection against attacks is the least popular of all functions of neutrality, although it is still supported by 35% of all respondents. At the same time, only 14% of all respondents (22% of male respondents) would be willing to defend the country with arms. This puts Austria among the lowest-ranked countries in Europe.

This lingering influence of a non-military interpretation of neutrality makes it difficult for Austria to adapt to the changed requirements of the EU security and defence policy.

Key messages

- Art. 23j Federal Constitutional Act “overrides” the Neutrality Act and offers Austria far-reaching opportunities to participate in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy.
- The relationship between Austria’s neutrality on the one hand and European solidarity on the other has not been sufficiently discussed in and with the public.
- Due to the lack of public discussion, the Austrian population is inadequately prepared for a call for mutual assistance from another EU member state.
- The lingering influence of a predominantly non-military interpretation of neutrality makes it difficult for Austria to adapt to the changed requirements of the EU security and defence policy.

A comprehensive strategy for an era of epochal change

Markus Kornprobst

In recent years, Austria has introduced a number of strategic documents, including the Foreign Economic Strategy and the Security Strategy. As a result, there are numerous strategy papers tailored to specific policy areas, but no overarching strategy that transcends the individual policy fields and their respective strategies.

The transitional period of epochal change

Three aspects of the environment of Austrian foreign policy are currently undergoing fundamental change. Materially, the Fourth Industrial Revolution is reshuffling the deck. The beneficiaries of technological progress include not only states, particularly in Asia and the Americas, but also non-state actors such as major technology corporations. In-

stitutionally, the pillars of the liberal, rules-based world order, which until recently appeared solid, have begun to wobble. The World Trade Organization, established to promote global free trade, finds itself marginalized, while U.S. President Donald Trump repeatedly threatened new tariffs and, in many cases, implemented them. The United Nations, founded to maintain international peace and security, is all too often merely a spectator in the armed conflicts of the world, even when these conflicts flagrantly violate its charter and principles.

Much has also changed epistemically. At the end of the Cold War, human security, in the form of the responsibility to protect, still brushed against the sacrosanct principle of sovereignty. Today, it is no longer considered one of the influential perspectives on international politics. Instead, an increasing number of decision-makers view world affairs through the lens of geopolitics. At the same time, a cognitive deglobalisation is underway. While a high degree of material globalisation persists, a romanticised nationalism claims that nation-state solutions can adequately address globalisation dynamics.

Austrian identity in international politics

Neutrality is a cornerstone of the legal foundations of Austrian foreign policy and, beyond that, a key element of national identity. Public support for neutrality remains high. However, it is the responsibility of policymakers to shape it and adapt it to the changing times. Just as a reinterpretation of neutrality once enabled Austria's accession to the United Nations, today neutrality must be adjusted to reflect the sovereignty pooled within the EU and the security threats facing Europe.

Austria's foreign policy is closely intertwined with the foreign policies of the EU and other EU member states. The same applies, even more strongly, to economic policy, and increasingly to security and defence policy. It is not only sovereign states that must be defended, but also the sovereignty pooled within the EU. Violations of the territorial integrity of Poland or Estonia by Russian drones, for example, target not only those specific EU member states but the EU as a whole. The same is true for nuclear threats as well as for hybrid warfare.

Another relevant aspect of Austria's identity is cosmopolitan in nature. Austria has repeatedly distinguished itself as a peacemaker, mediator, and facilitator, whether through peacekeeping missions under the UN or through advancing international rule of law. Time and again, Austria has successfully contributed to shaping the international order.

International Order in the national interest

Austria's foreign and security policy serves its national interests, from economic interests to the defence of territorial integrity. The latter is not only a matter of state *raison d'être* but also a legal obligation under international law. Neutral states must be able to defend their territory independently. In this sense, the goal of Austrian foreign policy is *raison d'état*. Richelieu, however, also pointed to *raison de système*. It is therefore not only in Austria's interest to pursue the country's short-term, utilitarian welfare. Rather, Austria seeks to promote an international order in which the rule of law prevails over the use of military force.

The international rule of law is of critical importance, particularly for states like Austria. Only with it is there a chance that great powers can be restrained in their (military) exercise of power. Accordingly, multilateralism is almost embedded in the DNA of Austrian foreign policy. At present, however, it is undoubtedly in a veritable crisis, yet this does not change Austria's interest in upholding multilateralism during this period of upheaval.

Issue of capabilities

Austria must, together with the EU and its member states, develop further capabilities in at least five areas in order to safeguard its foreign policy interests. First, military national defence must be able to protect Austria's territorial integrity. This requires adequate military equipment, including new digital technologies, as well as societal support for the Austrian Armed Forces. Second, Austria needs civil-military capacities to protect its critical infrastructure and counter hybrid attacks aimed at polarising society and driving a wedge between Austria

and the EU. Here too, it is essential that the population supports the measures being implemented.

Third, from an economic perspective, Austria and Europe must unleash innovative potential to avoid falling further behind internationally. Advances in areas such as quantum computing, artificial general intelligence, or even artificial superintelligence could fundamentally transform people's lives. Understanding and anticipating how innovations can be applied for political and military purposes must therefore be sharpened. Fourth, the regulation of new technologies has diplomatic relevance. This requires specialists in emerging fields, such as tech diplomacy, to be trained or further educated. Finally, fifth, expertise in scientific and technical fields is essential. Universities, think tanks, and research institutes thus form a critical part of the infrastructure for effective foreign and security policy in the age of innovation.

In lieu of a summary: a question of consensus

Strategy papers risk languishing in drawers if they are not backed by the broadest possible consensus. Such a broad consensus can ensure that a country stays on course even when the waves of world politics crash harshly against its ship. In particular, an overarching strategy that goes beyond sector-specific policy strategies requires such a broad consensus. Its outlines should be clearly identifiable, providing a foundation on which a public debate can be built.

Key messages

- Austria operates in an environment of profound change, shaped by technological upheavals, a weakened global order, and a resurgence of geopolitical thinking.
- Neutrality remains a core part of Austria's identity but must be interpreted in a modern context, considering EU-level sovereignty and emerging threats.
- International rule of law and multilateralism form the heart of Austria's interests and are essential for the security of small states.
- To act effectively, Austria requires greater military, civilian, technological, and diplomatic capabilities, supported by broad political consensus.



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Between War and Peace

Russia's hybrid warfare in Europe

Elisabeth Hoffberger-Pippan

The invasion of Polish airspace by at least 19 Russian drones on the night of 9 to 10 September 2025 can undoubtedly be described as a decisive security event for Europe. The intrusion into NATO airspace is one in a series of hybrid operations undertaken by Russia to restore its geopolitical supremacy and implement its imperialist plans. The debate on hybrid warfare also has a gender dimension, as misogynistic sentiments are deliberately stirred up to support pro-Russia voters in Western democracies.

There is still no universally accepted definition of the term “hybrid warfare”, even though it has been in common use since the 1990s. It was not until James N. Mattis and Frank Hoffman published an article in 2005 that the term hybrid warfare was used for the first time in the same way in which it is understood today. Mattis and Hoffman assumed that in the future, i.e. today, hostile states would use a combi-

nation of various techniques and tactics in the grey zone between war and peace. These would extend to various domains, including civil and social, but also military.

Russia itself does not use the term “hybrid warfare”. However, an article published in 2016 by the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, is considered the main source for understanding Russian hybrid warfare, even though the terms “hybrid warfare” and “hybrid operation” do not appear once in the text.

Hybrid warfare

In order to understand the challenges facing Austria in particular, it is worth taking a look at the Austrian Security Strategy. It then becomes clear that Austria must prepare itself above all for the increased risk of a direct military confrontation between Russia and a NATO member state. The exact legal and political classification of such a confrontation could prove difficult, as demonstrated by the intrusion of Russian drones into Polish airspace.

Shortly after this incident, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) Alexis G. Grynkewich launched Operation Eastern Sentry, clearly condemning Russia as the perpetrator of the attack. However, during a visit by Polish President Karol Nawrocki to the USA, US President Donald Trump expressed doubts that Russia had committed this incursion intentionally. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio also expressed similar doubts. This is because Russian Defence Minister Andrey Belousov claimed that Russia was not responsible for this attack.

Although both the NATO Secretary General and the SACEUR were quick to condemn Russia’s actions, statements by both the US President and the Secretary of State reveal the potential of hybrid warfare. Hybrid actions which always occur in a politically and often legally grey area can lead to differences in foreign policy perspectives and even to incoherence in foreign policy. Ultimately, they could undermine NATO’s credibility and deterrence potential.

Following another incursion by Russia on 22 September 2025, this time into Estonian airspace, Estonia convened an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council. During this meeting, however, the US Ambassador to the UN, Mike Waltz, emphasised that the US would defend every inch of NATO territory. Whether this will really be the case cannot be answered conclusively, particularly in view of current domestic political developments in the US. It will therefore be all the more important for European states to demonstrate greater unity in the future, thereby increasing their military independence from the US. In light of these developments, Austria should also actively work to strengthen the European strategic autonomy within the framework of its constitutional possibilities. This would help prepare Europe for a potential withdrawal of US support while simultaneously strengthening efforts to counter Russian hybrid warfare.

Austria's response to hybrid warfare

The incursion of Russian drones into NATO airspace clearly shows that adequate, comprehensive and cost-effective air defence is essential. Austria therefore intends to continue participating in the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI). While there has been much discussion about the procurement of the air defence systems "IRIS-T SLM" and, at least in Germany, of the "Arrow 3", the need for cost-efficient counter-drone systems is now likely to become more prominent among political decision makers.

Another issue in the context of hybrid warfare is the dependence on fossil fuels. Although Austria stopped importing gas directly from Russia via the Transgas pipeline in 2025, gas deliveries from Slovakia are still possible, some of which are in turn sourced from Russia. The European Commission has already announced its intention to achieve full independence from Russian gas by 2028. However, crude oil supplies also pose a challenge; although Austria does not purchase crude oil directly from Russia, its current source of supply, Kazakhstan, delivers it via pipelines that run largely through Russian territory. Here, too, there is a risk that Russia could profit financially from oil deliveries to Europe and retain a political power lever that it might exploit as a part of its hybrid warfare if necessary.

The gender dimension of hybrid warfare

During the 2016 US election campaign between Donald Trump and his opponent Hillary Clinton, in particular, it was possible to observe how misogynistic narratives were fuelled on social networks by Russian and to some extent Chinese bots in order to undermine the competence and credibility of the female candidate. Russia pursues an anti-feminist foreign policy with which it also aims to mobilise pro-Russian segments of the population of Western countries. This not only leads to further polarisation within democratic societies, but also dilutes awareness of the current threat landscape.

It is therefore all the more important to take action against the denigration and discrimination of women within European society as a whole, especially in the context of election campaigns. Furthermore, social media platforms should also be obliged to take much stronger action against disinformation and misogynistic comments. This could help to prevent President Putin from gaining additional voter support in Europe.

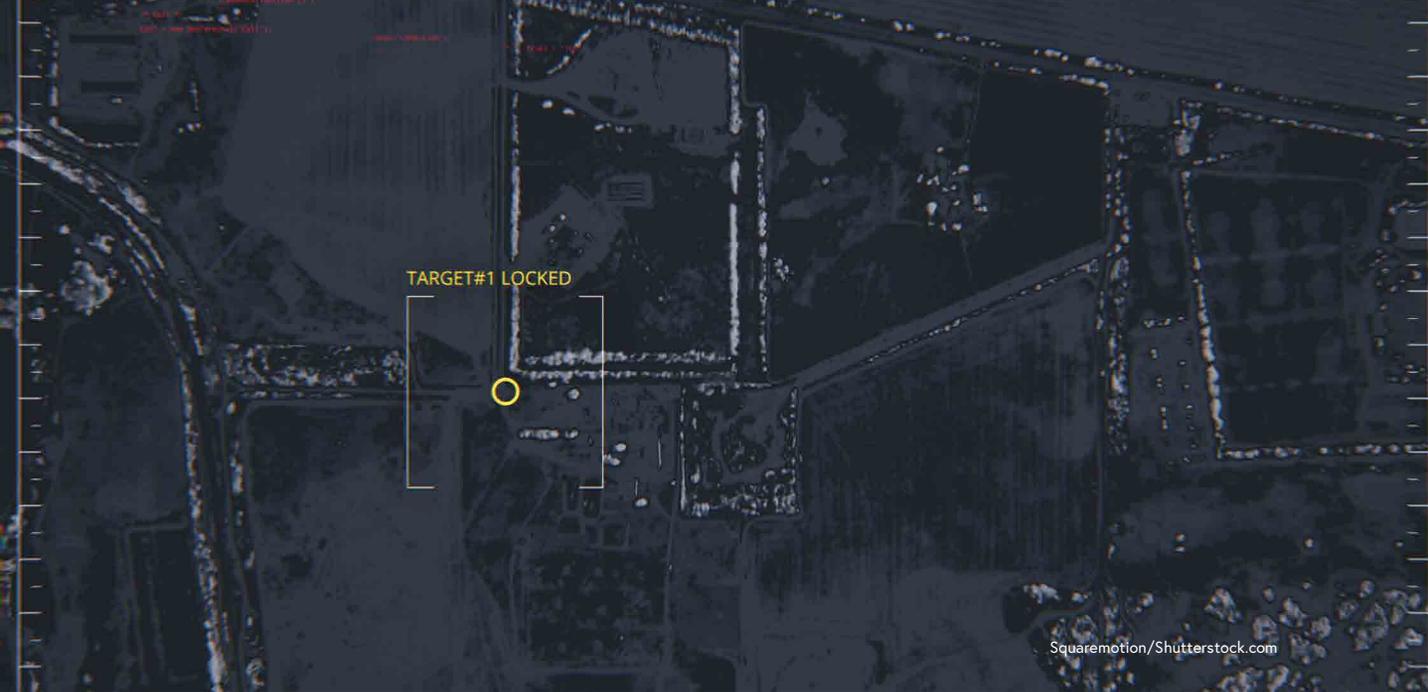
Outlook

Although the concept of hybrid warfare is difficult to grasp, the term helps decision-makers to better understand the complexity and intricacy of politically relevant actions in the grey zone between the civil and the military component. The promotion of European strategic autonomy, participation in ESSI, and the procurement and development of high-tech drone defence systems appear to be important steps in this regard. Austria has already reduced its dependence on Russian gas, although the supply of oil from Kazakhstan is problematic due to the pipeline running largely through Russian territory.

Austria should therefore continue to seek to source crude oil from alternative sources and also import gas primarily from countries that are not dependent on Russian gas imports. The fact that hybrid warfare raises not only military or economic issues, but above all democratic and gender-specific issues, is demonstrated not least by Russia's influence on the 2016 US election campaign. In the fight against hybrid warfare, it is therefore urgently necessary to pay sufficient attention to the gender dimension, which is known to manifest itself in a wide variety of areas of life.

Key messages

- Russia is deliberately using hybrid warfare to restore its geopolitical dominance and to destabilise Western democracies.
- The incursion of Russian drones into Polish and Estonian airspace demonstrates the difficulty of legal and political responses to actions in the grey zone between war and peace.
- Hybrid warfare aims to promote discord within NATO and to weaken its deterrence potential.
- Austria should deepen its participation in the European Sky Shield Initiative and advance with the development of cost-effective drone defence systems.
- Energy dependencies – particularly on oil and gas – remain a security risk that Russia can use as an instrument of power.
- The gender dimension of hybrid warfare, for example through anti-feminist narratives in election campaigns, calls for social and regulatory countermeasures in Europe.



Foreign Military Intelligence Services in focus

Reinhard Ruckenstein

The unstable security situation in the European neighbourhood requires both NATO and the EU to pay closer attention to military defence. The armament and defence efforts of Austria and its neighbouring countries thus represent particularly attractive targets for foreign military intelligence services. To this end, civilians are increasingly being recruited for individual intelligence-gathering activities via digital channels, often without receiving any formal training. The capabilities of Austrian counter-intelligence must therefore be fully aligned with the challenges posed by this new era of intelligence services.

The Austrian Armed Forces as a target for foreign intelligence services

The erosion of the rules-based international order, coupled with interest-driven politics, is increasingly leading to an era of systemic competition. Against this backdrop, military intelligence services are becoming increasingly important as instruments for asserting interests. A key factor in the competition for supremacy is intelligence gathering, which ultimately always serves the purpose of enabling actions to an adversary's disadvantage. These actions can be both non-kinetic (e.g. espionage or disinformation campaigns) and kinetic in nature (acts of sabotage or targeted killings).

Especially in times of conflict or war, military intelligence services focus increasingly on information tactical and operational value. This means that military technologies and their application, research and development, procedures, but also certain functionalities are subject to increased reconnaissance interest. Austria and the Austrian Armed Forces (AAF) are also subject to this change. With its Development Plan 2032+, the AAF have entered a phase of rearmament and upgrading, which will see the arrival of a large number of modern armaments technologies and goods, many of which are also used by NATO countries, in the coming years.

Human sources are *en vogue*

Just like the armed forces, intelligence services also strive for constant modernisation. Modern technologies open up new and better opportunities for information gathering. Although technical methods of information gathering are an integral part of foreign military intelligence, gathering information from human sources remains as important as ever, as information is always context-dependent and therefore requires interpretation.

Foreign military intelligence services will therefore continue to disguise their personnel as researchers, journalists, etc., or deploy them as so-called “illegals” in the target country, completely concealing their true identity and origin. In Austria, they are predominantly deployed under diplomatic cover. In the case of this type of cover, they particularly

benefit from the strong presence of international organisations and the respective national missions in Austria.

Non-professionalisation as a trend?

In Europe, Russian intelligence services are increasingly relying on civilians recruited digitally to carry out their missions. Unlike agents, however, these individuals receive no training. Their missions range from simple tasks such as carrying out socially polarising actions to spying on military support for Ukraine to specific acts of sabotage. Due to the resulting difficulty in attribution and credible deniability, together with the large number of Russian intelligence officers expelled from Europe in recent years, this trend towards non-professionalisation of intelligence service activities will continue in 2026.

Given the success of this method, it can be expected to be imitated by other intelligence services. It is therefore clear that foreign intelligence services are using all available means and methods and are sometimes very creative in developing new ones. This presents Austrian intelligence services with challenges that will have to be met with equally adapted methods backed by an appropriate legal basis.

A turning point in intelligence affairs?

Europe has embarked on a sustained path toward rearmament, armament and strengthened defence capabilities. At the same time, the security situation in the EU's neighbourhood remains tense and military intelligence activities will remain at a high level – even if the war in Ukraine comes to an end. As a result, the intelligence service threat to Austria will remain unchanged in 2026, but may intensify if Austria increases its military engagement for Ukraine or NATO.

The high rate of innovation in intelligence and military threats will remain, and this must be taken into account legislatively, methodologically and technically. At the same time, the penalties for foreign intelligence operations in Austria lag behind those in other European countries, thereby limiting their deterrent effect. Austria will therefore remain an important hub and safe haven for foreign intelligence services.

Key messages

- The Austrian Armed Forces are becoming the focus of foreign intelligence services, right down to the tactical level.
- The use of human sources remains highly important.
- The trend towards the non-professionalisation of intelligence service activities will continue.
- The speed of innovation in intelligence threats must be comprehensively addressed.



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Economic National Defence

Thomas Feßl and Sonja Linskeseder

Economic National Defence has been part of Comprehensive National Defence and thus part of the security provision in Austria for over 50 years. It focuses on maintaining economic performance and preventing disruptions to the economy, and consequently on ensuring supply security for the population. Numerous crises since 2020 have highlighted the vulnerability of supply systems. Since then, several initiatives have been launched in Europe to increase the resilience of the economy. In Austria, too, greater attention is once again being paid to Economic National Defence.

In 1975, Comprehensive National Defence (CND) was enshrined in Article 9a of the Austrian Federal Constitutional Act. CND is divided into four areas: Military, Intellectual, Economic and Civil National Defence. Economic National Defence (END) aims to prevent economic disruptions through precautionary measures and to ensure the supply security and performance of the Austrian economy in times of crisis. According to the Federal Ministries Act, the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs, Energy and Tourism is responsible for coordinating END.

Objectives of Economic National Defence

One objective of Economic National Defence in its modern interpretation is to minimise extra-European dependencies, to strengthen the security and diversity of supply chains, and to increase national economic and technological resilience. The scope of END is therefore very broad and basically includes any situation in which goods or services become scarce. This includes ensuring the supply of essential goods to the population, guaranteeing currency stability and providing the material resources necessary for defence. In addition, there are measures to secure jobs and stabilise the labour market, as well as to maintain social peace and cohesion.

The specific tasks of Economic National Defence include maintaining international trade, ensuring the supply of raw materials and basic commodities, and securing the supply of cash. This also includes a reliable supply of energy and fuel, the organisation of waste and sewage disposal, and the timely procurement and secure provision of goods and data – including those necessary for defence. An essential legal basis for Economic National Defence is ensured by the economic control legislation, which is intended to secure supplies for the population in the event of foreseeable market disruptions. These include the Supply Security Act and the Energy Control Act, both of which fall within the remit of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs, Energy and Tourism. In addition, the Food Management Act falls within the remit of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management (BMLUK).

National and international initiatives

The experience gained from the crises in recent years highlights both the importance of resilience and the vulnerability of supply systems: examples include the COVID-19 pandemic, impending energy shortages and supply chain disruptions. For example, the export ban on medical protective equipment from Germany led to shortages in the medical sector in Austria. This clearly demonstrated the dependence on international supply chains and the need for national production capacities. In response to the developments since 2020, several initiatives have

been launched at both national and European level to revitalise strategic resilience and CND.

At the European level, measures are being developed and implemented to ensure a self-sufficient supply for at least 72 hours and the resilience of critical facilities. These include strategy papers such as the Preparedness Union Strategy and the EU Stockpiling Strategy, as well as the EU Directive on the Resilience of Critical Entities (RCE). The Austrian Federal Crisis Security Act (B-KSG), which has been in force since 2024, provides for the creation of a continuous, strategic overall situation assessment. This goes hand in hand with the need to record the situation reports relevant to CND.

Inter-ministerial cooperation

In addition to the Federal Crisis Security Act, the Austrian Programme for Critical Infrastructure Protection (APCIP) also aims to increase Austria's resilience. This programme involves companies in the protection of critical infrastructures on a voluntary basis, thereby contributing to a higher national supply security. The Federal Act on Ensuring a High Level of Resilience of Critical Entities (RKEG) also implemented the requirements of the European RCE Directive and, for the first time, standardised legal requirements for increasing resilience and protecting critical facilities in Austria.

Both the Austrian Programme for Critical Infrastructure Protection and the Federal Act on Ensuring a High Level of Resilience of Critical Entities thus contribute to achieving END objectives. However, both fall within the remit of the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI), therefore requiring inter-ministerial cooperation between the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs, Energy and Tourism and the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Climate and Environmental Protection, Regions and Water Management. Also of particular note is the physical protection of selected critical infrastructures that is ensured by the police and, if assistance is required, also by the Austrian Armed Forces.

Challenges for companies

It is also in the interest of companies themselves, however, to remain resilient and capable of acting in times of crisis and to be able to react flexibly to disruptions. This necessitates crisis and emergency plans, a flexible organisational structure and secure IT systems. Wherever possible, attention should also be paid to maintaining stable supply chains and alongside proactive financial planning. This is not only economically significant for business, but also serves as a crucial element of economic national defence. In order to further implement national and international requirements, it will be essential that companies do not suffer any disadvantages as a result of clear and practical regulatory framework and that their contribution to Economic National Defence does not distort competition.

Key messages

- Economic National Defence as part of Comprehensive National Defence of the country has been established in Austria for over 50 years.
- The goal of Economic National Defence in its modern interpretation is to reduce extra-European dependencies, to strengthen the security of supply chains, and to increase resilience in Austria.
- Initiatives to strengthen resilience have been launched across Europe regarding the response to crises since 2020.
- The protection of critical facilities supports Economic National Defence and necessitates inter-ministerial cooperation.
- Measures to strengthen resilience in companies should be implemented, while ensuring they do not create competitive distortions.



Civil National Defence

Caught between yesterday and today

Josef Farda

Civil National Defence was established in the 1960s to protect the population and ensure the state's capacity to act. Over the past forty years, security-policy and societal developments have fundamentally changed the environment. Given the increasingly dynamic and hybrid threat landscape, the role of Civil National Defence needs to be reconsidered and oriented more towards the future.

In 1961, a decision by the Council of Ministers set the first points of reference for Comprehensive National Defence (CND). This comprises military, economic, intellectual and civil components. This concept was further developed in the following years, enshrined in the Federal Constitution in 1975 and finally culminated in the National Defence Plan of 1985. A large number of tasks for Civil National Defence were summarised there in four chapters:

- protection of the population (civil defence),
- ensuring the functioning of state organs and other important institutions,
- protection of cultural assets, and
- ensuring the personnel requirements for Civil National Defence.

These definitions are still formally valid today. In summary, Civil National Defence pursues the protection of the population and the functioning of state organs and other important institutions that would probably be referred to today as the critical infrastructure. Furthermore, from a public perspective, civil defence is understood to mean preparation for operations, the warning and alarm system, the construction of public shelters and other measures, such as human or veterinary medical care or radiation protection measures. For private individuals, the implementation of self-protection measures and the construction of private shelters are important.

The distinction made by the author between public and private measures highlights one peculiarity of Civil National Defence: in contrast to other spheres of Comprehensive National Defence, the population plays an active role in Civil National Defence, as every individual is responsible for taking preventive and protective measures. This involvement goes beyond receiving information or participating in an organisation.

Undefined competences

Responsibility for Civil National Defence has not been clearly defined until today. Responsibility for disaster management lies with the federal states. As early as 1985, however, the federal states pointed out that the nine disaster management acts were not applicable in the cases covered by Comprehensive National Defence (crisis, neutrality and defence). At the same time, the fire brigades and rescue organisations organised at provincial level were recognised as suitable instruments for Civil National Defence. The 15a Agreement recommended in the National Defence Plan on the deployment of these forces by the federal government was never concluded.

Independently of Comprehensive National Defence, a state crisis management system was developed, which was reorganised in 2004 as the

State Crisis and Disaster Management System (SKKM). Within this framework, Austria-wide standards were established, *inter alia*, for disaster management and cooperation between authorities and emergency services. Operational responsibilities remain clearly with the federal states.

Inclusive civil protection

Crisis situations pose particular challenges for people with disabilities (PwD). For example, many communication channels and messages are not freely accessible, and not every communicated measure can be implemented equally by everyone. This affects both individuals and entire institutions, such as care facilities. The National Action Plan on Disability 2022–2030 therefore provides for concrete measures for the inclusion of PwD.

Since the 2024 floods in particular, the authorities have been working intensively on implementing inclusive disaster control. In 2025, for example, the Ministry of Social Affairs held various workshops on this topic together with the Austrian Disability Council, the Ministry of the Interior and other stakeholders. Since 2025, the Austrian Civil Protection Association has also been directly involving the Austrian Disability Council in the development of individual preparedness and conduct guidelines. These processes allow conclusions to be drawn for Civil National Defence.

Hybrid threats

Resilient communication by the organisations responsible for disaster management is essential – both in preparing for and coping with disasters or military conflicts. Hybrid threats therefore pose a significant potential danger also to Civil National Defence. Disruption of communications (whether hardware or software) restricts the ability to assess the situation and potentially reduces the range of command.

Just like the communication between public authorities, communication between authorities and the population can also be the target of hybrid attacks. Whether it be deliberate disruption of supply chains, infrastructure failures or armed conflicts, it can be assumed that the

information environment will continue to gain importance as a sphere of conflict in the future and that attacks will particularly target the civilian population. Even today, false alarms pose a problem for emergency services, authorities and the civilian population when dealing with emergency situations. In some countries, specialised teams have already been established to monitor and analyse information circulating on the internet during an incident. This allows disinformation to be countered quickly. In Austria, personnel are already being deployed for this purpose and a nationwide coordination is being considered.

Conclusion

The terminology and content of Civil National Defence have not been updated since 1985. While its institutions (committees and working groups) no longer exist today, disaster management in Austria has become more professional and created its own formats for cooperation. It is up to the decision-makers to now redefine the significance and objectives of Civil National Defence in the light of the challenges that have changed since the end of the Cold War, and to derive procedures and responsibilities from this.

Key messages

- Civil National Defence aims to protect the population and ensure the functioning of state institutions.
- Since the floods in 2024 in particular, the authorities have been working intensively on implementing inclusive civil protection.
- Resilient communication between the organisations responsible for disaster management is essential.
- Just like the communication between public authorities, communication between authorities and the population can also be the target of hybrid attacks.



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Intellectual National Defence

Democracy education as an opportunity for greater social cohesion

Anna Katharina Obenhuber and Jan Sisko

Schools play an essential role in strengthening democracy and securing peace. Both the democratisation of the school as an institution and the examination of democratic processes in school and extracurricular education make self-efficacy tangible and contribute to the communication of democratic values and thus to social cohesion. This is an essential foundation for Intellectual National Defence.

Strengthening democratic skills and attitudes

Alongside Military, Civil and Economic National Defence, Intellectual National Defence (IND) is part of Comprehensive National Defence (Article 9a of the Federal Constitutional Act). It is a task for society as a whole, in which the interaction of a wide range of actors is essential. However, schools as “socialisation spaces” play a fundamental role in strengthening democratic skills and attitudes in society and in safeguarding peace. In the classroom, IND is inextricably linked to political education, as was already reflected in the first Policy Decree on Political Education and is also evident in the references in the curricula. In addition, other actors such as the Federal Ministry of Defence, the Federal Chancellery and other institutions play an important role.

Democratic structures and opportunities for participation at national and European levels cannot be taken for granted and are under pressure – as clearly demonstrated by current political events, geopolitical threats and studies on the increasing alienation *vis-à-vis* democratically legitimised institutions and constitutionally protected fundamental rights and freedoms. The latest National Education Report also highlights this clearly in its discussion of the development area of “democracy education”.

Under these conditions, IND in the school context aims in particular to engage with security policy issues and Austria’s role in a European and global context, thereby raising awareness of the need to defend democratic values and principles.

Democracy education promotes social cohesion

After all, democracy and democratic participation mean much more than just voting in elections. Both the democratisation of the school as an institution and the examination of democratic processes in school and extracurricular education should enable children and young people to experience democratic participation and self-efficacy. This should also create a sense of belonging, which is a valuable resource in terms of security policy. The measures in the current government programme aim to firmly establish “democracy education” in the school system. This involves the planned introduction of a separate subject in lower

secondary education as well as further measures to establish a democratic school culture. School partnership networks and programmes that enable real encounters with democratic participation and social engagement also play an important role here.

Through joint projects, pupils experience the importance of solidarity and responsibility. They develop empathy, encounter people from different backgrounds and dismantle prejudices. This creates a stronger sense of togetherness. Respectful discussion of different opinions and approaches is also an essential foundation of a liberal and pluralistic democracy. In a current research project of the Austrian Security Research Programme (KIRAS), in which the Federal Ministry of Education and the Federal Ministry of Defence participate as project partners, approaches to and challenges and perceptions of IND in the educational context are being researched and future needs identified. The findings from the “SEEDS – Security Education by Empowering Democratic Strength” project will also form the basis for measures to strengthen education in democracy.

Digital political education in the age of hybrid threats

Changes in the availability and consumption of information are creating broader opportunities for stakeholders of all kinds to influence public opinion, particularly among, younger people. Social media and artificial intelligence follow a different logic than traditional media. This often makes it difficult for the state to control and restrict content in terms of its educational suitability for certain age groups.

This highlights the need to raise awareness among pupils about disinformation campaigns and other digital threats to the constitutional order and democratic system. The many challenges associated with this are already being addressed at various levels of political education. The Council of Europe, in particular, recently launched several initiatives to put digital political education and measures against online hate on the agenda in its member states. 2025 was declared the Year of Digital Political Education, and the “Zentrum polis”, the contact point for political education in schools commissioned by the Ministry of Education, regularly implements programmes for schools.

In addition, the school subject “digital literacy” and the associated media education aim to enable children and young people to use digital media responsibly. The links between political education and the use of media will also play an important role in the new school subject “democracy education”.

Key messages

- Political education and democracy education contribute significantly to Intellectual National Defence.
- Curricula offer numerous points of reference for Intellectual National Defence.
- Democratic skills and attitudes must be made tangible and strengthened in schools.
- Democracy education in schools promotes social cohesion in society.
- Digital political education is of central importance in the face of hybrid threats.



BMLV/Daniel Trippolt

The “Preparedness Union Strategy” and Comprehensive National Defence

European preparation for crises – but how?

Matthias Resch

Over the past 15 years, Europe has been consistently shaped by conflicts from a security policy standpoint. These conflicts have emerged in various forms and types with unpredictable timelines. In response, the EU is attempting to address these issues jointly and proactively for the future.

Security and socio-political responsibility

After the newly formed EU Commission took office in 2024, Finnish Special Adviser Sauli Niinistö published the “Niinistö Report” in the autumn of the same year. Its aim was to prepare the EU for the security policy challenges ahead. The goal was to develop comprehensive and active crisis prevention measures coordinated by the EU, covering both civil and military aspects of comprehensive prevention.

Based on this report, the European Commission drew up the EU Preparedness Union Strategy in March 2025. The strategy defines disasters, hybrid threats posed by various actors and geopolitical crises (including attacks on EU member states) as threats. The strategy is to be implemented through a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach. Its seven areas are:

- strengthening anticipatory capabilities through comprehensive risk and threat analysis at EU level,
- Protection of critical infrastructures such as hospitals, schools, transport and telecommunications, as well as stockpiling,
- self-sufficiency,
- public-private preparedness measures,
- enhanced civil-military cooperation,
- improved crisis response, also at EU level, and
- resilience through partnerships, e.g. with NATO.

For Austria, this means that existing national measures in these areas have been given additional conceptual support. It should be noted, however, that concepts presented by the European Commission have no legal character and are therefore not binding.

European alignment of national concepts

The EU is working intensively to prepare the member states for crises of all kinds. To this end, extensive cooperation is already taking place in numerous areas. While the EU has no primary legal competence in the field of defence, the division of responsibilities and tasks between the EU and the member states has also been settled in secondary legislation, particularly in the area of internal security. Conceptually, the term

“resilience” mainly refers to threats and dangers that do not concern defence. So what does this mean for the realisation of the “Preparedness Union”?

The Comprehensive National Defence (CND) of the Republic of Austria is enshrined in the Federal Constitution. Article 9a defines its purpose as follows: “[..] to safeguard Austria’s independence from external influence and to preserve the inviolability and unity of its federal territory [..] to safeguard and defend it against violent attacks from outside.” It further stipulates that CND encompasses Military, Intellectual, Civil and Economic National Defence. The purpose of CND itself is therefore the military defence of the country, which is achieved at the national level through the instrument of these four sub-areas.

Since the establishment of the Federal Crisis Security Act (FCSA), the relevant committees have also been enshrined in law. With the tasks it contains (Section 5) “for the overall strategic advising of the federal government on issues of crisis prevention, crisis management, Comprehensive National Defence, national security and state resilience”, the FCSA forms the national link to the “Preparedness Union”.

The proposals put forward by the EU will mainly be implemented in those areas of CND that are not directly related to Military National Defence. Nevertheless, due to the “hybridity” of modern warfare, there is an overlap with core military issues, and separating threats according to the pillar-like structure of CND is illusory. Building resilience against crisis-related threats affects all areas of society and the state: it encompasses a broad spectrum of measures, ranging from raising awareness among the population (Intellectual National Defence) through individual and organised crisis preparedness within the framework of civil protection (Civil National Defence) and the stockpiling of goods (Economic National Defence).

The question of the connectivity of national measures with EU concepts therefore focuses on two key points: Firstly, it should be noted that there cannot be standardised and harmonised processes for resilience across the EU and its member states, since competences lie at national level and the design of crisis management mechanisms is regulated differently in each state. Secondly, the respective national security policy characteristics of each state must be taken into account,

such as membership in alliances, which, like the EU, may also provide thematic guidelines on resilience. The question of connectivity is therefore not solely related to the EU.

Consequently, this means that Austria should take into account the guidelines of the EU's "Readiness Union" within the framework of its national crisis response mechanism. The better any cooperation – or at least the exchange of information with other states – is implemented, the better the response to crises will be. However, the starting point for actual cooperation is that the crisis at hand is of such a nature that there is an advantage in dealing with it jointly. In other words: cooperation must not be an end in itself.

Conclusions

The holistic Austrian approach of CND already encompasses the whole-of-society and whole-of-government concepts proposed by the EU. The FCSA provides the procedural framework for comprehensive crisis prevention. It is therefore important to ensure that existing national processes, from state crisis and disaster management (SCDM) to civil protection and military national defence, are compatible with the EU's new conceptual ideas.

Specific existing national measures, such as the newly implemented national situation assessment within the framework of the FCSA, fit seamlessly into the above-mentioned "comprehensive risk and threat analyses at EU level". Existing national cooperation at bilateral, multilateral and international level can also be contextualised within the EU's "resilience through partnerships" area.

Key messages

- The “EU Strategy for a Preparedness Union” developed by the European Commission in 2025, aims to prepare member states for future threats by means of whole-of-society and whole-of-government.
- The strategy covers seven specific areas, ranging from crisis anticipation to coordinated crisis response, involving various levels of administration, armed forces and security forces, as well as civil society.
- In Austria, a corresponding structure already exists in the form of Comprehensive National Defence with its four sub-areas, which is enshrined in the Federal Constitution. The FCSA provides the procedural framework for comprehensive crisis prevention.
- The aim is to make the existing mechanisms of Comprehensive National Defence compatible with the EU concepts.



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6G without Space?

Austria's orbital dependence

Robert Toni Pfaffenbauer

Space has become an indispensable foundation for modern societies and security systems. Space services enable global connectivity, support critical infrastructures and create redundancies for communication, navigation and terrestrial observation. With the transition to 6G and highly networked applications, dependence on satellite-based services and thus vulnerability are also growing. Geopolitical rivalries are increasingly being played out in space, which has become an arena for security policy conflicts. States are therefore faced with the task of ensuring resilience, capacity to act and technological sovereignty in their use of space-based services in order to guarantee stability and crisis resistance.

In the digitally connected world of the 21st century, space has become an essential infrastructure for modern states. The transition to sixth-generation mobile communications (6G) will enable far-reaching

connectivity of previously separate systems in real time. Applications such as the Internet of Things, autonomous mobility, AI-based logistics and virtual reality environments require global network connections with minimum latency, high data rates and maximum reliability. These requirements can no longer be met without satellite-based components. They complement terrestrial networks, ensure connectivity in remote regions and enable flexible response capability.

Space is therefore already a key pillar of the digital infrastructure. Its benefits become particularly evident in security-related situations. In the event of disasters, terrestrial observation, independent communication and precise navigation are indispensable. Satellite services are also central to military operations, for example for situation awareness, secure communication, navigation and time services. Against the backdrop of increasing geopolitical rivalries, which can also manifest themselves in the form of sabotage of fibre optic cable connections, space infrastructure can provide valuable redundancy. Since a large part of transcontinental data traffic runs via submarine cables, which are susceptible to damage from anchors or sabotage, entire regions could be cut off from global communications. Such damage can take weeks to repair. In such cases, satellite communications provide important redundancy that can quickly take over critical functions in a crisis.

National vulnerabilities

However, the heavy reliance on space services for these capabilities creates new vulnerabilities. Satellite-based infrastructures are increasingly becoming attractive targets for hybrid warfare. Many global navigation satellite systems are particularly vulnerable, as they are largely outdated and particularly easy to disrupt or manipulate. Such attacks can have a massive impact on military capabilities, but also on the daily lives of the population. This is exemplified by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, in the course of which targeted attacks on the energy infrastructure are putting the resilience of the civilian population to the test.

Similar effects can be achieved by disrupting space services, which would not necessarily require cruise missiles, ballistic missiles or drones. Cyber operations would often suffice. Disruptions to basic social services could conceivably increase domestic political pressure on

governments to end military confrontations as quickly as possible or to prevent them altogether. Attacks on space infrastructure thus become an instrument of strategic influence that is used below the threshold of conventional force but can nevertheless have a significant socio-political impact.

Growing challenges

In addition, there are new opportunities for covert influence, such as those known from cyberspace. Reversible effects, such as the temporary blinding of optical sensors by lasers or the disruption of communication links with directed microwaves, can be technically detected in some cases, but are nevertheless difficult to attribute unequivocally to a specific actor. As a result, space is increasingly becoming a theatre for hybrid conflicts. In addition to physical interference, this spectrum also includes the use of satellite-based services for disinformation, reconnaissance, surveillance and cyber operations against space infrastructure.

The growing dependence on commercial capacities poses a particular challenge. States that do not have their own space programmes must rely on the systems and services of private providers or allied states in an emergency. Decisions on access, bandwidth prioritisation or control of such systems are then not necessarily made in accordance with national security interests, but are based on commercial or geopolitical considerations.

At the same time, there is a lack of clear international traffic management in orbit. The competition between major space powers and between state and private actors is leading to increasingly dense occupation of strategically important positions in near-Earth space. International agreements are often insufficient. The increasing geopolitical competition also makes binding cooperation more difficult. This not only increases the risk of collisions in orbit, but also the potential for escalation if, for example, approaches are perceived as a threat.

Implications

These developments undermine political, economic and technological sovereignty. States that cannot develop access to space themselves remain dependent in key areas. This affects security preparedness as well as economic and technological competitiveness and the ability to manage crises independently. This is not about an abstract vision of complete self-sufficiency, but about strategically maximising and safeguarding the capacity to act. Societies and institutions must recognise that space-based services are neither a given nor are they invulnerable. Their failure, disruption or withdrawal must be considered as part of Comprehensive National Defence and security preparedness at the technical, organisational and cognitive levels.

Innovative concepts and new technologies are becoming increasingly important in security policy in order to overcome these challenges. “Responsive Space”, for example, aims to quickly provide additional satellite capacity in the event of failures or threats. Satellite-based quantum communication will also play a central role in the future thanks to secure encryption. Space is therefore not merely a transmission medium, but an integral part of national resilience. An active role as a space actor is a prerequisite for sovereign crisis management and the preservation of political influence.

Key messages

- Satellite-based systems are indispensable for global connectivity, communication, navigation and terrestrial observation – and thus for the resilience of modern societies.
- 6G, AI, autonomous systems and global data streams are increasing the dependence on space-based services, which in turn increases vulnerability.
- Attacks on satellites and infrastructure can target military as well as civilian areas, thus having a major political and social impact.
- Increasing competition between states and private actors in space, space debris and the lack of international rules exacerbate escalation and security risks.
- In the European context, states must develop redundancies, protective measures and sovereign capabilities to ensure their capacity to act and to maintain stability in crises.



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Division as a Strategy

Polarisation and radicalisation as a security-policy challenge

Roman Schuh

Social polarisation and radicalisation are key risk factors in Europe's security policy environment, and increasingly so for smaller EU member states such as Austria. These developments are closely linked to geopolitical, social and technological dynamics that will continue to intensify in the coming years. Particular attention should be paid to targeted influence of external actors, the fragmentation of public opinion through social media, and the increasing instrumentalisation of gender and sexuality in extremist narratives.

Polarisation is not merely a symptom of social change, it is a tool used strategically by, for example, foreign disinformation campaigns or domestic extremist movements that deliberately sow mistrust. Issues such as migration, gender equality, sexual identity, and climate and en-

ergy policy are particularly polarising. These lines of conflict cut across population groups and make Europe vulnerable to political instability.

New actors, new frameworks, new narratives

In 2026, radicalisation is expected to become further digitised and individualised. The classic milieus of right-wing extremist or Islamist radicalisation will remain, but new hybrid forms will emerge: for example, conspiracy-ideological groups with religious or identity-political overtones. Women and girls are increasingly becoming active participants in these processes. In the right-wing extremist milieu, they are not only active as passive supporters, but also as multipliers on social media, as ideological bearers of a “traditional image of women” and as key figures in women-centred influencer circles that deliberately combine emotionality and lifestyle with radical content. Islamist extremism is also seeing growing involvement of women – whether as ideological missionaries on the internet, as marriage prospects for jihadists or, in rarer cases, as active perpetrators.

Sexualised violence as a means of propaganda and power

Terrorist groups use sexualised and gender-based violence strategically: as a demonstration of power, for recruitment (e.g. by promising sexual availability) or to dehumanise opponents. In propaganda materials, violence is often explicitly sexualised in order to present dominance and strengthen loyalty within the group.

This instrumentalisation often targets particularly vulnerable groups. These include women in precarious social situations, LGBTQIA+ persons and young people with little attachment to social structures. In Europe, and especially in smaller countries such as Austria, this poses a particular challenge for the justice system, integration policy, schools and social institutions.

While men are attracted in many cases by images of authoritarian masculinity, women are often influenced by other narratives. Right-wing extremist groups increasingly mobilise women through issues such as

child protection, gender criticism, family values or the claimed “over-sexualisation” of society. Islamist groups, on the other hand, promise purity, affiliation and a clear role assignment, which is particularly effective in phases of personal or social disorientation.

Resilience through inclusion and education

The most effective counter-strategy against radicalisation lies not only in restrictive security policy measures, but also in promoting social resilience, especially among marginalised groups who feel disconnected from politics and institutions. Target group-oriented political education, empowerment initiatives for disadvantaged young people, digital media literacy programmes and psychosocial support services are central pillars of sustainable prevention.

A more intersectional approach is particularly recommended for smaller states such as Austria: prevention measures must be socio-spatial, gender-sensitive and oriented towards everyday life, with a focus on early intervention and outreach youth work. The EU can play a key role here as a multiplier and funding body.

The Austrian Armed Forces (AAF) can also contribute to national resilience. In addition to its central function of military national defence, it has particular potential to promote social cohesion by developing and maintaining a strong military culture. Military culture can convey values such as camaraderie, discipline, responsibility and democratic loyalty, thereby acting as an identity-forming counterweight to fragmenting extremist narratives. By making these values visible to the outside world, the AAF help to anchor resilience not only within the armed forces, but also throughout society as a whole. Suitable instruments for developing an inclusive military culture would be education in state and defence policy, the integration of young people into the ready-reserve structure, international cooperation and the full integration of women into the AAF.

Recognise polarisation, prevent radicalisation

Polarisation and radicalisation will remain key risks to social cohesion in Europe in 2026. Particularly threatening are the dynamics that are deliberately orchestrated around gender roles, sexual identity or cultural fears. In a time of growing global tensions and technological acceleration, the challenge for security policy lies not only in responding to violence, but also in recognising and interrupting radicalisation processes at an early stage in both the analogue and digital worlds. For countries such as Austria, it is crucial to have a clear strategy for promoting democracy, digital civil courage and target group-specific prevention work. This is the only way to ensure in the long term that polarisation does not become permanent division – and radicalisation does not become an open threat.

Key messages

- Polarisation is deliberately used as a strategic tool, for example through disinformation or extremist movements, to sow mistrust and deepen social divisions.
- Radicalisation is becoming increasingly digitised and individualised, with new hybrid movements emerging that combine conspiracy ideologies, religion and identity politics.
- Women are playing a growing role in extremist circles, both as ideological multipliers on the internet and as actors who exploit gender and family narratives.
- Sexualised and gender-based violence serves as a propaganda and power tool in terrorist and extremist contexts to create dominance, loyalty and fear.
- Social resilience is created through inclusion, education and military culture, not solely through security policy measures – in particular through early, gender-sensitive prevention work and the promotion of democratic values, for example in the Austrian Armed Forces.



BMLV/Paul Kulec

Marching in step with equality

The Austrian Armed Forces in transition

Alexander Scheidl

A low proportion of women and slow progress in the area of equality pose potential risks to the performance, legitimacy and resilience of the armed forces. Since the Austrian Armed Forces (AAF) opened their doors to women in 1998, various measures have been taken to promote equality, including the Women's Promotion Plan and "voluntary national service" for women, which has been in place since 2023. In the long term, it is clear that genuine equal treatment and a gender-balanced personnel structure are not only socio-political goals, but also central prerequisites for Austria's security and future viability.

Every beginning is difficult

Whether as professional soldiers, in the ready reserve or in the “voluntary national service”, women are now an integral part of the AAF in all areas. However, at around six per cent, their share remains low, showing that the military profession continues to be strongly dominated by men. This poses considerable challenges for the AAF in terms of equal treatment and real implementation of equal opportunities.

When the first women joined the AAF in 1998, this was controversial in many quarters – despite various efforts at the EU level and especially within the United Nations to consistently implement existing equal treatment and equality guidelines in the armed forces. Austria thus followed the Scandinavian example relatively quickly; Scandinavian countries had already opened up access to the military for women at the end of the 1980s.

Despite fundamental social and political support, there were numerous hurdles and challenges from the outset. On the one hand, the infrastructure had to be redesigned, which affected, for example, sanitary facilities and accommodation for both sexes, new clothing had to be procured, and changes had to be made to medical and sports standards. On the other hand, women had to contend with prejudice and discrimination both within the armed forces and at the ministerial level.

One means of combating unequal treatment is the Federal Equal Treatment Act (FETA), which was introduced in 1993. Its aim is to achieve a demographic composition of public service personnel that reflects the population as a whole – in particular, a 50 per cent share of women. This naturally also entails the need to adapt the structural and procedural framework conditions to such a heterogeneous workforce.

In order to achieve these goals in a sustainable manner, a working group on equal treatment issues was set up in the Federal Ministry of Defence in the mid-1990s. To promote the equal treatment of female soldiers in the long term, the introduction of the FETA also made it mandatory to draw up a comprehensive plan for the advancement of women (AW plan), which is revised regularly.

Lack of diversity as a security risk

A lack of diversity and a lack of targeted promotion of women poses a long-term security policy risk. Armed forces that do not reflect the diversity of society run the risk of losing legitimacy, innovative strength and operational adaptability. International comparisons show that mixed teams are more effective and have better communication skills, especially in peacekeeping and crisis operations. Insufficient involvement of women therefore not only means the loss of valuable perspectives and skills, but also a weakening of institutional resilience. Furthermore, a lack of equality undermines the goal of a modern, democratically anchored security architecture. Diversity, on the other hand, strengthens the credibility, efficiency and future viability of the AAF, and thus ultimately also the security of Austria.

This idea underlies all measures to promote women and diversity in the AAF. Last but not least, this is also the reason for numerous personnel planning and management initiatives, such as the preferential admission, recruitment and admission to training courses for female employees with equal qualifications in the Federal Ministry of Defence and the AAF, as enshrined in the AW Plan. In addition to the promotion of women, the FETA also includes the requirement for equal treatment regardless of age, sexuality, origin and ideology – which is essential for anchoring the armed forces at the heart of society.

Women in the AAF as an opportunity

Due to demographic developments and the associated challenges in the personnel situation of the AAF, the inclusion of women offers a potential opportunity to fill the resulting gaps in terms of both quality and quantity. Likewise, a higher proportion of women gives the AAF the opportunity to incorporate different approaches and perspectives into its decision-making. In this way, the inclusion of women contributes to the quality of decision-making.

The inclusion of women is therefore not only a necessity, but must also be seen as an opportunity to attract highly qualified personnel. In this respect, targeted recruitment measures for women are necessary. For example, the MoD is pursuing the goal of facilitating access to the AAF

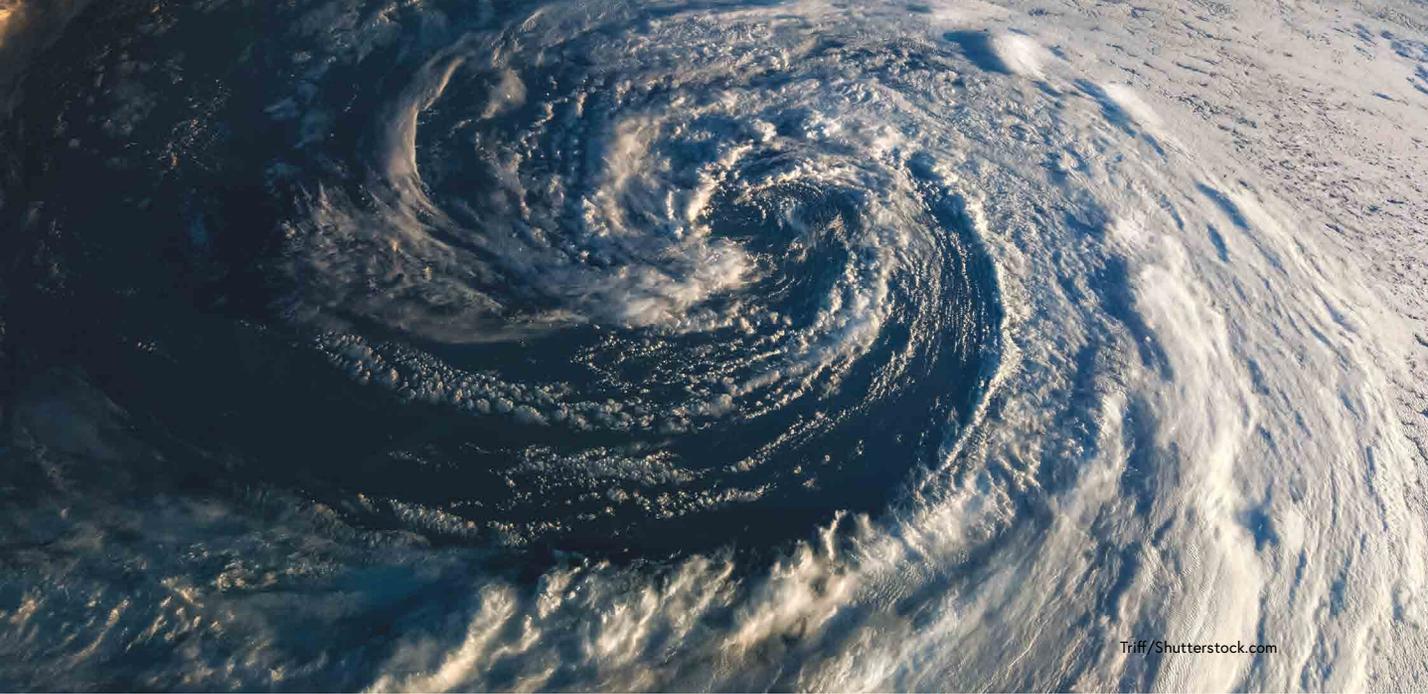
for women, increasing the proportion of women and strengthening the integration of women in all military areas in the long term with the “voluntary national service” for women, which has been in place since April 2023. Initial experiences with this model are seen as thoroughly positive. Other examples of targeted measures aimed at women include the “Girls’ Day”, which aims to inform young women about careers in the AAF and thus spark their interest in becoming soldiers.

The Austrian Armed Forces of tomorrow

The road to complete equality in the AAF is still long. However, numerous initiatives, reforms and structural adjustments show that the Federal Ministry of Defence is actively striving to create modern, equal opportunity and diverse armed forces. Measures such as the AW Plan, “voluntary national service” for women and targeted awareness programmes are initiating a cultural transition aimed at long-term change. The Austrian Armed Forces of tomorrow will increasingly have to be measured by how consistently they combine diversity, equality and professionalism. The sustainable integration of women is not only an expression of social justice, but also a decisive factor for the operational performance and democratic legitimacy of the armed forces. Only if the AAF reflect the diversity of society can they fully meet their security policy responsibilities in the 21st century.

Key messages

- Measures to promote women, raise awareness and implement structural reforms are intended to create a modern, diverse and equal armed forces in the long term.
- Since the opening of the AAF for women in 1998 and the introduction of the “voluntary national service” for women in 2023, important steps have been taken towards integration, but the proportion of women still falls short of the expectations of the Federal Equal Treatment Act.
- A lack of infrastructure, prejudice and discrimination continue to hinder genuine equal opportunities. A lack of diversity in the AAF, however, poses a strategic risk.
- Numerous measures have already been taken to promote the inclusion of women in the AAF. However, the advancement of women remains a nationwide challenge for which numerous measures are also planned in the current government programme.



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Securitisation of Climate Change

Eva Widhalm

Although climate change poses a global security threat, its consequences are increasingly being pushed into the background despite daily disaster reports. Political goals are being watered down, conspiracy theories are being spread in the media, and the security-political consequences are also being suppressed at the geopolitical level. However, armed forces are already integrating the consequences of climate change into their operational and capability planning. The Austrian Armed Forces (AAF) can credibly promote the development of whole-of-society resilience as a central necessity for securing Austria's future capacity to act and defend itself in public discourse.

The protection of the soil, water, ecosystems and biodiversity is the basis for a resilient population and thus a cornerstone of Comprehensive National Defence and the European Preparedness Union Strategy. The Austrian Security Strategy also recognises the protection of resources

as a cross-cutting issue and a security policy area, which represents a challenge for society as a whole due to its impact on all areas of life and politics. The measures provided for in the strategy serve primarily to ensure the security and stability of Austrian society.

According to the second Austrian Status Report on Climate Change, Austria is warming twice as fast as the global average. Without effective climate protection and adaptation measures, annual damage in Austria could rise to as much as EUR 10.8 billion by 2050. In addition to the security policy risks, such as for supply chains, critical infrastructure, water supply, health, agriculture and security of supply, climate change is a fundamental catalyst and threat multiplier that exacerbates and intensifies existing global instabilities, social tensions and political fragility.

Strategic opportunity and multiple dilemmas

Armed forces are already incorporating these developments into military capability and operational planning. The NATO basic assumption is the worst-case scenario, i.e. an increase in the global average temperature of at least 3°C by the end of the century. This would have serious consequences for the military infrastructure, equipment, logistics and, last but not least, the safety and health of soldiers at home and abroad. As a result, European armed forces are facing multiple dilemmas. Russia's aggressive policy requires rapid development of capabilities and an energy transformation to reduce dependencies. At the same time, it is necessary to build autonomy and resilience and adapt to the civilian energy transition. Similarly, the consequences of climate change require the adaptation of infrastructure, equipment and appliance while maintaining or even increasing operational readiness and endurance.

As connectivity and interdependence can lead to disruptions across all sectors, such disruptions threaten power grids, fuel and water pipelines, communication systems and transport routes, which are also used by the armed forces. Thus, the need of the AAF for new technologies, especially new energy and climate technologies, and for equipment adapted to climate change, taking into account the entire life cycle, is not only an ecological necessity but also an operational imperative. At

the same time, it offers a strategic opportunity to promote innovation in the field of military capabilities.

Competition of narratives and disinformation

Environmental and climate protection measures are subject to various, sometimes conflicting narratives. While some narratives equate climate protection measures with an “economic slowdown” or a “surrender of prosperity” or insinuate that they are “ideologically driven measures”, arguments that it is all about a good life for all, clean air or less noise fall on deaf ears. One reason for this is that climate protection could be put on the back burner behind supposedly more urgent challenges – after all, it is about the climate, not us.

Environmental and climate protection measures are also often watered down or undermined by deliberate or unintentional false or misleading information in social media and political discussions in order to influence public debate and reduce the pressure to act. Examples of this include denying the man-made causes of climate change, downplaying the security policy consequences, or citing questionable studies and misinterpreting data or statistics. Hostile actors exploit the free media landscape to spread misinformation or conduct disinformation campaigns in connection with the energy transition in Europe. Their goal is to destabilise societies, maintain dependencies and prevent resilience.

However, scepticism towards science and politics fuelled by disinformation is making it dangerously difficult to take the necessary measures and implement them, and is preventing adaptation and the development of resilience in Austria. Furthermore, security-related aspects are not sufficiently addressed in the public discourse due to the climate protection debate having been initiated by civil society. Security-policy actors are also called upon to reflect these aspects in democratic discourse.

The role of security policy actors

The tasks of security policy actors will include overcoming barriers, highlighting security-related issues and engaging in targeted, strate-

gic communication. Not least, this serves to promote measures across society in the interests of Intellectual National Defence. Because if Austria fails to adapt and drive forward transformation, the AAF will also find it increasingly difficult to fulfil its tasks. In the interests of Comprehensive National Defence, the goal must therefore be to invest equally in national and European defence capabilities, whole-of-society resilience and civil-military cooperation, as well as in adaptation measures and climate protection. Recognising climate change as a security risk could accelerate the necessary measures.

Key messages

- Building whole-of-society resilience is crucial to securing Austria's future capability to act and defend itself. This requires a functioning democracy and a resilient, adaptable society capable of defence.
- The armed forces are directly affected by the consequences of climate change and take these into account in their military capability and operational planning.
- The need of the AAF for new climate and energy technologies and equipment adapted to climate change is both an ecological necessity and an operational imperative. At the same time, this offers strategic opportunities for self-sufficiency.
- Climate risks and climate resilience will become determining factors for the operational readiness and endurance of the AAF in the future.
- Combating disinformation campaigns through targeted, strategic communication within the framework of Intellectual National Defence is crucial. Security-political actors also have a role to play here. They can contribute to a securitisation of the discourse, which in turn could accelerate necessary measures.



BMLV/Paul Kulec

On the Development of Modern Armed Forces

Martin Dorfer

The Austrian Armed Forces are undergoing a comprehensive transformation into modern, technologically connected armed forces. The focus is on modernising equipment and systems, specialising brigades, expanding the ready reserve and digitising command and control and the information environment. The Development Plan 2032+ combines investments in personnel, infrastructure and capabilities to ensure a flexible, responsive and socially anchored defence by 2032.

Capability and technology

In 2026, the Austrian Armed Forces (AAF) will continue to face considerable challenges in view of the changed security environment. Conventional wars, global crises, hybrid threats and the increasing importance of new technologies require continuous adaptation of capa-

bilities and structures. While traditional tasks within the framework of military national defence remain central, aspects such as cyber defence, digitisation, international cooperation and ensuring modern mobility are becoming increasingly important.

The question of adequate personnel, infrastructure and material resources is also more pressing than ever in order to ensure constant operational readiness. The aim must be to align the AAF in such a way that it can effectively fulfil its constitutional tasks and at the same time respond flexibly to new security-political requirements as efficient and modern armed forces.

The road to modern armed forces

The combat capability of the Austrian Armed Forces is at the heart of the transformation. It is strengthened by the continuous modernisation of weapon systems, the annual improvement of equipment and the targeted training of soldiers. Milestones in 2026 will include the introduction of combat drones, the continuing additions to the Pandur APC system family, and the start of the development of air defence for the four land brigades.

These measures, together with the increase in weapon effectiveness through the strengthening of rocket artillery and the development of new capabilities for electronic warfare and drone defence, will ensure that the armed forces are able to handle complex operations in the future. The will to fight and the readiness to act decisively in an emergency in accordance with the command principle of “mission command” are promoted through training, the teaching of values and active camaraderie.

The specialisation of the brigades is another important step in the concerted effort by the land forces to enable combined arms warfare. Each brigade will be given targeted specialisations tailored to its core tasks. This diversification, together with the special operations forces, will enable a clear assignment of tasks and a high level of performance in the respective specialisations. From 2026 onwards, the ready reserve will be reorganised and strengthened in close cooperation with the brigades. However, the military commands will also be strengthened in their command capabilities.

Response capability

This will be complemented by integration into multinational exercises and cooperation, which strengthen interoperability and ensure international operational capability, particularly within the framework of the Common European Security and Defence Policy (CESDP). Furthermore, air defence is being systematically developed in order to reliably protect the federal territory, troop movements and critical infrastructure. A modern network of sensors and effectors ensures that threats are neutralised, while digital command and control systems enable a timely response. In this context, medium to long-range air defence systems in the context of the European Sky Shield Initiative should be mentioned as examples. The integration of systems in the area of close air support and operational and tactical air transport for the land forces and special operations forces will continue in 2026.

The response capability will be adapted to future operational challenges by increasing the mobility of land brigades and special operations forces. The operational capability of the armed forces will be enhanced by establishing a domestic stand-by force, including the further roll-out of the rapid reaction reserve, and by reorienting the stand-by forces to form an international stand-by force. Modern transport solutions, protected vehicles, improved infrastructure and digital communication systems will ensure that forces can be deployed quickly and can operate under all conditions.

Information space

At the same time, the response capability of the armed forces in the information space is being continuously improved. Command superiority is vital for modern armed forces. The AAF must become a “joint force”. Consequently, the operative headquarters will become fully operational by 2029. The command capability of the armed forces will be enhanced by the digitisation process that has already begun, by command information systems such as the new cloud landscape (Mission Cloud) and the rollout of the “SITAWARE” battle management system.

This will enable precise situation assessment, rapid decision-making and efficient coordination of forces. The digitisation of all processes en-

sure that information is available in real time, significantly shortening decision-making processes, aided by the use of artificial intelligence. The focus remains on field command, with reconnaissance capabilities also being strengthened through the establishment of an operational reconnaissance battalion and the reinforcement of the brigade sensors.

Personnel development

Sustainability is the foundation of continuing development, ensuring that the AAF remain operational even in protracted conflicts. The new defence model is designed to ensure sustainable personnel readiness and resilience. The main focus here is on harnessing social diversity and attracting more women of all ages and professions to serve in the armed forces. In all operations, female soldiers are an essential factor for successful and sustainable conduct of operations and an integral part of modern armed forces.

At the heart of the continuing development is a well-trained and regularly practising ready reserve. It anchors the armed forces in society, enables a broad personnel base and ensures that the Austrian Armed Forces remain responsive and sustainable when needed. Another essential operational basis is the expansion of military bases to enable longer deployments. In addition, work on strategic stockpiling and optimised supply chains will be continued so that operations can be continued over longer periods of time, even under difficult conditions.

First steps on a long road

The Development Plan 2032+ sets out the main framework for action by the armed forces as they move into the future. It provides for comprehensive investment in personnel, equipment and infrastructure in order to gradually achieve the target for defence readiness by 2032. Initial measures, such as the modernisation of certain weapon systems, the expansion of logistic capabilities and initiatives to strengthen cyber defence, have already been implemented and mark the beginning of a structured transformation.

Nevertheless, the road ahead remains challenging: the plan requires, on the one hand, long-term planning, and on the other, continuous adaptation to an evolving threat landscape and consistent implementation in all areas. The main strength of the armed forces lies in the excellently trained and highly motivated personnel. The path we have chosen now also provides our soldiers with the equipment and infrastructure that this motivation deserves. The Austrian Armed Forces are on their most important but challenging path, with the goal of achieving a modern and comprehensive defence capability by 2032.

Key messages

- The modernisation of the Austrian Armed Forces aims to create flexible, technologically advanced armed forces that can respond to new security policy challenges such as hybrid threats and cyber attacks.
- The focus is on strengthening combat capabilities through new systems (drones, rocket artillery, electronic warfare), specialising brigades and building a responsive ready reserve.
- Digitisation, command superiority and information environment will be significantly expanded with systems such as Mission Cloud, SITAWARE and a joint operational headquarters (by 2029).
- The Development Plan 2032+ provides for comprehensive investment in personnel, equipment and infrastructure to ensure a modern, sustainable and socially anchored armed force by 2032.

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