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JUDr. Markéta Vaňková

Mayor of Brno



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Committee on Budgetary Control (CONT)

Good intentions, convenient interpretations: EU funding plays a vital role in supporting public services through Member States, such as health care, education, and social welfare, yet cases such as the recent Motol hospital scandal reveal how money allocated for development can be diverted through inflated contracts and procurement manipulation. How can the EU reinforce transparency, control mechanisms, and cooperation to ensure its funds serve the public interest and protect them from corruption and criminal exploitation across Member States?

by Hana Flašarová (CZ)

ABSTRACT



Short Video
[Corruption in the EU: defining and measuring](#)

While money moves at the speed of light, oversight from EU bodies often lags behind. Corruption alone costs the EU economy between [€179 billion and €990 billion annually, potentially consuming up to 6%](#) of the Union's total GDP.

In 2024, the European Public Prosecutor's Office ([EPPO](#)) has been chasing down [more than €24.8 billion in estimated damages across over 2600 active investigations](#), and even though oversight bodies have improved over the past century, fund misuse remains a persistent threat.

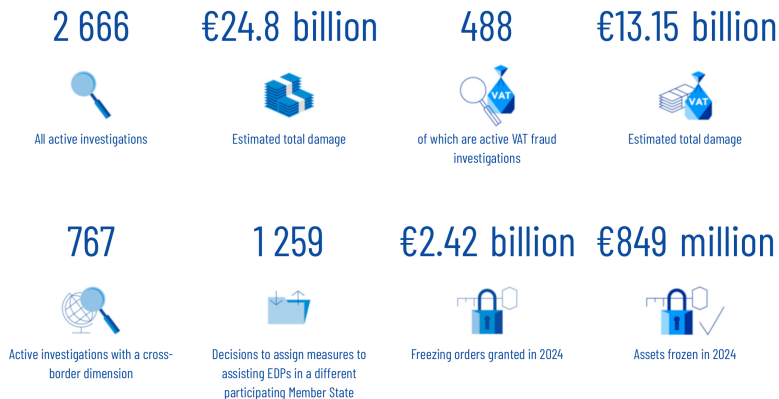
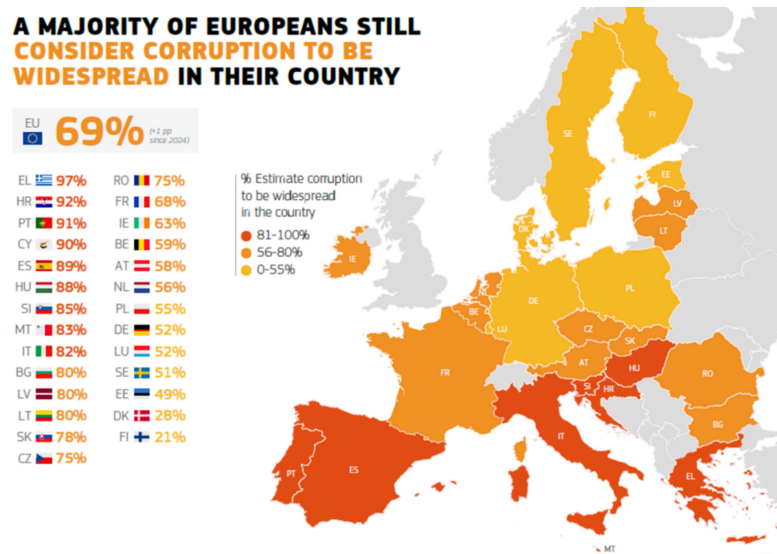


Image 1, EPPO Annual Report 2024, EPPO

The human cost of this issue can be illustrated by the 2025 [Motol Hospital case](#) in Prague, where the EPPO uncovered **a bribery and subsidy fraud¹ scheme** involving the hospital's management and [17 suspects](#). Projects worth [over €160 million](#), such as a new oncology centre, were manipulated so management could take cuts from the granted money for themselves. This case is not an isolated incident, and we can see [similar fraud cases](#) across the whole EU. In the health care sector alone, the financial impact is estimated at [around €56 Billion](#) each year, diverting billions from public health services into illegal financial networks.

However, in failing to implement proper countermeasures and secure a safe flow of funds, the EU is not merely losing money [but also public trust](#). [69% of Europeans](#) believe corruption is still widespread in their national institutions, with numbers climbing above 90% in countries like Greece and Croatia.



[Image 2](#), Percentages of citizens who consider corruption and fraud widespread in their country, Eurobarometer

QUOTES

“Corruption is paid by the poor.” - Pope Francis

KEY ACTORS

- The **Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union (DG FISMA)** is a department of the **European Commission** responsible for creating a stable financial system that aligns with the EU's strategic objectives, including security

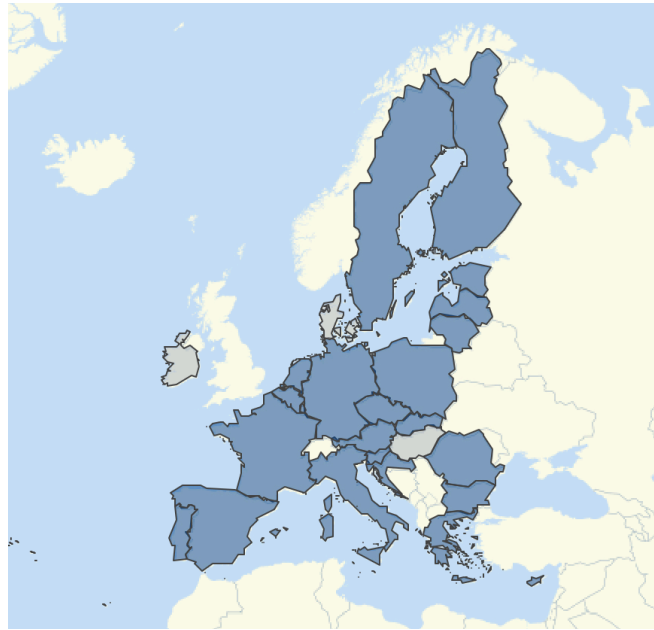
¹ **Subsidy fraud** occurs when someone provides misleading or inaccurate information to gain funds or alternatively when money obtained from funds are used for other purposes than was their actual intention.



and the **fight against corruption** and financial crime. **DG FISMA** can set **EU-wide policies** for financial transparency related to the misuse of EU funds.

- Similarly, the **Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers** ([DG JUST](#)) proposes directives and regulations and can oversee their **proper implementation**. It aims to foster a just environment for all EU citizens.
- The **Directorate-General for Budget** ([DG BUDG](#)) **protects the EU budget** by verifying the legality and responsibility of EU spending. It conducts audits¹ and checks to **detect irregularities** and potential fraud in **EU-funded programmes**. It also ensures that funding is provided transparently.
- The **European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation** ([Europol](#)) prevents and combats cross-border crimes in the EU. The centre focusing specifically on financial crime and the misuse of EU funds is the **European Financial and Economic Crime Centre** ([EFECO](#)), which provides **analytical support** in investigations connected to financial crime. It can also support Member States in their investigations by providing strategic support and expertise.
- The **European Public Prosecutor's Office** ([EPPO](#)) is an independent EU body that investigates and **prosecutes** financial crimes that harm the EU's financial interests while upholding the rule of law. They also safeguard the EU budget against criminal activity and facilitate the recovery of damages done by financial crimes. In carrying out its tasks, EPPO works closely with **national authorities**, particularly law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities, and courts of the participating Member States. Investigations and prosecutions are conducted by **European Delegated Prosecutors** ([EDPs](#)), who are embedded within national legal systems while acting on behalf of the EPPO. However, its jurisdiction is limited to participating Member States, as not all EU countries take part in the **EPPO framework**, which can hinder investigations involving **cross-border crimes**. Furthermore, the EPPO has also faced challenges related to [high caseloads](#) and [varying levels of cooperation](#) from national authorities, which may affect its overall effectiveness.

¹ An **Audit** is an official inspection of an organisation's accounts, expenses, and assets, typically done by an independent body.



[Image 3](#), Member States participating in the EPPO, EPPO

- The **European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF)** is an EU body that works to protect the EU budget **by investigating** fraud, corruption, and serious misconduct affecting the **EU budget** and institutions. Based on its findings, OLAF can issue financial, judicial, and administrative recommendations. They also [contribute](#) to the **development of anti-fraud policies** and raise awareness through seminars and conferences. However, OLAF has been seen as having [several shortcomings](#) that limit its effectiveness, including its lack of prosecutorial or sanctioning powers, meaning that criminal follow-up and recovery of funds depend entirely on national authorities or the EPPO. Moreover, OLAF's impact is further weakened by **complex and lengthy procedures**, **inefficient coordination**, and [information-sharing](#) with other EU bodies.
- The **European Court of Auditors (ECA)** is the independent external auditor of the EU that **inspects the revenue and expenditure** of the EU budget and ensures that funds are managed in accordance with the law. Reporting any suspected fraud or illegal activity to the OLAF and the EPPO, it plays a critical role in fighting fraud. Additionally, through its special reports, performance audits, and formal opinions on new legislation, the Court provides guidance to policymakers on how to improve financial management and enhance transparency across all EU institutions and Member States.



- **Member States** have primary competence to **prevent, detect, and prosecute** fraud and corruption in their country, working through national authorities that can carry out investigations, bring prosecutions before national courts, and recover misused funds. It is their responsibility to establish an appropriate administrative and judicial system, manage anti-corruption measures, and [implement them into their national law](#). But since every Member State can do that on its own, anti-corruption laws vary between countries, creating legal fragmentation,¹ thus making EU-wide investigations and prosecutions more complicated.

POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

The **Directive on the fight against fraud to the Union's financial interests by means of criminal law (PIF Directive)** was adopted in 2017 as part of the Commission's anti-fraud strategy. It establishes [harmonised criminal law definitions](#) and minimum sanctions for offences affecting the EU's financial interests, including **fraud and corruption**. The directive plays a central role in combating misuse of EU funds by ensuring that such offences are [criminalised consistently](#), aiming to reduce legal fragmentation and enable [cross-border prosecutions](#) through the EPPO. However, the Directive's impact is constrained by [uneven implementation](#) throughout Member States, which is the main reason why most of today's policies are insufficient in resolving the issue.

Complementing these criminal law standards is the [Early Detection and Exclusion System](#), an administrative **preventive** mechanism managed by the European Commission designed to flag [operators that pose a risk](#) due to fraud, corruption, serious **contract breaches**², or attempts to evade legal obligations. However, the ECA has found that the system is [underused and largely ineffective](#) in practice because it currently covers only a small portion of EU spending, leaving funds managed by Member States outside its direct reach. Moreover, its impact is limited by [restricted access](#) to relevant national criminal records and by the overall complexity of today's fraud structures.

To address the financial trail of illicit money, **EU Anti-Money Laundering Directives (AMLDs)** aim to [prevent the laundering of proceeds](#) from crimes, including the **misuse of EU funds**. **AMLDs** make it more

¹ Legal fragmentation describes inconsistent laws and enforcement mechanisms, which may lead states to react differently in the same situation.

² [Contract breaches](#) occur when a party or an individual in a legally binding agreement fails to fulfil their obligations.

difficult to hide misappropriated EU money through financial systems by requiring [certain entities](#), like banks, to [report suspicious transactions](#) to national **Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs)**. These then pass on their findings to law enforcement or the EPPO. However, fragmented implementation and uneven supervision across Member States have [weakened](#) their overall effectiveness, allowing criminals to exploit regulatory gaps.

The [Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation 2020/2092](#), put into force in 2021, is a legal mechanism that enables the **European Commission** to [propose measures](#), including **suspension, reduction, termination, or restriction** of EU budget payments, as well as **prohibition** of new commitments of funds against a Member State if they [violate the rule-of-law principles](#). However, this law carries a risk of **stopping funding for meaningful projects**, as the suspension or delay of EU funds can [disrupt programme implementation](#) and the delivery of benefits to citizens.

[The Whistleblower¹ Protection Directive](#), established in 2019, seeks to **protect individuals who report** breaches of EU law, including fraud and financial irregularities affecting EU funds, by [providing secure reporting channels](#) and safeguards against **retaliation**. It helps by enhancing the early detection of misuse by [enabling insiders to come forward](#). Where effectively implemented, the Directive has complemented institutional controls such as **investigations and prosecution**. However, its success is uneven due to [limited awareness](#) among potential **whistleblowers**.

Less than half of Europeans know where to report a case of corruption

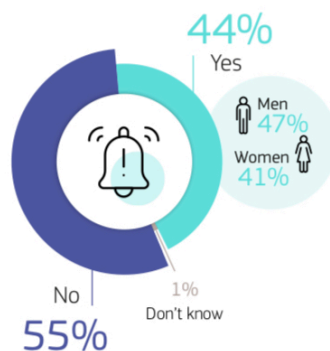


Image 4. Citizens' attitudes towards corruption in the EU in 2025, Eurobarometer

¹ **A whistleblower** is a person who reveals information about a person or a group that actively participates in unlawful activities such as fraud, abuse, or corruption.



A proposal for a [Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating corruption](#), amending **the PIF Directive**, aims to create a [unified system](#) in which Member States punish corruption consistently across government offices and private companies. It also encourages Member States to strengthen preventive measures, such as [transparency](#) and stricter accountability for abuse of office. However, the success of this is threatened by a [lack of agreement](#) between the European Parliament, the European Council, and Member States, where some of them advocate for changes that could weaken the impact of the Directive.

KEY CHALLENGES

Sophisticated Schemes

A key challenge in addressing the misuse of EU funds lies in the **increasing complexity of corruption schemes**, which are [designed to blend](#) into legitimate administrative and financial processes. Investigations by the EPPO show that people committing fraud may create [networks of connected companies](#), make [transactions across different countries](#), and pretend business relationships to **increase costs and hide spending** that is not allowed under EU-funded projects. In some cases, they alter or rename equipment and other assets, for example, [changing serial numbers](#) or [repainting machinery](#) to make it seem like it is part of the project and justify claims for EU funding that they are not actually entitled to. **Fragmented oversight** and systemic problems in [how information is shared](#) between EU and national bodies make tackling this issue increasingly more difficult. As a result, fraud can remain undetected for years, often only becoming visible after substantial funds have already been disbursed and [integrated into complex financial structures](#), limiting the effectiveness of recovering funds.

Speed at the expense of financial safety

The €577 billion **Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)** is an instrument of the EU that provides **grants and loans** to projects that support development in Member States after the COVID-19 pandemic. It [prioritises speed over financial accountability](#), paying out massive sums [based on qualitative milestones](#)¹ such as passing a law or officially starting a certain project, rather than **auditing** individual transactions. An example of this occurred in 2025 with the [Motol Hospital case](#) in Czechia, where the milestone for starting [construction on an Oncology Centre](#) was met, and the money was released.

¹ [Qualitative milestones](#) are checkpoints in a certain project marking a finalisation of a specific phase of the project.



Investigators later discovered that the bidding process for the project was not handled fairly and was [allegedly rigged](#) to favour specific companies. However, changing the system to a stricter one that requires verification of every expense would not only [violate the core legal framework](#) of the RRF but also **slow down** the very economic flow these funds were designed for.

Legal fragmentation and abuse of power

The EU's ambition to create [a unified anti-corruption area](#) clashes with the legal fragmentation across the EU, since [Member States decide](#) how EU anti-corruption rules are applied in their own legal systems. This flexibility allows corrupt individuals in positions of power **to weaken or delay the implementation** of EU measures for their own benefit. When a Member State weakens these anti-corruption laws, the EPPO's legal authority is [effectively neutralised](#). An example of this occurred in 2024, when [Slovakia](#) passed the **Penal Code reform**, which included [a reduction of sentences](#) related to fraud, dissolution of the Special Prosecutor's Office, and shortening of limitation periods. [According to the opposition](#), this is a way to favour members of the prime minister's party. This could allow corrupt actors to [strategically migrate](#) their fraudulent activities to the most moderate jurisdictions, **undermining the financial security** of the entire Union.

Transparency gaps

The [beneficial ownership](#)¹ law, which is part of the AMLDs, allows auditors, journalists, and anyone who can [prove their legitimate interest](#) to see exactly who is behind a certain company. However, this essential transparency is often undermined in practice, as people in power create [complex ownership structures](#) or [shell companies](#)² to hide their wrongdoings. As a result, official reports or formal actions **rarely highlight corruption**, and even those with a legitimate interest may be [unable to uncover](#) who truly controls a company, slowing **down investigations and reducing accountability**.

Fear and underreporting of fraud

[43%](#) of all fraud cases are successfully investigated and prosecuted thanks to **whistleblower leads**, which highlights their importance and the necessity for the public to speak up against any fraudulent activity they may encounter. In many regions, corruption is common and normalised, leaving the public with a

¹ **Beneficial owner** is a person who owns, controls, or significantly benefits from a company or other legal entity.

² **Shell companies** are legal entities that only exist on paper and have no active business operations or significant assets.



learned sense of helplessness. This silence often works to the advantage of corrupt governments since an empowered public, capable of speaking up, poses a threat to the corrupt systems they create and benefit from. When citizens feel that reporting fraud will lead to **no real change or personal retaliation**, the flow of any useful information **slows down**.

FURTHER RESEARCH

- **“EU Budget explained”**, a YouTube video by the European Commission, 2025.
- **“Whistleblowing protection laws”**, an interview with Mark Worth by Inside Corruption, 2025.
- **“Corruption in the EU: monitoring and combating”**, a YouTube video by the European Parliament Research Service.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Since the EU currently pays out money based on milestones rather than checking every receipt, what methods could be used to prove the money was spent honestly without slowing down the economic flow of funds?
- How can the EU balance its respect for national sovereignty with the urgent need for a unified legal shield that protects the entire Union’s budget?
- What specific strategies could be used to rebuild public trust and encourage citizens to come forward as whistleblowers?



Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO)

Fake nEUws: Disinformation spread has long been a threat to democratic European ideals, but the recent rise of generative AI has made it easier than ever to create and spread convincing fake imagery and information, creating further difficulties for the public in distinguishing fact from fiction. How can the EU fight the spread of misinformation while still allowing new technologies and innovations to thrive in its markets?

by David Griffin (IE)

ABSTRACT

As the world continues through the digital age, with massive strides in technology made almost daily, [AI has become nearly ubiquitous](#), capable of writing essays, generating images, and even [creating games](#) from just a single prompt. With the public launch of [OpenAI's GPT-3](#), the accessibility of AI to the masses has led to a variety of **new developments and innovations**, but also a host of **new challenges and concerns**. While disinformation has been around since the [dawn of the media](#), the ease with which one can create doctored images and videos has led to a whole [new disinformation landscape](#). AI-powered disinformation spread has raised serious concerns surrounding the [risks AI may pose to the democratic process](#). With this, the EU finds itself in the difficult position of ensuring that its **citizens are informed** and not being misled, while also still giving these newly emerging technologies **a solid place to grow and develop within European Markets**.

QUOTE

*"We live in a world where all wars will begin as cyber wars... It is the combination of hacking and massive, well-coordinated disinformation campaigns." - **Jared Cohen**, former CEO of Google Ideas*

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

Disinformation has been [a threat to society](#) for generations. However, the evolving media landscape has made it [easier than ever](#) for people to create and share content to mislead the masses. [78%](#) of EU citizens are concerned about **disinformation influencing voting decisions**, as disinformation [undermines trust](#)



[in democratic institutions](#) through lies and poses a serious [threat to people's freedom of thought](#) by misleading them and impacting their ability to form their own opinions based on facts.

Social media has had a [significant impact](#) on how people consume information and how it spreads. The accessibility of social media platforms has allowed anyone to share ideas and information, rather than being confined to large-scale news outlets or groups with large amounts of money, with **42%** of young people reporting **social media as their primary source of information** on political and social issues. While this free spread of information has had many [benefits](#), such as helping people access new information, perspectives, and ideas more easily than traditional media may allow, it has also led to an [increase in the spread of both misinformation and disinformation](#). A global survey showed that **48%** of people have been exposed to online content related to election-based disinformation, illustrating the prevalence of political disinformation online.

The **rise of AI** has made image generation easier than ever. While fake imagery and video have always been [used as a tool](#) to spread disinformation, the ease with which one can create these fakes in the present times has created serious [concerns](#) over **the potential uses of AI in disinformation campaigns**. There have already been examples of AI being used to spread disinformation in elections, seen in countries such as [France](#), [Ireland](#), and the [United Kingdom](#). Additionally, though people are often confident in detecting deepfakes, research shows that people are [not actually able](#) to **reliably distinguish between deepfakes and real images**.

KEY TERMS

- [Disinformation](#) is false information created and spread to **deliberately deceive** people. It can [undermine the democratic process](#) and create **social unrest** by spreading harmful ideas and lies. It is [different from misinformation](#), which is false information that is **spread accidentally**, without an active attempt to deceive.
- [Artificial Intelligence \(AI\)](#) refers to a variety of **technologies that are capable of simulating human intelligence**, comprehension, creation and autonomy. There are [several different types of AI](#), such as:



- **Reactive machine AIs**, which are AIs built for specific tasks that do not require previous data, such as recommendation algorithms,
- **Limited Memory AIs** that use both past and present data to produce their outputs, allowing their outputs to evolve and improve over time, such as AI image generators,
- **Theory of mind AIs and self-aware AIs**, which do not exist yet, but would be hypothetical forms of super-intelligent AI that would have the ability to match or surpass human intelligence and emotion.
- **Generative AI (GenAI)** is a type of limited memory AI that is able to **produce text, image, and video content**. This is accomplished by using large amounts of data and training these systems to know what their outputs should look like based on statistical analysis of the data. Commonly used examples of GenAI are [OpenAI's ChatGPT](#), [X's Grok](#), and [Google's Gemini](#).
- **Deepfakes** are images, audio or video created by AI that have been altered or manipulated to **misrepresent the truth** of what someone has said or done.

KEY ACTORS

- The **Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT)** is the European Commission's body responsible for overseeing the EU's AI policies. Their role is to develop, implement, and enforce **laws regarding online platforms, digital markets, and AI**. In recent years, they have developed and implemented the [AI Act](#), a comprehensive legal framework aimed at ensuring that AI is used **safely, fairly, and respects the rights** of those within the EU.
- [The European AI Office](#) is an office under DG CONNECT that is specifically responsible for the **implementation and enforcement of the AI Act**, as well as working with AI companies to promote new developments in AI within the EU. They collaborate with Member States to create advisory bodies, develop tools, and investigate breaches of AI policy. Their work on implementing the AI Act is expected to continue until 2027.



- Companies such as **OpenAI, DeepL, Minstral, X, Google**, and countless more are already working with and [developing GenAI systems](#). The AI market was valued at **USD 196.63 billion in 2023** and is projected to grow at a rate of **36.6% annually** from 2024 to 2030. However, concerns have been raised about the [dangers of AI](#) and the potential [misuse of its models](#) to spread disinformation.
- The **European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)** is an EU-funded project that aims to fight the spread of **digital disinformation**. They are a group of independent, multidisciplinary [fact-checkers and experts](#) who are working to support fact-checking organisations, design frameworks to help combat disinformation, and support policymakers and public authorities. Their [two-phase plan](#) focuses on **building a research hub** to fight disinformation throughout the EU.
- The [EU DisinfoLab](#) is an independent body that conducts research and **provides information and tools** on disinformation in the EU. Their work helps **combat AI-based disinformation** by releasing information about it and providing advice on how it can be recognised and countered by both citizens and the EU. Their mission is to conduct research on disinformation and make resources on how to counter it more accessible to both the public and policymakers.

RELEVANT POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

The [AI Act](#) is a series of laws that outlines the [obligations for AI providers](#), based on a risk level classification system. Under the act, AI providers must perform a **risk assessment** on their AI systems, and depending on the level of risk that the system is deemed to have, different rules and regulations will be applied. Notably, all AI systems are **prohibited from generating illegal content**. Based on their risk level, AIs are [divided into four categories](#):

- AIs with the **"unacceptable risk"** level are AI products that pose a **threat to citizens' wellbeing or freedoms**, such as surveillance systems or social scoring systems, and are prohibited entirely, with some [limited exceptions](#).

- **High-risk** AI products are AI products that are used for **critical infrastructure systems**, such as transport or medical technologies, and must undergo **further risk assessment** to ensure that they are meeting necessary **safety standards**.
- **Limited risk** AI systems are AI models where risk is largely due to a **lack of transparency**, such as GenAI models, where it may not be clear that the content is generated by AI. These systems are obligated to **declare that their content is created by AI**. Some AI systems, such as [Google's Gemini](#), have built-in **digital watermarking systems** to aid with this.
- All remaining AI systems are deemed minimal risk. These include things like video games or spam filters. No obligations fall to these providers.

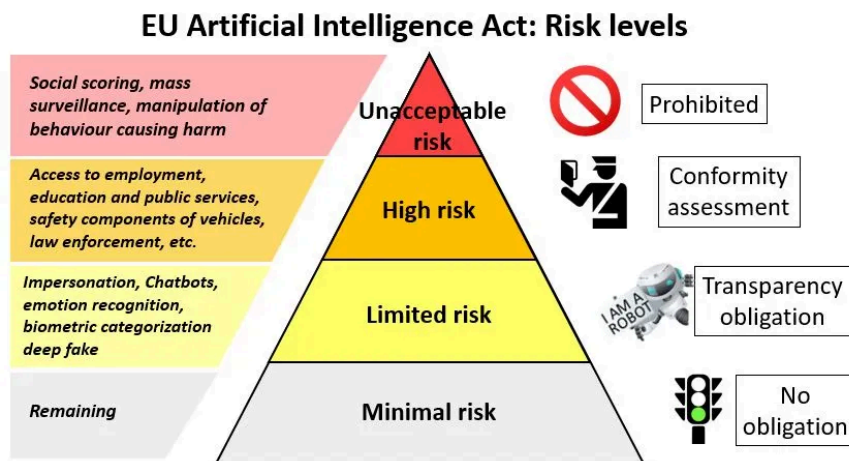


Image 1, The AI Act Risk Tiers, Telefónica

The **Digital Services Act (DSA)** is a set of legislation that lays out a variety of obligations for online services, such as marketplaces, social media platforms, and app stores, to **ensure that they are safe and fair for users** within the EU. The [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#) is a voluntary set of guidelines for actions that digital service providers, such as social media companies, can take to **limit the spread of disinformation on their platforms**. [Many digital service providers](#) have signed the code, though notably, [X withdrew from signing the code](#) in 2022, despite having signed in 2018. Integrated in the DSA framework is the **Code of Practice on Disinformation**, a voluntary, official code of conduct on how large online platforms should handle disinformation. While the code is not itself mandatory for companies to follow, it serves as a benchmark for how well companies are adhering to other portions of the DSA.



Organisations such as the EU DisinfoLab and EDMO also **research the spread of disinformation online**. They publish **information and guides** on how to tackle this spread, notably releasing [documentation](#) on how **AI can be used in the fight against disinformation**, creating and endorsing initiatives to use AI for good.

KEY CHALLENGES

The scope of online disinformation

Disinformation is **extremely prevalent online**, with [78%](#) of people in 2023 reporting having read deliberately falsified information on social media, and experts warning that the development of AI will continue to lead to an **“explosion” of new disinformation** online. To mitigate this, the EU has created measures and worked with social media platforms, but **disinformation is still running rampant**. It is continuously pushed by both domestic [political parties](#) and [foreign influences](#), and the existing **tools for detecting AI are not entirely accurate**, causing further difficulty in distinguishing AI-generated content from real images and videos. Consequently, some companies have started using [digital watermarking systems](#) to increase accuracy in detecting AI-generated content.

The consequences of disinformation spread

The spread of disinformation risks **serious social consequences**, such as [influencing elections](#), impacting [emergency response systems](#), and even spreading [false information about health](#). Across Europe, there have been examples of **AI being used to falsely incriminate politicians** in the lead-up to elections. For example, in [France](#), deepfakes emerged showing supposed family members of a candidate mocking racial minorities, though these family members did not exist. Similarly, in the [2024 Irish presidential election](#), AI-generated videos of one candidate announcing that she was withdrawing from the election were spread. In fact, in 2024, **over 80% of countries** saw AI content circulated leading up to their elections. These generated videos [undermine the democratic process](#) by **influencing people’s opinions with lies** and impacting their ability to form their own conclusions based on the truth. [Research](#) on disinformation campaigns and elections has shown that widespread disinformation can have a **serious impact on public trust and hinder informed policymaking**.



AI misinformation in journalism

AI has also found a place in **published articles**. Over [50%](#) of newly produced articles were identified as being written by AI. However, with AI's [tendency to hallucinate](#)¹ information, [concerns have been raised](#) as to whether or not **AI should be used in formalised journalism**. In a study on the use of AI Assistants to analyse news content, it was found that the AI systems would [misrepresent news content 45%](#) of the time. [Concerns](#) have also been raised that widespread AI usage will result in people **giving up trying to distinguish between fact and fiction**, running the risk of eroding trust in mainstream news outlets, and causing a further deterioration in the availability of factual information.

The impacts of regulation on new technologies

With AI being such a new technology, the EU finds itself in the **difficult position of [balancing innovation and regulation](#)**. Companies have **reacted negatively to overly restrictive AI regulation** in the past, with [threats from OpenAI](#) to withdraw its services from the EU being made in 2023, when the AI Act was in development. Concerns were also raised by [EU officials](#) about the risks that overly harsh AI regulation may pose to the European technology market, with emphasis on how steep fines and restrictive regulations on training data may discourage companies from operating within European markets. Therefore, the EU has **worked with these companies to create the AI Pact**² and refine AI policies to ensure that safety standards are upheld, while still encouraging the development and use of AI products in European markets. However, it still faces pushback, most notably [X withdrawing from signing](#) the Code of Practice on Disinformation in 2022 following a strengthening of the code's practices. Large tech companies have been [subject to criticism](#) for their **lack of action regarding disinformation**, with some opting to [withdraw some services](#) instead of complying with regulations. While legislation such as the AI Act and DSA allow the EU to exert some force on these companies, large companies continue to be [accused](#) of **avoiding responsibility**, causing some to call for the EU to take a firmer stance.

¹ [AI Hallucinations](#) are errors made in generated AI content.

² The [AI Pact](#) is an agreement between the EU and many AI companies on upholding safe AI development standards.



FURTHER RESEARCH

- [*“How false news can spread”*](#); a video by Noah Tavlin and TED-Ed, 2015.
- [*“AI Learns to Escape \(deep reinforcement learning\)”*](#), a video by AI Warehouse, 2022.
- [*“AI Is Dangerous, but Not for the Reasons You Think”*](#), a TED Talk by Sarah Luccioni, 2023.
- [*“What We Still Don’t Know About How AI is Trained”*](#); an article by Sue Halpern, 2023.
- [*“How AI and deepfakes are changing politics”*](#), a news report by the BBC, 2024.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What actions can the EU and AI companies take to further the fight against disinformation?
- How can the EU ensure that it is not overstepping in its regulation and stifling innovation?
- How can citizens protect themselves from AI-generated disinformation online?



Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO II)

Always bet on blue: The European gambling market reached €123.4 billion in gross gaming revenue in 2024, with online platforms accounting for 39% of this total. This fast-growing industry has led to rising addiction rates, mounting personal debt, and increased mental health issues, disproportionately affecting youth and low-income communities. How should the EU address these harms while ensuring responsible regulation of the gambling sector?

by Gayane Terteryan (AM)

ABSTRACT

The **digitalisation of gambling** has transformed it into a highly accessible, [fast-growing global industry](#), particularly [through online and mobile platforms](#). While it offers enormous economic benefits, it also raises serious concerns regarding consumer protection, public health, and social harm.

[Existing efforts](#) to reduce harm, such as national self-exclusion schemes, advertising restrictions, and consumer awareness campaigns, remain inconsistent across Member States. The core policy challenge lies in [balancing](#) the economic benefits of the online gambling industry with the imperative to protect vulnerable populations, particularly young people.

QUOTE

“First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you.” - F. Scott Fitzgerald

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

People have gambled since [prehistoric times](#). Betting [was popular](#) among ancient civilisations, including the **Chinese, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans**. In the **Middle Ages**, gambling evolved into more complex forms. This was the time of the [birth of card games](#), as well as the **first regulations against them**, but only for [ordinary people](#). Later, **in 1638**, the [first casino](#) was established, called “**The Ridotto**” in Venice. In the 20th century, [gambling expanded globally](#) and [developed into a multi-billion-dollar industry](#). However, the biggest transformation the betting industry underwent was the [digitalisation of gambling](#). Current technologies make gambling [more accessible](#) by providing a **user-friendly interface** for mobile

betting apps, **tailored offers** that meet individual preferences, and **security of financial information**. All those transformations of the industry have surpassed the capacity of existing regulatory frameworks to respond effectively.

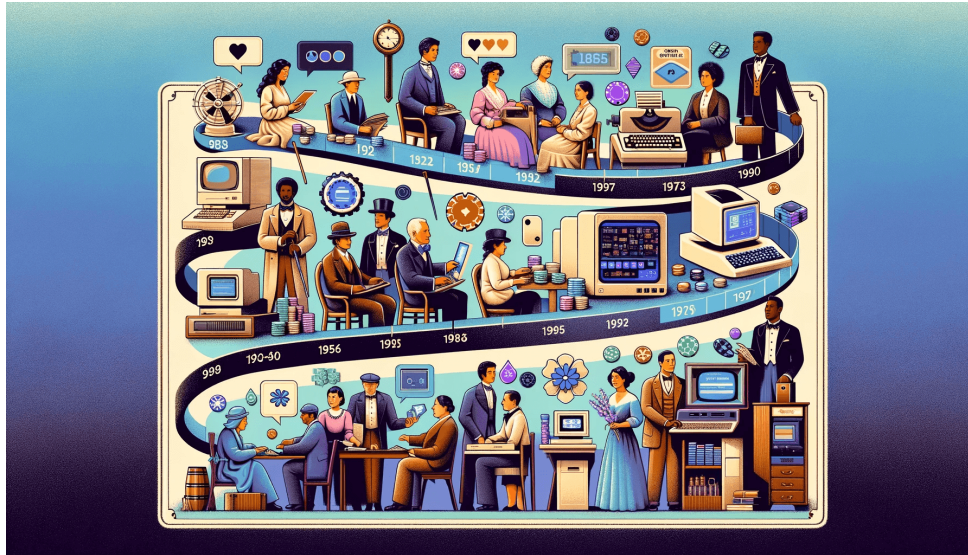


Image 1, Evolution of Gambling, Marina Avramovic

Alongside the industry's rapid expansion and positive economic impact, people perceive it as a public health issue, given its broader social harms impacting individuals, families, and society as a whole. In the 21st century, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted online betting significantly. During the lockdown, **vulnerable groups**, such as unemployed people, individuals with mental health issues, and individuals with gambling disorders, were more prone to an **increase in their gambling frequency**. Online betting carries a **significant risk to public health**, with 2.7% to 6.5% of adults experiencing gambling-related problems. With gambling content available at all times, with little friction, making it difficult for individuals to stop once harmful patterns begin, the World Health Organisation estimates that 1.2% of the world's adult population has a **gambling disorder**.

Additionally, the line between gaming and gambling is becoming increasingly blurred, with features like loot boxes¹ and in-game betting becoming prevalent in video games. This convergence raises concerns about the **normalisation of gambling behaviours** among adolescents, potentially leading to increased addiction rates.

¹ **Loot Boxes** are virtual items that offer rewards purchased usually with in-game currency or real money.



The gambling industry, with its online segment, has had a **huge economic impact**: **supporting thousands of jobs** worldwide, stimulating **growth in related fields**, like payment processing, content marketing, and cybersecurity, and providing a notable source of **tax revenue**.

KEY TERMS

- **Gambling disorder** is a serious mental health condition characterised by the uncontrollable, repetitive urge to gamble despite severe negative consequences.
- **Variable ratio reinforcement** is a reward system where wins happen randomly, encouraging people to keep trying because they never know when the next reward will come.
- **Cognitive biases** are patterns of thinking that occur when people process and interpret information in their surroundings that affect their decision-making. This leads people to make irrational decisions, often causing them to overestimate their chances of winning or believe they have control over outcomes that are actually coincidental.
- **Aggressive marketing** is when companies use persistent, forceful, or persuasive tactics to influence people's decisions. This includes repeated advertisements, pressure to buy quickly, and exaggerated claims to make products or services seem more attractive than they really are.

KEY ACTORS

- **The Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (DG GROW)** is a department in the European Commission that is responsible for upholding and managing the Single Market for goods and services. They manage the **Technical Regulation Information System** to prevent the creation of technical barriers to trade in the EU. It has the competence **to regulate** aspects of the gambling industry regarding **advertising and marketing restrictions** and **consumer protection measures**.



- **The Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST)** advocates for a fair, safe, and just society protected by the rule of law. Their consumer protection laws, such as the [Unfair Commercial Practices Directive](#), ensure a high level of protection for EU citizens.
- **The Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CONNECT)** supports and regulates digital technologies to create a safe digital space and markets. DG CONNECT is actively involved in **regulating** and **monitoring the online gambling sector**.
- **The Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE)** is responsible for protecting the health of EU citizens and coordinates the EU's addiction strategies. It also focuses on protecting the **mental health of vulnerable groups in the digital era**, particularly regarding screen addiction, digital literacy, and creating a safer digital environment.
- **The European Gaming and Betting Association (EGBA)** is a Brussels-based trade association that promotes competitive, innovative, and well-regulated markets. It works with Member States and other stakeholders to have a well-regulated market that recognises the consumer demand while providing consumer protection. For a **safer gambling environment**, they adhere to many [industry standards and codes](#) that reinforce different licensing requirements within Member States.
- **The European Association for the Study of Gambling (EASG)** is the primary academic and research hub that bridges the gap between science and policy. Its purpose is to **increase the level of dialogue between individuals and organisations** representing different aspects of gambling. They provide independent data on gambling prevalence and harm that justify the need for strict regulations to policymakers and public health authorities. Their primary role is **raising awareness**.
- **The European Data Protection Board (EDPB)** is an independent European body that ensures the consistent application of data protection. The EDPB has the authority [to issue guidelines and binding decisions](#) that restrict the use of addictive design patterns and data-driven targeting of vulnerable users.



RELEVANT POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

At the EU level, the European Commission's [2014 Recommendation](#) on principles for the protection of consumers and players of online gambling services and for the prevention of minors from gambling online marked an important policy initiative aimed at promoting **responsible gambling across Member States**. This non-binding instrument called for the introduction of transparent information tools, age verification systems, and limits on marketing content. Its objective was to establish a [minimum level of consumer protection](#), particularly for minors and vulnerable users, such as responsible advertising, transparency, account safety tools, like mandatory registration, identification requirements, and fund protection, while allowing Member States flexibility in implementation. However, since the Recommendation is **not legally binding**, progress has remained inconsistent. A [2018 European Commission evaluation](#) showed that many Member States had only partially implemented the proposed measures, and several lacked enforcement mechanisms. This [raises concerns](#) about the effectiveness of soft law in areas where **commercial interests are strong and consumer harm is substantial**.

At the national level, Member States have taken varied approaches to regulating online gambling. Countries like **France, the Netherlands, and Sweden** have implemented **stricter consumer protection measures**, including [national self-exclusion registers and advertising restrictions](#). While these efforts demonstrate growing awareness of gambling-related harms, they often occur in isolation, without a common EU framework to ensure consistency, which, as a result, **limits the effectiveness of national-level protections**.

KEY CHALLENGES

Market Freedom or Gambling Regulations

The EU does not have sector-specific legislation on gambling services, meaning that regulation remains a [national-level competence](#) as long as Member States respect the fundamental freedoms of the [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#). Gambling markets across the EU [differ substantially](#); some countries operate state **monopolies**, others allow multiple **licensed operators** to offer online gambling services. Since the EU does not favour any particular regulatory model, the EU's [ability to intervene remains limited](#).



Cross-border Gambling

The offshore nature of online gambling creates a significant regulatory challenge at the EU level, because operators can provide [gambling services across multiple jurisdictions](#). Many of these operators are based in countries with more permissive regulatory frameworks, and they target consumers in more restrictive markets. As a result, people can [easily access](#) gambling platforms in illegal markets, from places where online gambling is prohibited. The [use of VPNs](#) plays a huge role in offshore gambling: by routing their internet traffic through foreign servers, users can bypass national restrictions and access gambling sites that are blocked or not licensed in their country.

Another barrier to local authorities' regulation of cross-border gambling is [the growing use of cryptocurrencies](#). Digital currencies [enable transactions](#) without the involvement of traditional banking systems. This [limits](#) the ability of local authorities to track financial flows and enforce national restrictions. As a result, governments face increasing [difficulties](#) in ensuring compliance and protecting consumers.

Marketing Strategies in the Industry

The gambling industry heavily uses **unethical and misleading marketing tactics** that [encourage risky gambling behaviour](#). Vulnerable users, including young people, are particularly susceptible to these [psychological hooks](#), such as bonuses, free bets, and time-limited promotional offers that have a sense of urgency.

The effectiveness of these marketing tactics is rooted in the underlying [biological and psychological factors](#) that drive problem gambling. One factor is a [variable-ratio reward system](#), which is commonly used in gambling and lottery games. In this system, wins occur unpredictably, meaning individuals never know when they will win, but are sure that a reward is always possible. Other [cognitive biases](#), such as **the illusion of control** and [optimism bias](#), cause players to overestimate their chances of winning. A great example of this is **sports betting**, which is [presented](#) as a **skill-based activity** rather than a matter of luck.



HARMFUL IMPACTS OF GAMBLING

Risk of Financial Insecurity

The most visible and imminent consequence of pathological gambling is **financial loss**. Persistent gambling behaviour commonly **results in depleted savings, huge debts, risky loans, and overreliance on credit**, which limits the ability to cover basic living expenses. **As financial pressure intensifies**, individuals may sell personal belongings, face property repossession, or experience housing instability. Nevertheless, many continue gambling, believing that one more “**big win**” will solve everything, remaining in the gambling’s harmful cycle.

People who are unemployed or have a lower income are **more likely to be at risk of gambling**. Socially disadvantaged people spend a significantly **higher percentage of their income** than wealthier people. Even in 2025, asylum seekers in Britain used their state-issued cards to make **transactions at gambling venues**.

Mental Health Challenges

People who frequently gamble face serious psychological and social consequences, which can lead to **serious mental problems**. **Gambling Addiction** is a non-substance-related addiction characterised by a **loss of control, compulsive behaviour, and continued gambling despite serious consequences**. Individuals suffering from it often feel trapped in a **gambling cycle** of **emotional highs and financial despair**. Pathological gambling **may cause depressive episodes and anxiety**, and can be followed by **shame, deceptive practices, and heightened impulsivity**. There is a strong link between pathological gambling and **cases of suicide**. Studies **have shown** that people with problem gambling are **15 times more likely to die by suicide** compared to the general population. Additionally, a study from Norway found that between 2008 and 2021, almost 0.5 % of those diagnosed with gambling disorder **died by suicide**.

Relationships insecurity

Gambling problems have highly **negative effects on personal relationships**. The more someone is linked with a gambling addict, the more likely they are to experience **negative consequences**. Gambling-related harm often **leads to** a withdrawal from the wider community. There are many different barriers, such as

internal stigma, shame, and denial, alongside external factors like lack of service awareness, financial constraints, and geographical distance to accessing treatment for individuals and families, that [slow down and complicate](#) the treatment processes.



Image 2, Addiction Cycle of Gambling, Stanton Peele

BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

Problem gambling, just like any other addiction, arises because [many environmental, biological, and social factors](#) are present simultaneously. People from **unstable family backgrounds** or with **prior experience of gambling within the household** are [particularly vulnerable](#).

Gambling problems have highly [negative effects on personal relationships](#). The more someone is linked with a gambling addict, the more likely they are to experience [negative consequences](#). Gambling issues often [lead to distrust and broken ties](#) within relationships. Families that face the problem are [more likely to experience conflict, emotional and psychological harm, domestic violence, and neglect](#). Couples in which at least one partner engages in problem gambling are at [high risk of divorce](#) compared to people



without problem gambling. And there is a [bidirectional correlation](#)¹ [between divorce and gambling problems](#). A bidirectional relationship also exists **between gambling problems and family dynamics** since most gamblers [lack family support](#) in the first place, and most [lose family support](#) after having the issue.

Mental distress, including **loneliness and anxiety**, [may increase the likelihood](#) of pathological gambling. **Peer influence** is a [strong factor in gambling behaviour](#), especially during adolescence and early adulthood. In many cases, similarly to sexual activity or substance use, particularly among men, [gambling is normalised and encouraged within peer groups](#). Adolescents who are more susceptible to peer pressure may engage in these behaviours as a mechanism [to maintain a sense of belonging to a group](#). Research [suggests](#) that the higher one's involvement in gambling activities, the higher the number of gamblers in their social network.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How can the EU better protect consumers in online gambling without undermining national competence?
- Should the EU regulate gambling design and marketing to reduce addiction risks, and if so, how?
- How can at-risk users be identified and supported while respecting data protection rules?
- How should policymakers respond to the growing overlap between gaming and gambling, especially for young people?

FURTHER RESEARCH

- [“Psychology of a Gambler,”](#) a YouTube documentary by Midnight Oracle, 2026.
- [“Would you take this bet?”](#) a YouTube video by Veritasium, 2015.
- [“The intergenerational transmission of gambling and other addictive behaviours,”](#) an article by Lia Nower, Wen Li Anthony, and Jackie F. Stanmyre, 2022.

¹ [Bidirectional correlation](#) happens when two variables have a reciprocal, mutual influence on each other.



Committee on International Trade (INTA)

A Material World: The trade of critical raw materials, such as Lithium or Cobalt, is vital for enabling the technologies necessary for the EU's transition to an efficient and environmentally friendly economy. However, 95% of the EU's rare-earth imports originate from three countries, among them Russia and China. How can the EU ensure a resilient supply of critical raw materials while safeguarding its environmental and ethical standards?

by Adam Hadžić (CZ)

ABSTRACT

Critical raw materials (CRMs) such as lithium, cobalt and rare-earth elements are essential for technologies central to the EU's green and digital transitions. However, the EU remains **highly dependent on imports from a limited number of third countries**, exposing it to **supply disruptions and geopolitical pressure**. At the same time, the extraction and processing of these materials raise **environmental and ethical concerns**, including ecosystem degradation and human rights violations. The challenge, therefore, lies in **strengthening supply chain resilience without compromising environmental and ethical standards**.

QUOTE

“Europe needs raw materials to succeed in our industrial and climate ambitions. The EU requires stable, secure and diversified supply chains.” - Stéphane Séjourné, Executive Vice-President for Prosperity and Industrial Strategy, European Commission

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

Critical raw materials play a central role in achieving the objectives of the **European Green Deal** and the **EU's ambition to become climate-neutral by 2050**. Technologies such as batteries for electric vehicles, wind turbines, **solar panels, and digital infrastructure rely heavily on materials like lithium, cobalt, nickel and rare-earth elements**. **Lithium, nickel, and cobalt are the main ingredients for high-performance batteries**, allowing them to store more energy for longer periods. Rare-earth elements are used to make the powerful magnets in wind turbines that convert mechanical energy into electricity. These same materials, along with other key minerals, are also the building blocks for the microchips and high-speed



hardware that run digital networks. As a result, demand is expected to rise sharply in the coming decades.

According to the European Commission, [EU demand for lithium could increase up to 21 times by 2050](#), while demand for rare-earth elements could grow by [six to seven times](#), driven mainly by clean energy and mobility technologies. Despite this growing demand, the EU currently produces only [a small share of the CRMs it consumes](#) and remains heavily dependent on imports.

This reliance is focused on very few suppliers. For example, [China accounts for almost all of the EU's supply of heavy rare-earth elements](#) and dominates global processing capacities for many CRMs, while [Russia is a key supplier of several metals, including nickel and palladium](#). Such concentration increases the EU's vulnerability to geopolitical tensions, trade restrictions, and supply chain disruptions, as highlighted by recent global crises. [Examples include](#) the supply shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic, the price spikes in metals following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and new export limits set by China on battery materials.

At the same time, CRM extraction and processing often involve [severe environmental damage and ethical concerns, including water pollution, biodiversity loss and labour rights violations](#). Ensuring secure access to CRMs while remaining aligned with EU environmental and human rights standards, therefore, represents a major policy challenge.

KEY TERMS

- **Critical raw materials (CRMs)** are raw materials of high economic importance for the EU whose supply is associated with a high risk of disruption due to the concentration of sources and limited substitutes. The EU regularly updates its list of CRMs based on economic and strategic criteria.
- **Rare-earth elements (REEs)** are a group of 17 elements used in high-performance magnets, batteries and electronics, particularly important for renewable energy technologies and electric mobility.
- **Supply chain resilience** is the ability of supply chains to anticipate, withstand and recover from disruptions while continuing to provide essential materials and services.



- **The circular economy** is an economic model focused on reducing waste and resource use by promoting recycling, reuse and longer product lifecycles, thereby lowering demand for primary raw materials.

KEY ACTORS

EU Member States: Responsible for permitting, mining, and processing projects, implementing EU legislation and balancing economic development with environmental protection at the national level.

Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs ([DG GROW](#)):

Responsible for shaping and implementing EU industrial policy and internal market legislation, including initiatives such as the Critical Raw Materials Act. It coordinates measures to diversify and strengthen raw material supply chains, enhance supply chain resilience, support strategic projects, and reduce the EU's dependencies on third countries in line with broader strategic autonomy objectives.

Third-country suppliers (e.g. China, Russia, Democratic Republic of the Congo): Provide a significant share of the EU's imported CRMs, often controlling extraction or processing stages of global supply chains.

Mining and processing companies (e.g. [Nordic Mining ASA](#)): Operate CRM extraction and refining activities both inside and outside the EU, influencing environmental practices, labour conditions and technological innovation.

Local communities and civil society organisations (e.g. [Děti Země](#)): Are directly affected by mining activities and play a key role in monitoring environmental and social impacts and advocating for ethical standards.

[Greenpeace](#): Is an international environmental organisation active across the EU that monitors the environmental impacts of mining and raw material extraction. It influences public debate and policy on critical raw materials through advocacy, research and legal action.

RELEVANT POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

In 2024, the EU adopted the [Critical Raw Materials Act \(CRMA\)](#), aiming to reduce strategic dependencies and increase the resilience of CRM supply chains. The CRMA sets concrete benchmarks for 2030, including producing at least **10% of the EU's annual CRM consumption through domestic extraction, 40%**



through processing and 25% through recycling within the EU.

It also introduced measures to streamline permitting procedures for strategic projects, setting strict time limits of [27 months for extraction and 15 months for processing](#) permits through a single designated authority in each Member State, granting these projects overriding public interest status to accelerate the decision-making process. At the same time, it emphasises the need for high environmental and social standards, requiring projects to comply with specific EU environmental legislation such as the [Habitats Directive](#) for biodiversity protection and the [Water Framework Directive](#) for water quality, while strictly adhering to international human rights norms. This includes mandatory compliance with the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), the [OECD Due Diligence Guidance](#), and the [ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work](#) to prevent forced and child labour, while also ensuring the [Free, Prior and Informed Consent \(FPIC\)](#) of indigenous communities and the protection of their traditional lands.

In addition, the EU has launched international partnerships, such as the [EU-Canada Strategic Partnership on Raw Materials](#) and cooperation frameworks with African ([Joint Vision for 2030](#)) and Latin American countries ([EU-Mercosur Agreement](#)), with the latter being met with [mixed public response](#). These frameworks have been launched to diversify supply sources while promoting sustainable mining practices.

However, [critics argue](#) that existing measures may not be sufficient to meet rapidly increasing demand, while concerns remain about the environmental impacts of expanding mining activities within the EU regarding the heavy use of local water supplies, the destruction of natural habitats, and the risk of soil pollution from mining waste.

KEY CHALLENGES

Strategic Autonomy of the EU

One of the central challenges lies in balancing **strategic autonomy with sustainability**. Increasing domestic extraction of critical raw materials can reduce the EU's dependency on imports and strengthen supply security. However, mining activities within the EU often face strong public opposition due to **environmental risks, land-use conflicts** and concerns about long-term ecological damage. Projects



related to lithium, rare-earth elements or other minerals have repeatedly encountered resistance from [local communities](#), particularly in regions with protected ecosystems or agricultural land. As a result, the EU must reconcile its ambition to expand domestic production with strict environmental legislation and public expectations regarding environmental protection.

The Necessity of International Suppliers

A second major challenge is the geopolitical concentration of global supply chains. Despite efforts to diversify suppliers, [many critical raw materials remain sourced or processed predominantly in a small number of third countries](#). [China, in particular, dominates the processing of rare-earth elements and battery materials](#), while other materials depend heavily on suppliers in politically unstable regions. This concentration exposes the EU to [geopolitical leverage, export restrictions and supply disruptions](#), limiting its ability to ensure stable access to materials essential for strategic industries. At the same time, the EU's reliance on external partners reduces its capacity to enforce environmental and ethical standards throughout global supply chains.

Recycling of Critical Materials

Another challenge concerns the limited short-term potential of recycling and material substitution. While recycling is a [key pillar of the EU's circular economy strategy](#), current recycling rates for many critical raw materials remain low due to technical complexity, insufficient collection systems and economic constraints. Moreover, [many CRMs are used in small quantities in complex products, making recovery difficult](#). [Substitution of critical materials with more abundant alternatives is often technologically unfeasible or leads to reduced performance](#), particularly in high-efficiency applications such as batteries or renewable energy technologies. Consequently, recycling and substitution are unlikely to significantly reduce dependency on primary extraction in the short to medium term.

FURTHER RESEARCH

- [“Sustainable supplies of critical raw materials”](#) European Parliament, 2023. (A concise overview by the European Parliament explaining why critical raw materials are essential for the EU's green and digital transitions, with useful data on import dependency and supply concentration.)



- [*“A Guide to the European Critical Raw Materials Act”*](#) African Policy Research Institute, 2024. (An official summary of the Critical Raw Materials Act outlining its objectives, 2030 benchmarks and the EU’s strategy to reduce strategic dependencies and strengthen domestic capacity.)
- [*“Executive summary – The role of raw materials in the green transition”*](#) International Energy Agency, 2023. (An analytical report examining global demand trends for minerals used in clean energy technologies, including projections and risks related to supply concentration and geopolitical exposure.)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

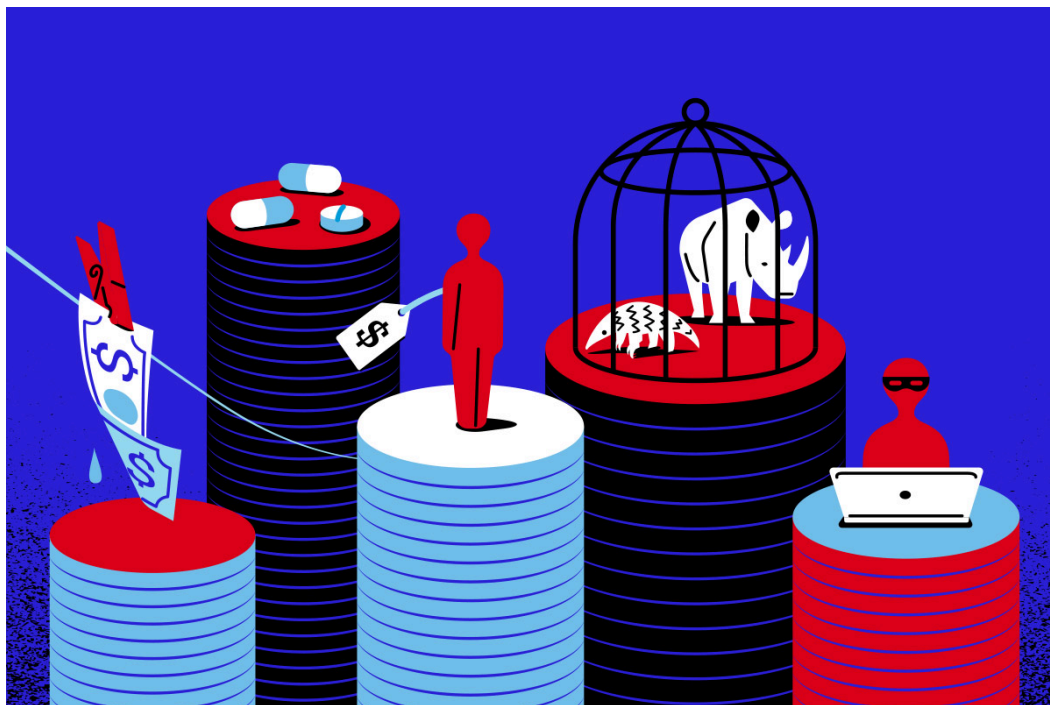
- To what extent should the EU prioritise domestic extraction of critical raw materials despite potential environmental trade-offs?
- How can the EU effectively enforce environmental and ethical standards in CRM supply chains beyond its borders?
- What role can recycling and material substitution realistically play in reducing the EU’s long-term dependency on imported CRMs?



Committee on Legal Affairs (JURI)

Criminals Without Borders: Organised crime networks increasingly operate across national borders, taking advantage of differences in legal systems, policing practices, sentencing rules, and enforcement capacity between European states. Criminal groups exploit gaps in coordination and weak information sharing, making investigations less effective. While people, goods, and capital move freely within the EU, law enforcement largely remains national, creating a clear mismatch. What can the EU do to strengthen cross-border cooperation, close legal and enforcement gaps, and ensure more effective joint action against organised crime in line with shared European standards?

by Maja Tho Hartvigsen (NO)



[Image 1](#), Types of transnational crime, United Nations

ABSTRACT

Criminal activity is often motivated by the pursuit of [financial gain](#). While the small fish take on the local grocery stores, there are [huge networks](#) of criminal organisations based all over Europe. They work **across borders**, exploiting nations' individual legal systems, hiding their work in the [wide gaps](#) of information sharing and poor EU mobility. These organisations take advantage of **differences in law**, police work and **jurisdiction** to widen their market, maximising potential profit and avoiding law enforcement.



QUOTE

“Organised crime is not only about illegal activities; it's a system that infiltrates legal structures.”

*- **Giovanni Falcone**, a former Italian prosecutor*

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

Cross-border crime, including international organised and transnational crime, is often portrayed in popular culture as the work of powerful actors operating beyond state control. In reality, international crime is not a new phenomenon, but a longstanding feature of global interaction. Cross-border crime has existed in Europe for a long time, [evolving](#) as political borders and trade routes changed over centuries. Historically, limited law enforcement allowed smuggling and banditry to flourish, but the economic and political integration of the EU comes with modern [challenges](#) connected to organised crime.

After the Second World War, the [European Economic Community promoted free trade and movement](#) by removing barriers between countries. This created new opportunities for organised crime to expand across borders, exploiting differences in legal systems. The [Schengen Agreement](#), established in the 1990s, removed internal border controls among participating countries, facilitating travel, but also making it harder to [detect and prevent](#) criminal activities such as trafficking, smuggling, and money laundering.

In response, the EU developed cooperative frameworks. Agencies like [Europol](#) were created to improve information sharing and coordinate law enforcement across member states. [The European Arrest Warrant](#) simplified cross-border prosecutions. Initiatives like the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats ([EMPACT](#)) enable joint operations targeting organised crime groups.

Today, cross-border crime in Europe encompasses traditional organised crime such as smuggling and fraud, and newer threats like cybercrime.

KEY TERMS

- [Cross-border crime](#) is any serious crime with a cross-border dimension committed or attempted to be committed at, along or in the proximity of the external borders.
- [Jurisdiction](#) is the power, right, or authority to interpret and apply the law.



- [Cybercrime](#) is a criminal activity committed using a computer, especially to illegally access, transmit, or manipulate data.
- [Trafficking](#) / [Smuggling](#) is to import or export secretly, contrary to the law and especially without paying duties imposed by law.
- [There is no current definition by the EU](#) of what a “**criminal network**” or “**organised crime**” is. However, it has previously been described as a group acting in concert to commit crimes for financial or material benefit. Newer descriptions also often include the use of violence, corruption or intimidation to gain control over parts of society.
- [Money laundering](#) is the crime of moving money that has been obtained illegally through banks and other businesses to make it seem as if the money has been obtained legally.

KEY ACTORS & EXISTING MEASURES

European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol)

Europol is a European law enforcement agency whose work centres around [preventing and combating all forms of serious international and organised crime, cybercrime and terrorism](#), and therefore plays a central role in fighting organised crime across Europe. In its 2021 Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment ([SOCTA](#)), Europol reported that nearly [40% of the criminal networks are active in drug trafficking. The production and trafficking of drugs remains the largest criminal business in the EU.](#) Europol facilitates [joint investigation](#) teams, coordinating operations that have led to arrests. For example, Operation [Silver Axe IX](#) targeted illegal pesticide trade and resulted in the seizure of over **1222 tonnes** of pesticides across Europe. However, [Europol](#) cannot [arrest suspects](#) directly and depends on national police forces, limiting its direct impact.



European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation ([Eurojust](#))

Similarly, Eurojust supports judicial cooperation by resolving jurisdictional conflicts and coordinating prosecutions. In 2022, [Eurojust contributed to more than 4,000 arrests and the seizure of drugs worth almost 12 billion EUR](#). Their coordination of joint investigation teams helped speed up extradition and prosecution, but differences in national legal frameworks sometimes delayed outcomes. Eurojust's [Annual Report](#) notes growing challenges due to complex, multinational criminal networks.

European Border and Coast Guard Agency ([Frontex](#))

Frontex is the agency responsible for supporting Member States in managing and securing the EU's external borders. It coordinates large-scale joint [operations](#) involving border guards from several countries to detect and prevent illegal border crossings, smuggling, and human trafficking. Frontex deploys intervention teams and uses advanced surveillance technologies such as **drones, biometric systems, and data analytics** to improve situational awareness and response times. This coordinated approach helps close gaps that criminals exploit by moving people and goods illegally across borders. However, Frontex has faced criticism over [human rights issues](#), such as the treatment of migrants during border checks. In response, the agency has increased transparency efforts, strengthened training on fundamental rights for its staff, and improved oversight mechanisms to ensure operations comply with EU values.

The Fundamental Rights Agency ([FRA](#))

The FRA is an independent body founded by the EU that works with policymakers, [sharing insights and raising rights awareness at the EU, national and local levels](#). It plays a crucial role in monitoring how security policies and enforcement activities affect the fundamental rights of individuals within the EU. FRA conducts independent research and publishes reports identifying risks related to discrimination, privacy infringements, and unfair treatment linked to border controls, data sharing, and policing practices. By advising EU institutions and Member States, FRA helps ensure that [security measures](#) do not violate rights protected under EU law, striking a necessary balance between effective crime prevention and the protection of personal freedoms. Its work supports the development of policies that are both strong and respectful of human dignity.



The European Arrest Warrant (EAW)

The EAW is a legal tool that has simplified and accelerated the extradition process between Member States. Before the EAW, extraditions could be lengthy and complicated due to differing national laws. The EAW sets out a streamlined process that enables faster arrest and transfer of suspects involved in crimes spanning multiple countries. This has been particularly effective in prosecuting members of organised crime groups who often cross borders to avoid justice. However, the system sometimes [faces delays or refusals](#) when concerns arise about prison conditions or whether suspects will receive a fair trial, reflecting ongoing differences in legal and human rights standards among Member States.

The European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)

EMPACT is an EU initiative that coordinates targeted action plans on priority crime areas like drug trafficking, cybercrime, human trafficking, and organised property crime. EMPACT [brings together](#) law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities, and other stakeholders from across Europe to share intelligence, pool resources, and conduct joint operations. This multidisciplinary approach has led to significant successes, including [large-scale drug seizures](#). However, the initiative's impact is sometimes hindered by uneven [engagement](#) from Member States, as some contribute more resources and personnel than others, which can limit overall effectiveness.

National Competent Authorities (NCAs)

NCAs are specialised units within Member States dedicated to tackling organised crime. These units vary in size, funding, and expertise depending on the country. For example, countries like [Germany and France](#) have well-established, well-resourced agencies with thousands of officers focused on cross-border crime. In contrast, smaller or less affluent Member States may have fewer resources and less capacity to enforce complex investigations, resulting in enforcement disparities across the EU. Criminal groups exploit these uneven enforcement capabilities by [shifting their operations](#) to jurisdictions where law enforcement is weaker or less coordinated.



Grassroots and civil society organisations

Organisations such as [Anti-Slavery International](#) and [Transparency International](#) contribute by raising public awareness, advocating for stronger laws and policies, and providing support services for victims of organised crime, such as human trafficking and corruption. Anti-Slavery International, for example, works to expose modern slavery practices and pushes for better victim protections within EU legislation.¹ These organisations often serve as watchdogs and voices for vulnerable populations, helping to keep pressure on policymakers and law enforcement agencies. Despite their important role, these groups often face limitations in funding and [political influence](#), restricting their direct ability to impact enforcement or policymaking.

KEY CHALLENGES

National sovereignty

With the need for effective EU-wide cooperation, [law enforcement](#) and judicial powers are traditionally exclusive competencies of Member States, each with its own legal system, priorities, and enforcement capacities. However, [“freedom, security, and justice”](#) is a shared competence between the EU and its Member States, which makes the scope of EU involvement somewhat unclear and often contested.

This tension has led to legal challenges from Member States concerned that certain EU measures regarding crime infringe on their sovereignty and constitutional principles. For example, the [German Federal Constitutional Court](#) has challenged the European Arrest Warrant, arguing that aspects of it violate fundamental rights protected by the German constitution. Such cases highlight the ongoing struggle to define how far the EU can extend its reach into traditionally national areas like policing and criminal justice.

¹ Modern slavery practices have many definitions but all include [control, involuntary actions and exploitation](#)



Security measures and fundamental rights

Efforts to strengthen border controls, surveillance, and data sharing, especially through agencies like Frontex, can clash with the EU's commitment to human rights and privacy protections upheld by the Fundamental Rights Agency, for example the surveillance and extensive data sharing can conflict with protections under the [EU Charter of Fundamental Rights](#), especially [Article 7](#) (Respect for private and family life) and [Article 8](#) (Protection of personal data). This raises ethical questions, such as how far enforcement can go without infringing on personal freedoms, and how to maintain public trust while ensuring safety. The risk of discrimination, unlawful detention, or privacy violations poses a challenge to creating cohesive policies that are both effective and fair.

Resource allocation and political will

An uneven resource allocation and political will across Member States also remains an issue. While countries like Germany and France invest heavily in specialised units and international cooperation, others lack the [funding](#), trained personnel, or political focus. These disparities create weak links in the EU's collective security, undermining efforts like EMPACT and joint investigation teams. With a growing share of cross-border crime involving cybercrime, many Member States, especially those with smaller budgets, struggle to keep up with the technical demands of this new threat. Criminals [exploit](#) these gaps, making stronger EU-wide coordination and investment essential.

Legal complexity and procedural differences

The [European Arrest Warrant](#) is still hindered by varying interpretations of human rights standards and detention conditions. This legal patchwork complicates prosecution and frustrates the goal of seamless cross-border justice.

FURTHER RESEARCH

- [“Peace and security: cross border crime”](#), a short video by the European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022
- [“Border Agents Search For Hidden Drugs at Gatwick Airport”](#), a video compilation of border control stopping drug trafficking by DangerTV, 2019



- [“Human trafficking vs smuggling”](#), a video by Melissa Siegel, 2021

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- To what extent should the EU limit national sovereignty to fight cross-border crime?
- How should the EU adapt its approach to organised crime as criminal networks move into cybercrime and digital financial systems?
- To what extent does public trust in law enforcement and EU institutions affect the success of cross-border crime prevention?
- Where should the line be drawn between effective surveillance and unacceptable intrusion in the fight against organised crime?



Committee on Fisheries (PECH)

Go fish: While Europe's fisheries continue to support food production and coastal livelihoods, a recent assessment of the European Environment Agency revealed that only 28% of assessed fish and shellfish stocks in European waters are being harvested at levels considered biologically sustainable. Given that the fisheries sector across the EU generates tens of billions of euros annually, how can the EU balance the economic gain of fisheries with the protection of marine biodiversity in both coastal areas and inland waters?

by Vlad Misterian (RO)

ABSTRACT

European fisheries provide **not merely food but also [jobs and income](#)** for many people, especially those living in coastal regions such as the **Northeast Atlantic** and the **Mediterranean Sea**, where **[fishing is a way of life](#)**. Fisheries are also **[highly profitable](#)**, contributing **tens of billions of Euros** to the EU economy each year. However, according to the European Environment Agency, only **28%** of **fish and shellfish stocks** are harvested at biologically sustainable levels. In other words, **nearly three out of every four fish stocks are overfished**.

The **more fish** are caught today to boost profits, the **fewer fish** there will be tomorrow. The EU has attempted to address this through **[several approaches](#)**, including common policies, funds to help fishers transition to sustainable practices, and the creation of protected areas.

Nevertheless, enforcement of these measures is uneven across **Member States**. Countries like **[Sweden and Denmark](#)** adhere closely to **scientific catch limits** and **inspect vessels** regularly to ensure that fishers follow the rules. As a result, fish populations like the Eastern Baltic Cod are beginning to show **signs of recovery**. Meanwhile, in the **[Mediterranean](#)**, Member States conduct **[fewer boat inspections](#)** and are less strict about enforcing fishing bans in protected areas.

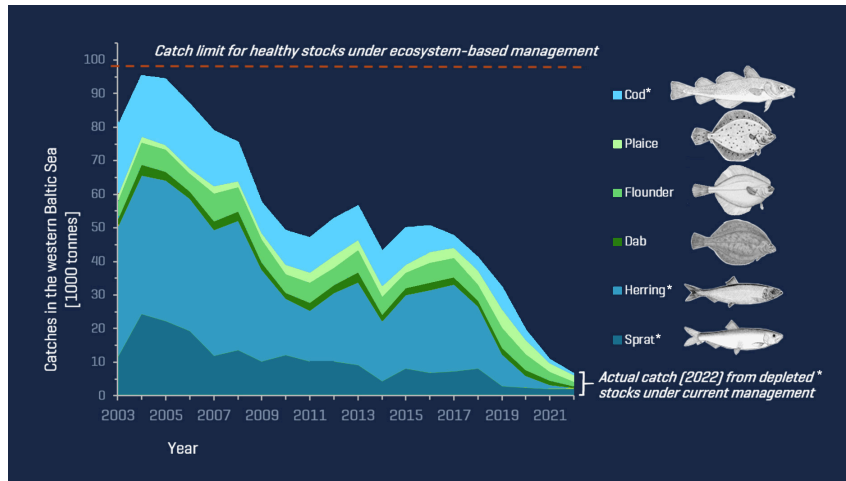


Image 1, Fish populations are shrinking in the Baltic Sea, GEOMAR

QUOTE

“We must plant the sea and herd its animals using the sea as farmers instead of hunters. That is what civilisation is all about - farming replacing hunting.” - Jacques-Yves Cousteau, French naval officer and oceanographer

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

Overfishing in European waters did not happen **overnight**. As **fishing technologies** developed during the **20th century**, so did overfishing. **Fishing and overfishing** had both intensified as trawlers and larger fleets **replaced** traditional boats, because fish were removed from the waters **faster** than they could reproduce, leading to the **decline** of many species, such as the **Northern Bluefin Tuna**. Once abundant in European waters, it had almost **vanished** by the **1960s** due to overexploitation.

Since the 1990s, scientists have gathered **strong evidence** that fish populations face **multiple threats**, including excessive fishing pressure, destruction of habitats from coastal development and pollution, and climate change that alters ocean temperatures and chemistry. All this puts both **fish and fishing communities** at risk. When a town depends almost entirely on fishing and the fish disappear, the whole **local economy can collapse**, sometimes forcing families to relocate.



KEY TERMS

- A **fishing quota** is a limit on how much of a certain fish species can be caught within a specific time period. Quotas aim to prevent overfishing and are usually set based on scientific advice.
- A **fish stock** refers to a population of a specific fish species living in a particular area. Scientists assess fish stocks to determine their health and how much fishing they can withstand.
- **Inland waters** include rivers, lakes, and freshwater systems inland from the coastal zone. These waters also support fish populations and fisheries and can be affected by overfishing and pollution.
- **Bycatch** refers to the **unwanted** fish and other marine creatures trapped by commercial fishing nets while fishing for a different species.
- **Bottom trawling** is a fishing method where weighted nets are dragged along the seafloor to catch fish and shellfish living near or on the seabed, such as cod, plaice, and shrimp. Whilst effective at catching target species, bottom trawling damages sensitive marine habitats like coral reefs and seagrass beds, destroys spawning grounds, and captures large amounts of bycatch.

KEY ACTORS

- The **Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE)** is part of the **European Commission**'s executive branch and is responsible for developing and proposing fishing laws such as the **Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)**. It sets sustainability targets such as **Maximum Sustainable Yield**, proposes EU legislation on fisheries management, oversees Member State implementation, and manages funding for sustainable fishing practices and aquaculture initiatives.
- The **European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA)** is an EU agency that supports Member States in enforcing EU fisheries rules by coordinating inspections, monitoring, and surveillance activities. EFCA facilitates joint operations, and its Union inspectors can



conduct inspections in EU waters, provide technical support and training, and help standardise data collection. However, Member States remain responsible for enforcement in their own territory and on their own vessels, while EFCA coordinates but does not enforce penalties.

- The **European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF)** provides financial support to Member States, based on a mix of strategic, economic, environmental and territorial criteria. Each Member State has to prepare a [national EMFAF programme](#), and funding is allocated with the Commission's approval. [EMFAF funding](#) supports investments into safer fishing gear, sustainable fish farms, diversification of fishing town economies by developing ocean tourism, for instance, and funds vessel decommissioning¹ when there are too many fishing boats.
- **Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)** such as [WWF](#), [Oceana](#), and [Blue Marine Foundation](#) play a crucial watchdog² role. They run public awareness campaigns about overfishing, publish independent research reports, and take legal action to pressure governments to follow existing laws. Additionally, NGOs work directly with fishing communities, running projects that train fishers in sustainable techniques, involve them in tracking fish populations, and connect them to eco-certification programmes like the [Marine Stewardship Council](#)³.
- **Member State governments and national fisheries authorities** [implement the EU fisheries policy domestically](#). They allocate national quotas, manage coastal and inland waters, issue licences, monitor fishing activity, and enforce rules. Each Member State has its own national fisheries authority, responsible for translating EU-wide laws into national legislation. [How effectively these apply](#) depends on whether the country has adequate funding and staff, how rigorously they enforce the rules, and how well they collaborate with fishing communities.

¹ [Vessel decommissioning](#) refers to the systematic process of dismantling and disposing of end-of-life vessels in an environmentally sound and safe manner. This process involves a series of complex operations, including the removal of hazardous materials, such as asbestos and heavy metals, and the recycling of valuable components and materials.

² [Watchdog](#) refers to a person or organisation responsible for making certain that companies obey particular standards and do not act illegally.

³ The [Marine Stewardship Council](#) is an international non-profit organisation that recognises and rewards efforts to protect oceans and safeguard seafood supplies for the future.

RELEVANT POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

To prevent overfishing, the EU has put several measures in place. **The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP)** is the EU's set of rules for the sustainable management of fishing. The EU has [exclusive competence](#) over the **conservation of marine biological resources**, meaning only the EU can create these binding laws. One key goal is [Maximum Sustainable Yield](#), basically, the most fish that can be caught year after year without damaging fish populations. These policies aim to **balance catching fish today** while ensuring **there are enough fish for the future**.

In **December 2024**, the Council of the EU approved an innovative [compensation mechanism](#) for the western Mediterranean for 2025 that **rewarded sustainable practices** rather than merely imposing sanctions. The agreement required trawlers to **reduce fishing effort by up to 66%** in Spanish and French waters to protect fish living on the seafloor. However, fishers could **earn back fishing days** by implementing [twelve specific measures](#), such as **removing destructive trawl gears**, and switching to selective equipment, using **45-millimetre square mesh nets** that allow small fish to escape, installing **remotely operated** fishing gear, implementing **electronic catch reporting systems**, and participating in scientific observer programmes.

Member States **set fishing quotas differently**, while some take [scientific advice](#) into account when setting them, others, such as [Spain](#), refused to **cut the fishing days by 65%** as initially proposed by the European Commission.

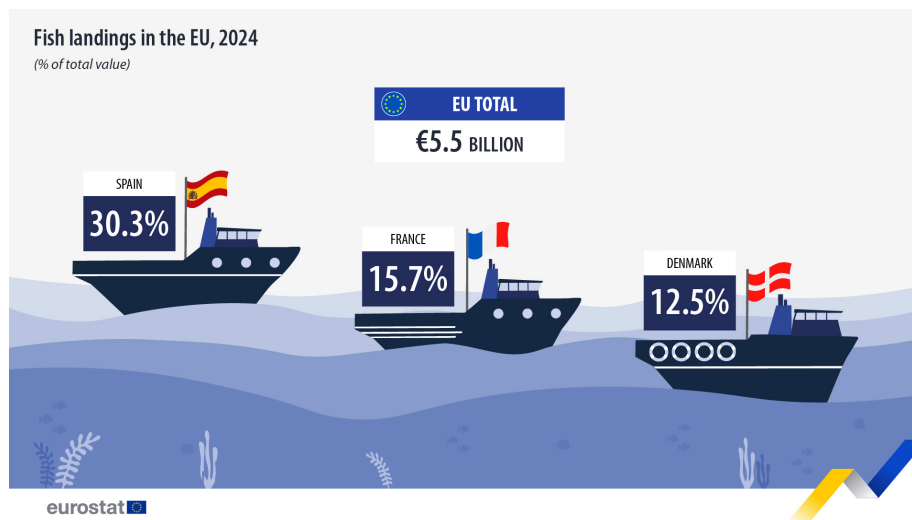


Image 2, Fish landings in the EU in 2024, eurostat



The North Sea [real-time closure system](#) uses live data from fishing boats to protect **juvenile fish in real time**. When vessels report catching high numbers of undersized cod, haddock or whiting, authorities can **temporarily close** that specific area. If the juvenile fish proportion exceeds the limits, **Norway** closes those fishing areas for **14 days**. These prohibited areas [move geographically](#) based on where the **young fish** concentrate, making them [more effective than static areas](#) as fish [shift seasonally](#), particularly in response to **climate change**. The system is based on **electronic monitoring** technology, including **GPS tracking, electronic logbooks, and catch documentation cameras**.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are designated regions within seas, oceans, estuaries, or large lakes that serve long-term conservation purposes. The [EU Biodiversity Strategy](#) calls for the legal protection of [at least 30%](#) of EU marine waters by 2030, including areas under **strict conservation measures**. MPAs can be designated through different legal frameworks. In the EU, one of the primary mechanisms is [Natura 2000](#), which is essentially a network of protected sites established under the [Habitats Directive](#). When such sites fall within marine waters, they effectively function as MPAs, and it is through this network that the EU, together with the Member States, designates a high percentage of its protected marine territory.

Member States are responsible for national designations, with many expanding their coverage in the last **10 years**. Coverage varies significantly, between [45.4% and 2.3%](#) of marine territory, depending on the country. However, designating protected areas alone is [not effective](#) in countering overfishing. Within Natura 2000 sites, the **Habitats Directive** requires Member States to protect **specific marine habitat types and endangered species** by preventing activities that may significantly disturb them and implementing targeted conservation measures, meaning **MPAs must be actively managed** with fishing restrictions and conservation measures, not just marked as protected zones on a map.

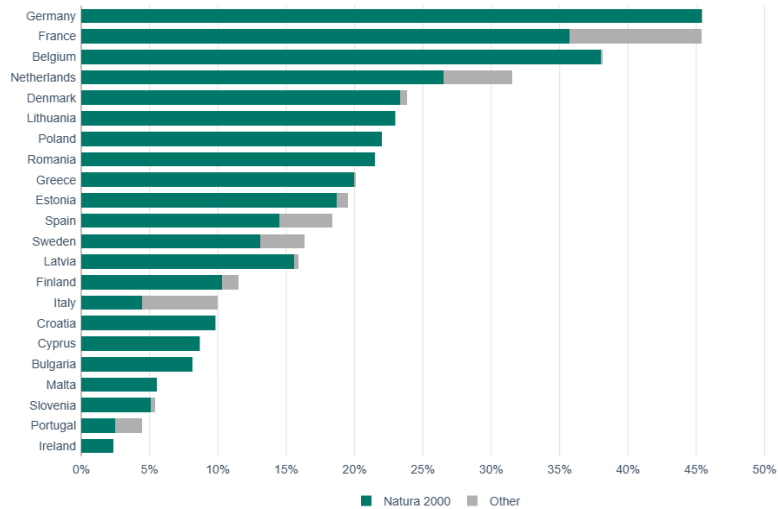


Image 3, Natura 2000 designated areas percentage per Member State, European Environment Agency

KEY CHALLENGES

When Economic Survival Clashes with Scientific Advice

Not all Member States **prioritise sustainability equally** when setting fishing quotas. While **Total Allowable Catches (TACs)**¹ are meant to follow [scientific recommendations](#) from the **International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES)** and the **Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF)**, economic pressures often **override** ecological concerns. In 2021, the EU fishing fleet employed nearly [125,000 fishers](#). In some **European coastal communities**, fishing accounts for up to [half of all local jobs](#). For example, in **Scotland's** fishing towns of **Fraserburgh** and **Peterhead**, over [4,000 jobs](#) depend on fishing and fish processing, with **alternative employment often being scarce**.

When scientists **recommend lower catch limits** to allow stocks to recover, Member States face a **complicated decision**: protect jobs today or ensure fish tomorrow. The problem is that between [2001 and 2016](#), TACs were set **above scientific advice**. [One 2021 analysis found](#) that fisheries ministers consistently **justify excessive quotas** as necessary "**compromises**" between short-term economic needs and long-term sustainability. Setting higher quotas to protect employment today actually [undermines fish stock recovery](#), **threatening** the very jobs these policies aim to save. [Research](#) confirms that quotas have regularly **exceeded scientific recommendations**, creating a cycle where economic pressures perpetuate overfishing.

¹ [Total Allowable Catches](#) or fishing opportunities, are catch limits (expressed in tonnes or numbers) that are set for most commercial fish stocks.



Rules Without Resources: Why Enforcement Fails Across Borders

While the EU has established [comprehensive fisheries control systems](#), putting them into practice is another matter. The **CFP** requires Member States to [monitor fishing activity](#), report catches, and inspect vessels, but here's the catch: under the [Control Regulation](#), [Member States are responsible for enforcement](#) and must allocate **their own resources** to carry out controls. This means **each country decides** how much money, staff, and technology to dedicate to enforcement.

This results in **massive gaps** between countries. [A 2022 European Court of Auditors report](#) found that control systems are "**weakened by uneven checks and sanctions.**" Some Member States have sophisticated [satellite monitoring, patrol vessels, and teams of inspectors](#). Others [struggle with limited capacity](#) in the form of fewer boats, outdated equipment, and insufficient personnel to police vast coastal waters. These **resource differences** create [enforcement gaps](#) where illegal or harmful fishing continues simply because **there are not enough inspectors to stop it**. There's [little incentive](#) for a Member State to impose strict controls if neighbouring countries fishing the same waters do not do the same. Why put your own fishermen at a disadvantage when others can break the rules without consequences?

Fishing Communities Trapped Between Today's Bills and Tomorrow's Fish

Here is where things get really difficult. Imagine being a fisherman in a small coastal town. Fishing is not **just a job**; the outcome of it is directly affecting day-to-day life, the community's identity, and often the only work available for miles around. When fisheries managers announce new restrictions to help fish stocks recover, they are **essentially telling fishermen** they cannot catch as much as before.

This causes immediate hardship because **fewer fish caught automatically means less income**. But unlike other jobs where you might find work in a nearby town, many fishing communities are in **remote coastal areas** where [alternative employment is extremely limited](#). The entire community [depends on fishing](#). When catch limits drop, [entire coastal economies can collapse](#).

Hydropower and fish conservation

[Hydropower plants](#) have many upsides. They provide **clean energy** and support local communities, but they are an [obstacle](#) for aquatic wildlife. **Fish get injured** passing through turbines, [dams block](#)

migration routes and change water flows, affecting food availability and breeding. Some measures **help fish migrate back to spawn points**, such as **fish ladders**¹ or **fish-friendly turbines**. Fish ladders are **not implemented consistently** across the EU because they are **not legally required** everywhere, are **expensive** to build, and can **reduce** hydropower production.

CASE STUDY

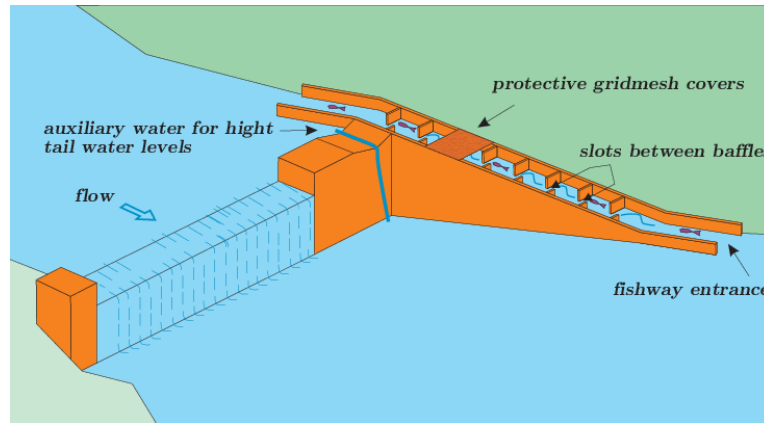


Image 4, Fish ladder explained

The ongoing **mackerel quota dispute** represents one of the most serious conflicts in European fisheries and has cost the industry **hundreds of millions of Euros**. The dispute began in **2010** when **mackerel stocks migrated further north due to warming ocean temperatures** caused by **climate change**. **Iceland and the Faroe Islands** argued they deserved larger quota shares because fish now spent more time in their zones. However, **negotiations collapsed** in 2013. Iceland and the Faroe Islands began setting unilateral quotas significantly higher than scientists recommended. In December 2024, **the United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands reached a four-party agreement** that completely excluded the EU, setting a 2026 catch of **299,010** tonnes, whilst the EU conservatively set only **156,921** tonnes.

¹ **Fish ladders** are structures designed to facilitate the passage of fish, by allowing them to navigate obstacles such as dams.



This **exclusion** sparked outrage across the EU fishing industry, particularly **affecting Ireland**. Ireland holds the largest EU quota share for Western Mackerel, and the cuts represent a direct loss of **€100-105** million with approximately **2,300 jobs** at risk in coastal towns like Killybegs. Ireland attempted to invoke the **Hague Preferences**¹, a protection mechanism granting Ireland larger quota shares when catches fall below specific levels. However, four Member States, **France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Poland**, blocked this invocation. The **mackerel wars** demonstrate critical weaknesses in **international fisheries** governance: there is no **enforcement mechanism** when coastal states exceed scientific advice, and climate change creates legitimate disputes about quota allocation that existing frameworks cannot resolve. Without a **comprehensive agreement**, stocks face continued **overexploitation**.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How can the EU make sure that fishing practices are not harmful long-term without hindering short-term economic development?
- How can Member States achieve standardised monitoring and enforcement to make fisheries laws more effective?
- How can the EU encourage all Member States to implement science-based quota setting?
- What role should local fishing communities have in designing policies that affect their livelihoods?

FURTHER RESEARCH

- [“Why Fish Ladders \(Mostly\) Work”](#), a YouTube video by Practical Engineering, 2024
- [“The High-Tech Future of Sustainable Fishing”](#), a YouTube video by SciShow, 2022
- [“Overfishing explained by the Marine Stewardship Council \(MSC\)”](#), a YouTube video by MSC, 2024

¹ The **Hague Preferences** is a mechanism under the CFP that was designed to adjust fish quota allocations to take account of the needs of certain fisheries dependent areas in northern parts of the UK and in the Republic of Ireland. These arrangements provided the UK and the Republic of Ireland the opportunity to invoke the Hague Preference when quotas for certain stocks fall below determined trigger levels.



Committee on Regional Development (REGI)

Ad integrum: Post-conflict societies across Europe continue to bear deep social and economic scars long after violence ends. In Northern Ireland, there are elevated Post-traumatic stress disorder rates, and 93% of children attend segregated schools, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has lost a significant amount of its population to brain drain since 1991. While keeping in mind existing peace frameworks, how can the EU support genuine societal healing in post-conflict regions, addressing persistent social and economic challenges?

by Amelie O'Connor (IE)

ABSTRACT

Post-conflict societies across Europe continue to struggle with deep-rooted social and economic challenges, many years after the fighting has formally ended. Despite peace agreements such as the [Good Friday Agreement](#) in Northern Ireland or the [Dayton Accords](#) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, these regions face persistent issues that hinder genuine societal healing. While the EU has limited direct competence in armed conflict resolution outside of its own borders, it supports post-conflict recovery through its Cohesion Policy framework and specific regional programmes such as [PEACE PLUS](#) in Northern Ireland. Despite these existing frameworks, many post-conflict regions continue to experience persistent social and economic challenges, raising the question of how the EU can effectively support societal healing beyond immediate short-term recovery.

QUOTE

"The Ceasefire Babies was what they called us. Those too young to remember the worst of the terror because we were either in nappies or just out of them when the Provisional IRA ceasefire was called. We were the Good Friday Agreement generation, destined to never witness the horrors of war but to reap the spoils of peace. The spoils just never seemed to reach us." - [Lyra McKee](#), a Northern Irish journalist who was [fatally shot](#) during the 2019 riots in Derry



BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

Europe has long been affected by violent conflict, and the [social and economic legacies](#) of these episodes endure long after hostilities cease. In the aftermath of the [breakup of Yugoslavia](#), the region experienced several wars across its former territory with an [estimated 140,000 deaths and four million displaced people](#)¹. In the far west of Europe, [the Troubles](#) in Northern Ireland lasted for three decades between the late 1960s, and when the [Good Friday Agreement](#)² was signed, which successfully ended large-scale violence, but underlying [social fragmentation](#) persists.

Beyond concluded peace processes, Europe is also home to **“frozen”** conflicts where the fighting has long since ended, but in the absence of any conclusive geopolitical agreement. For example, in the Eastern Mediterranean, the [1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus](#) resulted in the island’s partition, several thousand deaths and many more displaced people, with the conflict still remaining unresolved. Transnistria is a [breakaway](#) region of Moldova where a [brief war in 1992](#) led to a ceasefire but no political settlement, leaving the territory in a “frozen conflict” with its independence [not recognised by any UN state](#) during the entirety of its existence and under ongoing [Russian military presence](#).

In any case, the cessation of violence does not necessarily equate to full societal healing. Post-conflict societies commonly face brain drain, weakened social cohesion, and even intergenerational trauma.

Specifically, [brain drain](#) remains a critical problem, with countless young people leaving these regions to seek opportunities elsewhere and not returning. Reasons for this brain drain are a continuing [distrust of viable job opportunities](#), as well as the continuing corruption that [frequently develops in post-conflict societies](#). Furthermore, [educational segregation](#) perpetuates pre-existing societal divisions, as children from different religious or ethnic backgrounds have limited opportunities to mix, diminishing mutual and intercultural understanding. Mental health challenges are also prevalent, with regions that have recently undergone conflict having [notably higher rates of mental health difficulties](#), especially post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Even in regions with frozen conflicts like [Cyprus](#) and [Transnistria](#), populations continue to feel the effects of displacement and intimidation.

¹ Displacement is when people have no choice but to leave the place in which they usually reside, which in the context of this topic is due to conflict.

² The [Good Friday Agreement](#) is a political deal signed in 1998 that brought the Troubles in Northern Ireland to an end. Among its many terms included a powersharing agreement, the right to British, Irish or both nationalities for people born in Northern Ireland, and that armed groups would decommission their weapons.



KEY TERMS

- A **post-conflict society** is one emerging from a war or other conflict where the main fighting has ended, but other social, security, or economic issues may persist.
- **Intergenerational Trauma** is the transmission of trauma from one generation to another. **Trauma** itself describes the physiological response to distressing events outside one's capacity to cope with. Usually, this is from the generation that experienced the traumatic event, to subsequent generations such as their children and grandchildren, even when those subsequent generations did not witness the same hardship as their ancestors.
- **Brain drain** is when large numbers of educated and skilled people leave a country to live elsewhere.
- A **frozen conflict** is a conflict where the armed aspect has ended in the absence of a peace treaty, meaning that there is no definitive resolution.

KEY ACTORS

Directorates General (DGs) are the policy departments of the **European Commission**, which put policies into practice. The most relevant DGs for this topic are the **Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO)**, **Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC)**, and **Directorate-General for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST)**. These respective DGs implement various initiatives that, while not focused exclusively on post-conflict societies, have the capacity to assist in societal and economic healing.

The EU has limited power to act on its own, as the **competences** of education, culture and civil protection are mostly reserved to Member States. However, economic, social and territorial cohesion and social policy are shared competences. Many post-conflict regions, such as Northern Ireland and much of the Balkans¹ are **not members of the EU**. As such, the EU cannot enforce binding rules upon external states, yet can work to promote healing in post-conflict societies through diplomacy and partnerships.

¹ In this case, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are not EU Member States.



The [Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe \(OSCE\)](#) is an intergovernmental organisation operating across Europe, North America and Central Asia with a focus on security, human rights, and rule of law, particularly in states where there is an ongoing or recent conflict. The OSCE has [field operations](#) in various post-conflict regions, including Albania, several ex-Yugoslav states,¹ and Moldova, where they strive to maintain security and human rights. OSCE decisions are politically binding [amongst its members](#) but not legally enforceable under international law.

Lastly, there are many smaller non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that operate at a local or regional level, helping their communities. This includes projects specifically aimed at **fostering reconciliation and dialogue in the Western Balkans**, such as the [Centre for Nonviolent Action](#), which focuses on trust-building and [peace education](#) across the Western Balkans.

RELEVANT POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

While the EU has limited competence in the direct intervention or resolution of armed conflicts, it nonetheless has the capacity to assist in post-conflict recovery and reconciliation through initiatives in post-conflict regions, such as the [Northern Ireland PEACE PLUS programme](#). This cross-border funding programme invests in communities in [Northern Ireland and border counties](#) under [six](#) distinct domains between 2021 and 2027, to the tune of [€1.14 billion](#). It has been used to fund a [variety of projects](#) in local communities and is managed by the [Special EU Programmes Body](#), a North-South body established to [manage EU funding programmes](#) within Northern Ireland and the border counties in the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, the EU's [accession criteria](#) are relevant for candidate countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina. In particular, there is the [stabilisation and association process](#) for the Western Balkans, which aims to stabilise these countries in a way that prepares them for future EU accession. This [includes](#) economic development and also specific security-related goals, such as the [normalisation of relations](#) between Serbia and Kosovo as a prerequisite for accession.

¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, North Macedonia.



Though not pertaining exclusively to post-conflict societies, the [EU Cohesion Policy](#) is a highly relevant framework aimed at reducing regional disparities and promoting social and economic cohesion across the EU. Through funding instruments such as the [European Regional Development Fund \(ERDF\)](#) and [European Social Fund Plus \(ESF+\)](#), it has financed numerous projects, including a scheme aimed at tackling unemployment and economic recovery post-pandemic in [Cyprus](#). Furthermore, the non-EU states **Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **Moldova** are [participants](#), allowing them to benefit from funding under the [Employment and Social Innovation \(EaSI\)](#) strand of the ESF+. These projects are funded by the EU, but the work itself is carried out locally or nationally.

KEY CHALLENGES

Departure of Talent

Oftentimes, a conflict will lead to social and economic challenges that persist long past the actual violence. While not exclusive to post-conflict societies, brain drain is particularly acute in regions impacted by past violence, where economic difficulties and continuing insecurity, among other reasons, push people to seek opportunities abroad. In Northern Ireland, it is quite common for students to pursue [university education in Great Britain](#), and then **not return** after finishing their degrees. A similar pattern of outward migration can be observed in the Western Balkans, and a survey by the [United Nations Population Fund \(UNFPA\)](#) in 2021 found that [47% of Bosnians aged 18-29](#) planned to go abroad **either temporarily or permanently**.



Education

One of the most persistent challenges in post-conflict societies is that education systems, rather than fostering reconciliation, often mirror and reinforce existing divisions. In Northern Ireland, only [seven per cent](#) of pupils attend integrated¹ schools, but [sixty-seven per cent](#) of parents claim that they would want to send their children to such a school. As a result, many Catholic and Protestant children grow up never forming connections towards [the other community](#). A similar situation occurs in present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina, where dozens of schools operate under a system referred to as ["two schools under one roof"](#), where Bosniak and Croat students attend the same school building, but in legally distinct educational institutions, and do not mix. Beyond formal segregation, education can also become a site of political pressure in frozen conflicts. In the region of Transnistria, Romanian-language schools face [significant intimidation](#) from the local authorities, a situation which exists entirely outside of the EU's jurisdiction and amid intense military presence and influence from Russia.

Lack of Psychological Support

Furthermore, there are elevated rates of psychiatric and other health issues in post-conflict societies. For example, while it can be difficult to establish a definitive causal link in every case of mental health difficulties, there are **elevated rates of post-traumatic stress disorder** in both [Northern Ireland](#) and [Kosovo](#). A little under one in twenty people over fifty in Northern Ireland suffer from PTSD, and [sixty per cent of](#) those surveyed in a recent study named The Troubles as their worst traumatic event. Despite this, Northern Ireland has a particularly severe [shortage of psychiatrists](#) compared to the rest of the UK. There are several factors at play here, namely the **limited places** to train as a psychiatrist that have [only recently been increased](#), and possibly also the [exodus of young professionals](#) after completing higher education.

¹ In Northern Ireland, an [integrated school](#) is a type of school where children from all communities learn together in the same classes. There is often a [quota](#) for the amount of pupils coming from Catholic, Protestant or "other" communities, usually up to thirty percent.



Legal Resolutions

Even when peace treaties are signed, power-sharing agreements are brokered, and weapons are put away, violence can still persist in localised incidents. For example, in Northern Ireland, the [Good Friday Agreement](#) was signed in 1998, but "[paramilitary-style attacks](#)"¹ occur to this day, often in communities with [diminished trust](#) in the police and legal system. The EU cannot intervene in these incidents because it lacks jurisdiction over UK territory and the situation does not constitute an active armed conflict. In the case of animosity between Greece and Turkey in relation to Cyprus, both states, but not Cyprus, are [members](#) of the [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation \(NATO\)](#), so in theory are meant to be allied militarily, complicating matters.

FURTHER RESEARCH

- [“Transnistria: Caught between Russia and the EU | DW Documentary”](#), a documentary by Deutsche Welle, explaining the situation in Transnistria.
- [“Derry Girls”](#), a television series created by Lisa McGee, 2018-2022. Though entirely fictional, it to an extent portrays how normality and low-level conflict coexisted. This series contains strong language and mature themes.
- [“‘Why can there be no peace?’ Cyprus remains divided 50 years on”](#), an article from The Guardian, 2025
- [“Navigating brain drain in the Western Balkans”](#), a policy analysis by the Martens Centre, examining how EU policies can address youth emigration, talent retention, and post-conflict economic challenges in the region, 2024

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How much responsibility does the EU have to non-Member States within the continent, as opposed to member states, in the domains of post-conflict social and economic development?

¹ [Paramilitary style attacks](#) in Northern Ireland are extrajudicial assaults, such as shootings or severe beatings, used by armed groups to exert control under the guise of punishing alleged criminality. These acts operate entirely outside the rule of law, subjecting victims to violence without trial or proof.



- How can the EU design funding programmes that support long-term societal healing in post-conflict regions, rather than only short-term economic recovery?
- How can the EU support post-conflict regions in retaining young people and skilled workers, while respecting freedom of movement and national labour markets?
- How can the EU ensure that regional development initiatives in post-conflict areas do not unintentionally reinforce existing social or ethnic divisions?



Committee on Public Health (SANT)

The Good Stuff: Recently, proof of falsified or counterfeit medication entering the market has surfaced. Such medication bypasses the EU's policies for pharmaceuticals, typically going unnoticed due to the growing demand for medicine and a rising trend of e-pharmacies. Considering the critical profit losses and oftentimes harmful substances used in counterfeit medicine, how can the EU further prevent falsified pharmaceutical products from entering the market and its trade among Member States to protect its citizens, environment, and economy?

by Teres Šavlová (CZ)

ABSTRACT

Recent [cases of falsified medicine](#) invading the pharmaceutical market have led to [numerous deaths](#) of patients. **Falsified medicine finding its way into the hands of workers and patients** requires a solution that is [harmonised across the Member States](#). The [process of developing medicine and its public distribution](#) is **highly sensitive**, and the need for its protection grows in importance in the [era of chronic illnesses](#). Given continuing issues with [healthcare inaccessibility](#), patients are likely to resort to unauthorised sources of medicine, such as **e-pharmacies**, to get the care they need. When falsified medicines become more and more common in the pharmaceutical market, their consumption not only leads to **major economic losses** in the European Union but also causes [environmental damage](#) and **harms the daily lives of EU citizens**.

QUOTE

*“Too many falsified medicines get into our supply chains as ‘silent killers’... Fake Viagra, fake pain killers or fake anti-cancer medicines... do not cure illnesses — and when illegal medication contains aluminium or arsenic, the consequences are fatal.” - **Françoise Grossetête**, MEP and EPP Group's Rapporteur*

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

The [pharmaceutical market](#) is one of the **EU's key economic assets**, representing over [22.4% in global sales of medicine](#) and [increasing annually by 7%](#), while directly employing over [950,000 workers](#). Simultaneously, [funding](#) research & development in the pharmaceutical industry supports **safe production and testing of new pharmaceutical substances** in properly financed [clinical trials](#), which are

mandatory for all medicines in the EU. **Any medicine bypassing this process** is classified as **substandard or falsified medicine**. A combination of long durations of medicine development, the great costs of developing medicine which may fail to pass the clinical trials, and harsh deadlines for trials **creates a demand for lower-priced medicine for diseases**, with the market often failing to keep up.

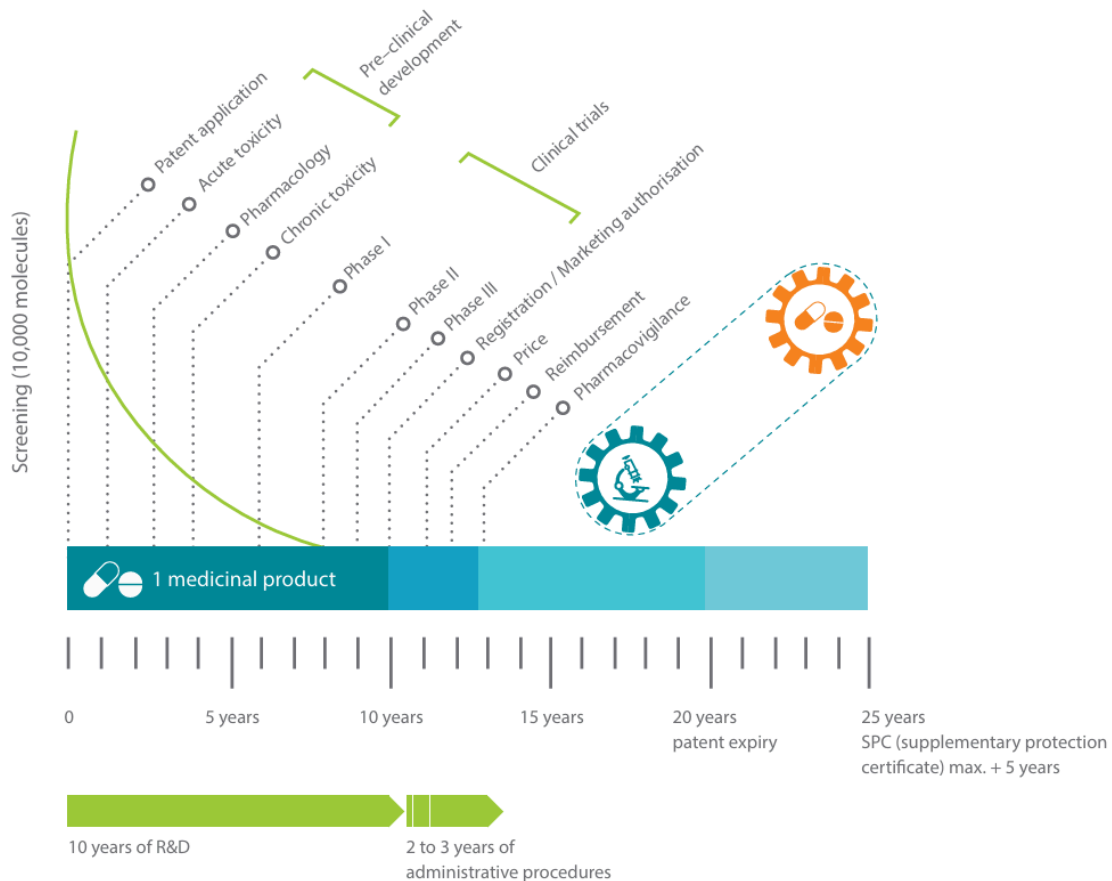


Figure 1: Phases of the Research and Development Process, European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations

Medicinal shortages are often the core reason for the distribution of falsified medicine, as demonstrated in Romania since 2015. Upon Romania's accession to the EU, newly imposed restrictive policies reduced competition in the pharmaceutical market, causing persistent medicine shortages, leading patients to resort to unauthorised pharmaceutical markets prone to falsified medicine.

In addition, **cases of organised crime related** to falsified medicines took place in 2024, when Belgium took part in the **SHIELD V** operation along with 30 other European countries, leading to the seizure of erectile stimulants and food supplements, found mostly in postal services, with online spaces playing a



vital role in the illicit pharmaceuticals market.

Similarly, [Operation SHIELD II](#), a joint investigation of **Hungarian and Norwegian authorities**, supported by Eurojust, led to the seizure of €63 million in illegal drugs and doping substances, but also found instruments in an **underground lab in Hungary** used to manufacture painkillers, hypnotics, and antihistamines with the intention of shipping them to Norway.

The [rise of chronic illnesses](#) is another key factor contributing to the strain on the pharmaceutical market. Chronic illnesses affect [ever younger patients](#), including illnesses such as obesity, cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health issues. On the other end of the spectrum, [the ageing of society](#) ensures a similar rise in diseases connected to age, such as [dementia](#). Notably, [premature respiratory issues](#) may also be attributed to environmental pollution, as demonstrated by the **devastating number of preventable casualties**, marking it as the **third most common cause of death** in the European Environment Agency member countries. In practice, the increasing prevalence of both chronic illnesses and spontaneous, environmentally induced diseases creates a **long-term demand for medicine**. While placing a strain on the already intricate pharmaceutical research & development process, the growing demand and medicine consumption create an **environment which allows vendors of falsified medicine to [exploit the patients' need for treatment](#)**.

KEY TERMS

- **Substandard and Falsified Medicines (SFMs)** are defined by the World Health Organisation as pharmaceutical substances that do not meet the quality standards, typically due to incorrect or inactive materials used for manufacture, while **Counterfeit Medicines** represent the theft of intellectual property.
- [Chronic Illnesses](#) are defined as long-term conditions whose effects remain persistent for longer than three months. Common chronic illnesses include [diabetes mellitus](#), [arthritis](#), and [asthma](#).
- [Policy inertia](#) refers to the inability of policymakers to update existing policies in light of changing circumstances, despite the potential change being more effective than the current policies.



KEY ACTORS

- **The Directorate-General for Health & Food Safety ([DG-SANTE](#))** serves as the European Commission's central authority for public health and pharmaceutical policy. DG SANTE plays a strategic role in promoting harmonised standards across Member States, implementing the Falsified Medicines Directive, and addressing emerging risks linked to online medicine sales.
- **The World Health Organisation ([WHO](#))** is a specialised organisation of the United Nations ([UN](#)) responsible for coordinating issues related to public health.
- **The European Medicines Agency ([EMA](#))** is a regulatory body granting pharmaceutical companies [marketing authorisation](#) to distribute medicines based on a framework of national regulations and quality standards described in the [European Pharmacopoeia](#),¹ while providing supervision to the scientific evaluation of the substances.
- **The European Anti-Fraud Office ([OLAF](#))** investigates and addresses large-scale fraud schemes that exploit European supply chains and funding mechanisms, such as the circulation of falsified medicines.
- **[EUROPOL](#)** supports Member States in combating all forms of international and organised crime, including the international trade of SFMs.
- **European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations ([EFPIA](#))** is a federation connecting 36 national associations, 40 leading pharmaceutical companies, and numerous small and medium-sized enterprises, contributing to [research, development, and delivery](#) of new medicines.
- **European Association of E-Pharmacies ([EAEP](#))** advocates for the interests and innovation of e-Pharmacies by promoting safety on digitalised healthcare systems, ensuring equal access to medicine and [providing transparent information to the public](#).

¹ **European Pharmacopoeia** serves as the reference work for evaluating the quality of medicines based on the quantitative and qualitative composition of the substance, while also establishing the tests mandatory during the substance's development.

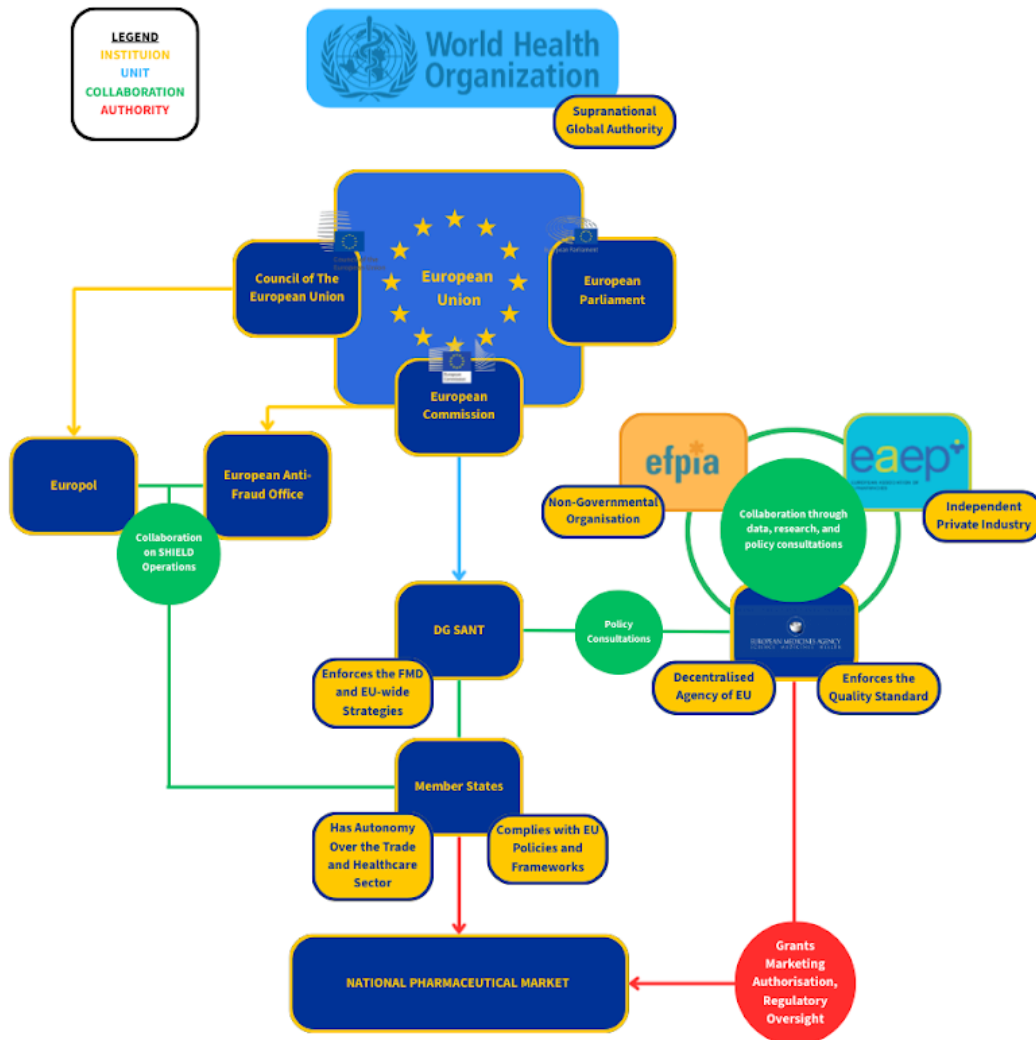


Figure 2: Stakeholder Map

RELEVANT POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

In the **Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)**, Article 28 ensures the free movement of goods among Member States, **clarifying the extent of limitations** of pharmaceutical distribution and the delicate nature of regulating their international trade. As the pharmaceutical sector is situated at the **overlap between trade and public health protection**, it's important to remember that the EU has **shared competence** over the healthcare and internal trade sectors, allowing the EU only to **suggest recommendations** and punish any breaches of EU-wide frameworks.



The **Falsified Medicine Directive (FMD)** was issued in 2011 as a ‘launching pad’ for legislation regulating the distribution of SFMs, proposing an **anti-tampering barcode scanning system** to ensure the validity of pharmaceuticals, with healthcare staff verifying barcodes on the packaging. Despite **regular updates**, the Directive received notable **criticism** for **disregard for its practical implementation**, drastically **slowing down the workflow** of hospital staff, as well as being cost-inefficient. Ultimately, its inconsistent nature and **loopholes** allowed for the **bypassing of this Directive** due to a lack of enforcement, as demonstrated by confirmed cases emerging **despite the FMD’s implementation**. Interestingly, the FMD may be seen as a **victim of policy inertia**.¹ Its **disharmonised implementation** matches the common signs of this phenomenon, considering also the Directive’s aforementioned technical and practical shortcomings, with only **28%** of the workforce believing in the Directive’s effectiveness in protecting patients’ safety.

The **Pharmaceutical Strategy for Europe**, updated in **2023**, is the EU’s plan to ensure **wide access to medicines and pharmaceuticals**. Although the Strategy acknowledges the unequal access to healthcare, Europe’s **dependency on external import** of certain medicines, and the pharmaceutical market’s pivotal role in the European economy, **it fails to describe the regulation needed** to mitigate the distribution of SFMs.

While the pharmaceutical market abides by EU-wide frameworks, such as the aforementioned Strategy or **Good Distribution Practice of Medicinal Products for Human Use**, as well as the **authorisation process and quality standards** issued by EMA, **national legislation** may differ on pricing and market control. For example, the **Czech General Pharmaceutical Legislation** has a **defined monetary cap** on reimbursing medicines by a central governmental body, while the **German Medicinal Products Act** allows for negotiation of the price of medicinal products based on their efficacy. Currently, all national laws **must be updated in accordance with EMA’s Reform of the EU pharmaceutical legislation**, which mandates the year 2026 as a transition period for all States to synchronise their policies. Although the fragmented market would benefit from EMA’s Reform, **individual States’ ability** to implement such changes within the proposed deadline **remains questionable**.

¹ **Policy inertia** describes maintaining existing policies without updating them in light of relevant circumstances, despite them losing effectiveness.



KEY CHALLENGES

Healthcare Accessibility

Despite the EU's commitment to [universal health coverage](#), **disparities in access to healthcare remain** across Member States, with an average of [2.4–3.6% of EU citizens reporting unmet medical](#) needs due to cost, waiting times, or distance to services. As a result, **patients are forced to resort to e-Pharmacies**, which often provide a wider array of medicines that **may not be authorised**. Many illegitimate drugs also enter the market [disguised as “lifestyle” medicine, vitamins, or food supplements](#), often distributed by private vendors.

e-Pharmacies

With harsher regulations on medicine distribution, the aforementioned **e-pharmacies are gaining popularity** due to their anonymous and practical nature. Despite [regulations tailored to the digital environment](#) of the pharmaceutical market, such as a **mandatory logo ensuring the validity** of purchased medicine, e-pharmacies and digital spaces remain a space for **organised crime in trafficking counterfeit medicines and SFMs**, and illegitimate distribution of medicine.

Economic Losses and Employment

The **financial strain** caused by falsified medicine entering the market costs the European pharmaceutical sector up to [4.4%](#) of total sales annually. The lost revenue consequently leads to over [37000 individuals losing their employment](#) in the research & development sector due to insufficient funding. The financial strain caused by lost profits, therefore, not only **contributes to the prevalent workforce shortage** but also halts the progress of research and development of medicine, thus **reducing the speed at which medicine covers the market demands**.

Toxic Substances and Local Cases

As [1 in 10](#) medicines **fail to meet the quality standards** due to incorrect dosage or dilution, usage of harmful chemicals or unhygienic manufacture, **many toxic substances** are released into the [environment](#), are handled by [workers](#), or even [reach the patients](#). The uncontrolled nature of SFMs contributes to the



progression of [antimicrobial resistance](#)¹, which simultaneously harms the [agricultural sector](#), as direct human contact with SFMs **sustains the prevalence of chronic illnesses**, leading to [productivity dips](#). Ultimately, some [cases of accidental fentanyl overdoses](#) emerged, along with the discovery of over 15 different types of [substandard cough syrups](#) and other [falsified pediatric medicines](#).

FURTHER RESEARCH

To continue your research independently in preparation for Brno 2026, explore the following links, articles, and videos:

- [“PharmaLedger's Detecting Falsified Medicines Use Case”](#), a brief summary of the issue of falsified pharmaceuticals by PharmaLedger Association, 2022.
- [“Milan Brych: New Zealand's Harold Shipman”](#), a document about a Brno conman known for promoting fraudulent cures for cancer by Interesting Fingz, 2021.
- [“How Criminals Are Making Millions Counterfeiting Prescription Drugs”](#), a video about the criminal nature of falsified medicine distribution by CNBC, 2023.
- [“Drug or Pokémon? Quiz”](#), an interactive quiz for examining one’s modern pharmaceutical knowledge, critical for spotting falsified medicine in practice, 2020.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

To broaden your horizons and exercise your personal stance towards the topic of falsified medicine in the pharmaceutical market, allow yourself to indulge in some food for thought:

- Which factors should be taken into consideration when synchronising and updating the regulatory policies, such as the False Medicine Directive?
- What kind of support should be offered to the victims affected by the false medicine epidemic?
- How should regulations of e-pharmacies handle the privacy, confidentiality, and medical history of their users?

¹ **Antimicrobial resistance** occurs when microorganisms, such as bacteria or viruses, gain resistance against effects of antibiotics and medication that was previously effective against them. This can happen due to the microorganisms adapting to the antibiotics, which may be accelerated with the overuse of such medication.



Committee on Security and Defence (SEDE)

Chain Reaction: Nuclear non-proliferation attempts have yielded few results, with the recent breach of the Budapest Memorandum aggravating concerns about nuclear war. At the same time, deterioration of the transatlantic relationship renews the question of building an independent European Nuclear deterrent. Should the EU change its nuclear approach, both domestically and internationally?

by Mariela Rangelova (BG)

ABSTRACT

Nuclear non-proliferation has played a key role in safeguarding international security ever since the end of the Cold War. At the time, **states** assumed that taking part in the **disarmament process would guarantee their safety**. Nevertheless, recent events, namely the breach of the Budapest Memorandum and the growing uncertainty regarding the United States' reliability, have **sparked debates about a common nuclear deterrent** within the EU. With the **increased** aggravation of transatlantic relations between the EU and the United States and the **war between Ukraine and Russia**, the EU has to decide whether it should continue its reliance on its North American ally via NATO or choose the path towards its **own nuclear independence**.

QUOTE

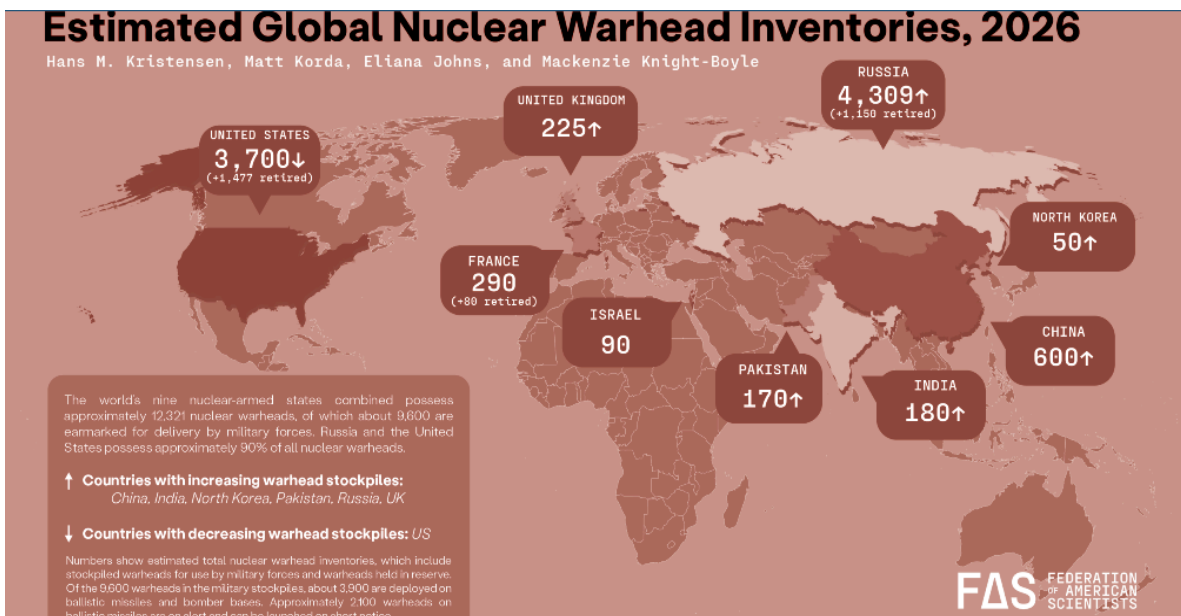
*“As long as nuclear weapons remain in existence, it is inevitable that they will someday be used, whether by design, accident or miscalculation.” - **Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland**, former Prime Minister of Norway and*

Director-General Emeritus of the World Health Organisation

BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

In the aftermath of World War II and the Cold War, one thing was certain – nuclear weapons were [an evident threat to international peace](#), and [significant efforts had to be made towards peace](#) within the international community. One key moment that shaped the peace-keeping process within the international community was [the signing of the Budapest Memorandum](#). It [ensured](#) that **Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity¹ and political independence, in exchange for surrendering its nuclear arsenal², would not be breached by Russia and the United States**. This was also a **signal** towards all non-nuclear states that “[disarmament would be honoured and rewarded](#)”.

Yet, in 2014, **Russia [breached this agreement](#) by annexing Crimea**. Eight years later, the Memorandum was violated again with the [full-scale invasion of Ukraine](#). Additionally, the **US has also been considered to have [violated the Memorandum](#)** by pushing forward with its minerals deal with Ukraine, in return for its military and economic support in the war with Russia. At the same time, the **US has [brought up the agreement to condemn Russian violations of international law](#)**, despite **its own actions being criticised** as [inconsistent](#) with the Memorandum.



[Image 1](#), “Status of World Nuclear Forces”, Federation of American Scientists

¹ [Territorial integrity](#) is an international law principle that describes the right of a state to preserve its territorial borders and sovereignty without external intervention.

² [Nuclear arsenal](#) is a state’s reserve of nuclear weapons.



Simultaneously, from the beginning of his second mandate as the President of the US, **Donald Trump has acted ambiguously towards Europe**. At the NATO Summit in 2025 in the Hague, Trump pressured NATO allies to increase their defence spending to at least **5% of their GDP**. In the following months, **Donald Trump made public statements** that **fueled new debates over the US's commitments towards the EU and its NATO allies**, emphasising that all is based on economic conditions and that Europe should not rely solely on them.

All this is especially relevant with how **international relations have developed or worsened in the past years**. The ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia has **raised concerns within the EU** about the possibility of military aggression extending toward the Member States. These concerns increased when Ukraine's neighbouring countries reported that Russia used **remote technology to cross the European borders of NATO**. These intrusions include drones that entered **the airspace of Romania and Moldova** in November of last year, crashing onto farmland.

These **breaches of international law**, the contradictory **behaviour of the US** administration towards Europe, and the evident **potential threat by Russia** have **propelled Member States to seriously start discussing a potential European Nuclear deterrent**, especially when the pressure is coming from the largest nuclear-weapon states.

KEY TERMS

- A **European Nuclear deterrent** is a possible project based on collaboration between the Member States to increase their common defence and to reduce their reliance on external help through nuclear weapons.
- **Nuclear non-proliferation** is a process which aims to do away with the spread of nuclear weapons technology and reduce the amount of existing nuclear weapons.
- **Nuclear disarmament** is the unilateral or multilateral act of reducing or eliminating the total sum of nuclear weapons in the world.
- **Nuclear deterrence** is a principle of international relations theory which describes how states refrain from using nuclear weapons due to retaliatory potential and their destructive force.



- **Nuclear umbrella** is a security guarantee from a state in possession of nuclear weapons that it will protect other allied or friendly states that do not own nuclear weapons through the use of its own nuclear weapons in case of a nuclear strike.

KEY ACTORS

- **The European Union (EU)** comprises 27 European countries that have ceded parts of their sovereignty to the EU's supranational institutions, while retaining the ability to shape policy-making on an EU level. Specifically, the **Council of the EU** is responsible for defining and implementing the **EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)**, based on guidelines set out by the **European Council**, as well as the **European External Action Service (EEAS)**, which also works on carrying out the CFSP. Although the EU does not possess direct authority over nuclear weapons or deterrence, it can, through the European Council and the Council of the EU, **adopt binding foreign policy decisions**, which require unanimity from the Member States.
- **The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)** works towards **the general and complete disarmament of state and non-state actors**. Moreover, the UNODA provides both impartial and up-to-date information on multilateral disarmament issues and activities. It also offers significant **organisational support in defining normative rules** and procedures in the area of disarmament through a variety of bodies such as the **Disarmament Commission** and the **Conference on Disarmament**. Thus, the UNODA establishes **disarmament measures through dialogue** and encourages regional cooperation. By doing so, it helps to **address the humanitarian impact** that major conventional weapons and emerging weapon technologies may have on the international community's peacekeeping.

- **The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)** promotes **safe, secure and peaceful use of nuclear science and technology**. It has published a number of scientific publications, such as **international safety standards, technical guides, conference proceedings and scientific reports**. In addition, the IAEA **manages several international networks** focused on strengthening international dialogue on nuclear technology and facilitating cooperation between network participants.
- **The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)** is a coalition of non-governmental organisations that is centred on **promoting adherence to and implementation of the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#)**, advocating for disarmament at both international and national levels.
- **The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)** is an alliance of countries from Europe and North America that **enables defence and security consultation and cooperation between its member states**. It guarantees the safety of its members through the promotion of democratic values. In cases of military disputes, despite attempts at peaceful resolution, it can invoke the **[principle of collective defence](#)**, authorising military assistance from allies to the attacked member.

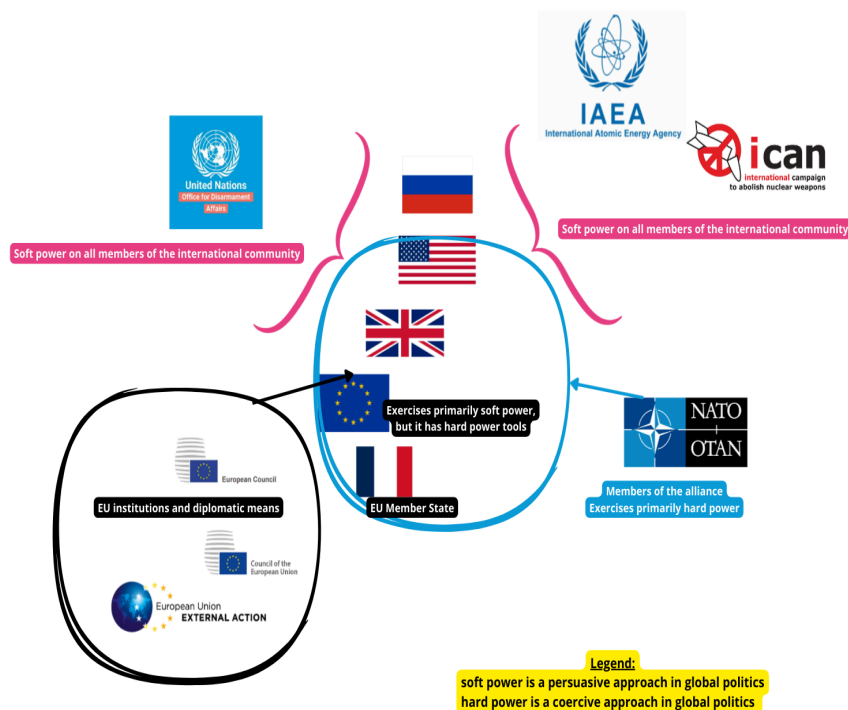


Image 2, “Powers of the Key Actors in Nuclear Relations”



- **Nuclear-armed states** such as the **United States (US)**, **Russia**, **France** and the **United Kingdom (UK)** have their own nuclear arsenal. **Russia** has the [largest amount of warheads¹ in the world](#), allowing it to continuously [undermine the Budapest Memorandum](#). The **US**, whose nuclear forces are [mainly relied on by NATO](#), holds the second-largest arsenal. In contrast, **France** has significantly less than either of the states, yet it is the only Member State of the EU to have its own nuclear weapons. The **UK** owns an even smaller number of nuclear warheads, which are intended exclusively for NATO.

RELEVANT POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

The **UN** has worked on the elimination of nuclear weapons ever since its establishment, accounting for the introduction of several multilateral treaties like the **Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)**, the **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)** and the **Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT)**, [binding the State Parties](#) to comply with them. In particular, the **NPT** [not only focuses](#) on the prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, on the peaceful use of nuclear energy and on disarmament, but it also created a safeguards system held by the IAEA. The IAEA utilises the system by [verifying compliance with the States' international legal obligations](#). While the treaty is **considered a landmark** within the international community, it has [faced internal challenges](#) from the continuous failure of nuclear-weapon countries to fulfil their obligations and **external challenges** in the face of the changing geopolitical environment that poses threats to the established norms on nuclear deterrence.

In addition, the **TPNW** prohibits the development, production, transfer, possession, or deployment of nuclear weapons, as well as their use or the threat of such use. However, it [does not include a verification regime²](#), instead, it obligates each party to the treaty to comply with its established safeguards agreements with the IAEA. In spite of that, this does [not constitute an enforcement mechanism](#). Along with that, most of the nuclear-armed countries in the world, more specifically **NATO**, have not signed the treaty, claiming it will weaken NATO's nuclear deterrent and criticising its verification system.

¹ [Warheads](#) are the front part of a missile that has explosive or chemical charge.

² The [TPNW's verification regime](#) consists of checks on whether the state party has complied with the treaty, and has followed its planned elimination of its nuclear arsenal and facilities.



The Partial Test Ban Treaty **prohibits** the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, in outer space and underwater. However, it **does not explicitly ban** underground testing as long as it does not cause radioactive contamination beyond the territory of the state undertaking the testing. That was later resolved by the **Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)**, which **banned all types of nuclear weapons testing on the planet**; however, it has **not entered into force yet**.

Furthermore, the **IAEA has introduced the so-called safeguards**, whose aim is to **verify a state's compliance with its international obligations regarding the peaceful use of nuclear material and technology**. Yet, despite the inclusion of an enforcement mechanism, when a **case is reported**, the IAEA itself possesses **no enforcement authority** and depends largely on state cooperation.

KEY CHALLENGES

EU's limitations

While there are discussions within the EU on **the creation of a European Nuclear deterrent**, Europe **does not have the necessary capabilities or mechanisms** to deter or respond to a nuclear attack, **in case the US decides to withdraw** its NATO guarantee to protect its allies. Although the **United Kingdom and France own nuclear weapons**, it is not certain that their arms **could be used to protect the whole continent**. The **UK possesses less than 250 warheads** and has explicitly declared that its arsenal is assigned to NATO's defence. On the other hand, **France has around 300 warheads** and has chosen not to take part in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). It would also be **challenging for Europe to reach Russian nuclear capabilities**, as the creation of a common nuclear deterrent would require **high financial costs** and a **complex technological infrastructure**, which many of the **Member States do not possess**.

Moreover, the **EU Member States are bound by the NPT**, therefore, they **cannot vote for the development of a European nuclear weapon**. Also, the EU is **committed to promoting the non-proliferation regime** within its jurisdiction, and due to the **unanimity requirement in the Council of the EU**, the creation of a **European nuclear deterrent is highly unlikely**.



Hard decisions and diverging views

If Europe were not able to rely on the US for nuclear deterrence, [European countries would have to decide](#) between developing **their own nuclear weapons independently** or creating **a common nuclear deterrent**. Either approach **carries high costs**, whether substantial **financial risks** or the introduction of **a common political and military authority**, which in turn would constrain the national sovereignty of each state.

Yet, **achieving a common nuclear deterrent** is complicated as the views on disarmament between the Member States vary from country to country. Member States such as **Sweden, Ireland and Austria** have been [advocating for a long time towards nuclear disarmament](#), and recently, the [Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez also expressed reservations](#) towards **nuclear rearmament**. In contrast, **France**, as a state possessing nuclear weapons, [continues to modernise its nuclear arsenal](#), ensuring its national security interests. At the same time, it adheres to its international commitments regarding nuclear disarmament. Nevertheless, **France is viewed by other Member States, specifically Germany, as the potential driving force** towards a European nuclear deterrent. Other Member States, such as [Latvia and Estonia](#), have expressed interest in the matter.

This difference in positions has led to the proposal of [several different approaches for the European Nuclear deterrent](#). These vary from an Anglo-French nuclear umbrella or an exclusive French nuclear umbrella, to the idea of a Franco-German nuclear force or even a solely German nuclear force. Additionally, there is a proposal for an EU nuclear umbrella or a combined NATO and French nuclear umbrella.

Balancing deterrence and peace

Currently, the **EU is dependent on the US in its security policy**. The US extends deterrence to all NATO members, in particular to many European countries like Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands that [consent to being defended with nuclear weapons](#), in case of an attack on the NATO members, but also host American nuclear weapons. Given **the deterioration** of the [transatlantic relations and the uncertainty over the US commitment](#), the debate on whether Europe could still depend on its North American ally for deterrence has been ignited once more.



Regardless, just the **mere discussion of a European Nuclear deterrent** could [signal the possibility of ending the transatlantic security cooperation between the US and Europe](#). Such a deterrent could be viewed as a **“severe blow to the global nonproliferation regime”**.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Why has nuclear non-proliferation been largely ineffective in the past years, and what implications could that have in the future?
- With the growing tensions in transatlantic relations, how and to what extent should the EU prepare for a potential withdrawal of the US' nuclear umbrella, leaving the EU at risk of foreign aggression?
- What are the challenges in creating an independent European nuclear deterrent, considering that France is the only country that possesses nuclear warheads among the Member States?
- Considering the idea of a European Nuclear deterrent, would that have any implications on the current international security order, and if so, what would they be?

FURTHER RESEARCH

- [“Budapest Memorandum at 25: Between Past and Future”](#), an article by Mariana Budjeryn and Matthew Bunn in the field, 2020 about the history around the Budapest Memorandum and its significance for nuclear disarmament on a broader scale
- [“Transatlantic Relations in Crisis: European Perspectives”](#), a panel discussion by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2026 about the tensions and challenges in the US-EU relations
- [“Global Nuclear Warhead Stockpiles \(1945-2024\)”](#), an infographic by Bruno Venditti, 2025 on the development of nuclear weapons since the end of the Second World War
- [“Could Europe go it alone for nuclear defence?”](#), a YouTube video by BFBS Forces News, 2025 about the ability of the EU to create a common nuclear deterrent and its feasibility



Committee on Transport and Tourism (TRAN)

On the Right Track? While the EU aims to reduce its emissions, European rail networks are shrinking due to a lack of international coordination, causing higher fees and longer travel times. The EU's TEN-T policy lays out an EU-wide high-speed rail network, but progress on implementing this network has been slow and uneven across Member States. How should the EU act to promote an affordable and climate-neutral transportation system?

by Nadir Luijten (NL)

ABSTRACT

The [European Green Deal](#) requires a **significant reduction** in transport emissions within the EU. Aiming to achieve this, the EU created a comprehensive plan for an EU-wide high-speed rail network and the reduction of air and road transport: the Trans-European Transport Network, or [TEN-T](#).

Although measures [financially supporting](#) its implementation are **already in place**, it has faced **significant challenges**. Member States' railway networks are often [incompatible](#), and the [environmental impact](#) of developing new rail lines has been called into question. With these logistical concerns in mind, and subsidised aviation making railway travel financially [unattractive](#) for potential passengers, the EU must decide how to implement TEN-T in a way that is sustainable, interconnected and attractive to consumers.

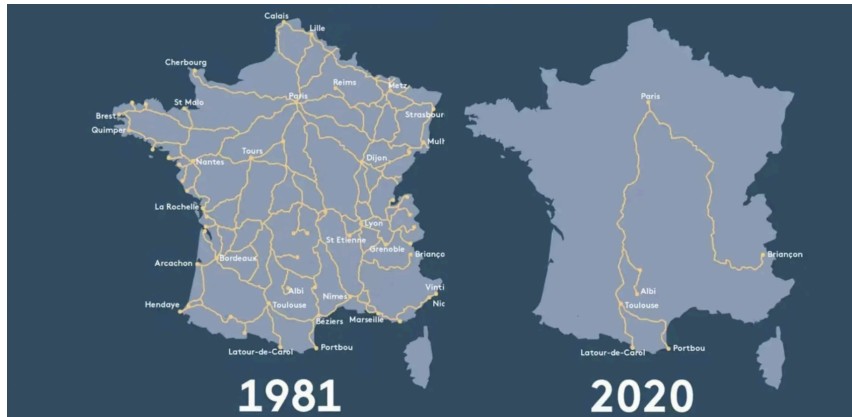
QUOTE

*"High-speed rail is not just about cutting travel times – it is about uniting Europeans, strengthening our economy, and leading the global race for sustainable transport." - **Apostolos Tzitzikostas**, EU Commissioner for Sustainable Transport and Tourism*



BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, trains were the [predominant mode of transport](#) in Europe. As budget airlines became increasingly popular between 1990 and 2000, railway travel, particularly overnight trains, started [disappearing slowly](#). Factors such as increased liberalisation¹ of railway companies, and cheap short-distance flights [have been named as the potential causes](#). From 2013 to 2023, the European railway network has continued to [shrink](#) notably.



[Image 1](#), France's Overnight Trains

However, recent awareness of global warming has caused renewed [EU interest](#) in trains. Even overnight trains, once on the brink of extinction, seem to be slowly [returning](#), with [Paris-Berlin](#) and [Amsterdam-Milan](#) services, operated by European Sleeper, coming this year. Nonetheless, prohibitive factors such as **high prices and unnecessarily long travel times** are [detering customers](#) from fully embracing this trend.

The [European Green Deal](#) aims for the EU to reach **climate neutrality by 2050**. With a [quarter](#) of EU greenhouse gas emissions coming from the transport sector, the EU has implemented a large-scale plan to enlarge its railway network and reduce reliance on more carbon-intensive transport, such as cars and domestic flights. However, **many challenges** still [lie in the way](#) of achieving this aim, such as cross-country standardisation and attracting a customer base.

¹ [Liberalisation](#) refers to the reduction of a government's economic regulation and involvement. In this context, it might refer to the privatisation of previously government operated railway services.



KEY TERMS

- **Interoperability** refers to the rate at which the railway networks of [different countries are able to cooperate](#) and run international services. Track gauge, voltage, and communication systems all affect interoperability.
- **High-speed rail** is a passenger railway running at [much higher speeds than usual for passenger trains](#). In the EU specifically, it refers to railway lines running at 200 kilometres per hour or even faster. New EU high-speed rail must run at [a minimum of 250 kilometres per hour](#).
- **Track gauge** refers to the [width of railway tracks](#). Generally, there are three types of track gauges: **large gauge** (>1435 mm), **standard gauge** (1435 mm) and **narrow gauge** (<1435 mm). Differences in track gauge between national rail systems can make it more difficult to run trains between countries.

KEY ACTORS

- The **Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport** ([DG MOVE](#)) is a department of the European Commission responsible for transport policy. It aims to make the transport sector sustainable, efficient, safe, affordable, and accessible. The department has the power to develop and implement **legislation**, to **fund transport operators** across Europe, and **stimulate innovation in transportation**.
- The **Directorate-General for Climate Action** ([DG CLIMA](#)) is a department of the European Commission responsible for climate action. It launched the [European Green Deal](#), a comprehensive economic and environmental strategy guiding the EU towards its aim of **reaching climate neutrality by 2050**. Like DG MOVE, it has the power to develop and implement **legislation** and **fund projects**.



- **Member States** are the individual countries that together make up the EU. With transport being a [shared competence](#) between the EU and Member States, both are able to legislate. Member States exercise their own competence where the EU does not exercise or has decided not to exercise its own competence. This means that countries retain major control over their own railway lines. Member States' not implementing the EU transport policy can [negatively impact interoperability](#) across the European railway network. While countries like Spain and France have rapidly been constructing new EU railway lines, [20 Member States](#), for example, have **no interconnected high-speed rail** at all.
- [European Federation for Transport and Environment](#) is a European lobby organisation advocating for environmentally-friendly transportation laws. It **publishes research** on new, efficient, and climate-neutral means of transportation, and reviews the effectiveness of policies already in place. With this research, the organisation has the **power to influence EU legislation**. In 2025, it released a detailed report on [the state of EU railway networks](#).
- **The European Passengers' Federation (EPF)** is an association of passenger organisations committed to improving standards on public transport and long-distance rail services in Europe. It campaigns for more **passenger rights and an accessible and affordable railway network**. The EPF conducts research, publishes reports, and works with transport operators, decision makers, and other stakeholders. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EPF [contributed to the development of safety protocols](#) for the resumption of railway services.

RELEVANT POLICY AND EXISTING MEASURES

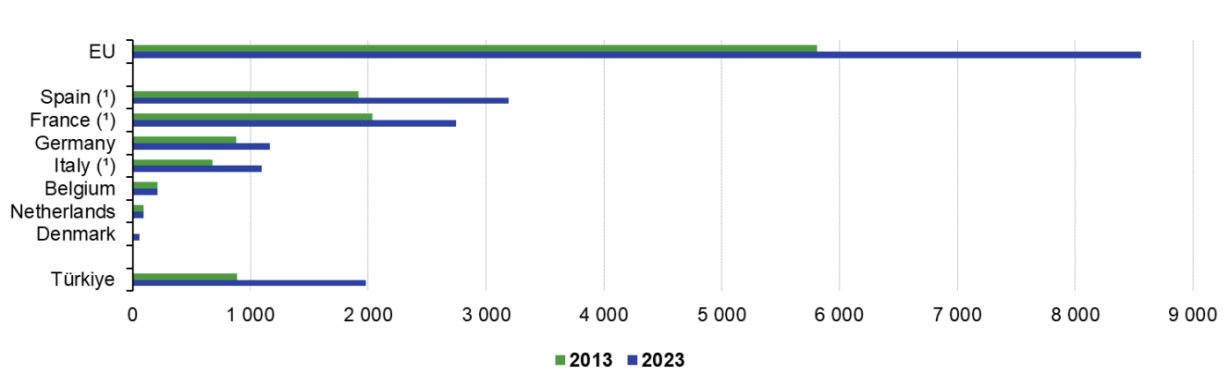
European Green Deal

The EU's climate framework guides transport policy. DG CLIMA's European Green Deal set the goal of reaching climate neutrality by 2050, ensuring sustainability is part of all EU policymaking. Concerning transportation, it [sets a clear objective of reducing transport emissions by 90% by 2050](#), compared with 1990 levels. Thus, moving away from automobile and aeroplane-focused transportation becomes necessary. The **emission goals** of the European Green Deal are [legally binding](#) for all Member States.

TEN-T and its policies

DG MOVE's [TEN-T regulation](#) lays out a broad set of goals for the future of the EU transportation network, aiming to balance economic growth and environmental responsibility. It is the **main guideline for EU policy on railways** and is entirely [binding and applicable](#) to **every Member State**. The following two TEN-T policies are of most concern to this topic.

Firstly, passenger railway lines on the core and extended core network must **support high-speed rail** by 2040, aiming to increase accessibility. Between 2013 and 2023, a dedicated high-speed rail network has grown, but [only in Spain and France](#). Additionally, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark are the **only EU countries** so far with dedicated high-speed railway lines.



[Image 2](#), Dedicated High-Speed Rail in the EU between 2013-2023 (km), Author

Secondly, the **European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS)** is a single European signalling system¹ that will be deployed across the entire TEN-T network. A unified system can improve rail safety, efficiency and interoperability. National signalling systems are planned to be phased out. Currently, [60% of EU rail](#) must be equipped with ERTMS. This system has seen **slow implementation**, with only Luxembourg [and Belgium](#) meeting this requirement.

Supporting Implementation

The slow implementation of the TEN-T policy across the Union, but especially in **cross-border projects**, has caused many delays. This is why DG MOVE adopted the [Directive 2021/1187 on streamlining measures for advancing the realisation of the TEN-T network in 2021](#). This policy allows DG MOVE to **aid or fund fixing** cross-border and missing links in the network.

¹ [Signalling systems](#) are networks of traffic lights for trains, keeping trains from colliding and improving interoperability.



To support this directive, Member States can access funds through the **Connect Europe Facility (CEF)**. Its rules set out which projects qualify for funding, and how Member States can apply for support. Through the CEF, cross-border infrastructure such as the [Lyon-Turin Base Tunnel](#) has received financing, helping to bridge gaps between Member States.

KEY CHALLENGES

Climate-friendly development

Every TEN-T project is designed to reduce emissions in the transport sector, moving passengers towards railway travel, while still expanding its network. At the same time, **construction often has an environmental impact** of its own. Railways can cut through protected areas, [disrupting biodiversity](#), and lead to [backlash](#) from local residents.

Critics say that because of this, such projects [risk contradicting](#) the aims of the Green Deal. They suggest that **improving infrastructure already in place or putting a focus on smaller initiatives** could limit ecological damage, while still advancing the TEN-T network. Other groups, such as the [European Federation for Transport and Environment](#), have claimed that the harm of construction could be [outweighed by the advantages](#) of a climate-friendly transport system. They see construction and the disruption that comes with it as a necessary step in achieving the EU's aims.

Interoperability issues

To achieve effective interoperability in the European Railway network, a lot of factors need to be accounted for. First of all, while the TEN-T will have to consist of [fully electrified](#) railways, **not all EU rail is electrified**. Older, [environmentally harmful](#), diesel trains are [still commonplace](#) in several Member States. Replacing these is [discouraged](#) by the high costs of electrification.

Electrified railway lines, 2023

(% of total length of railway lines)

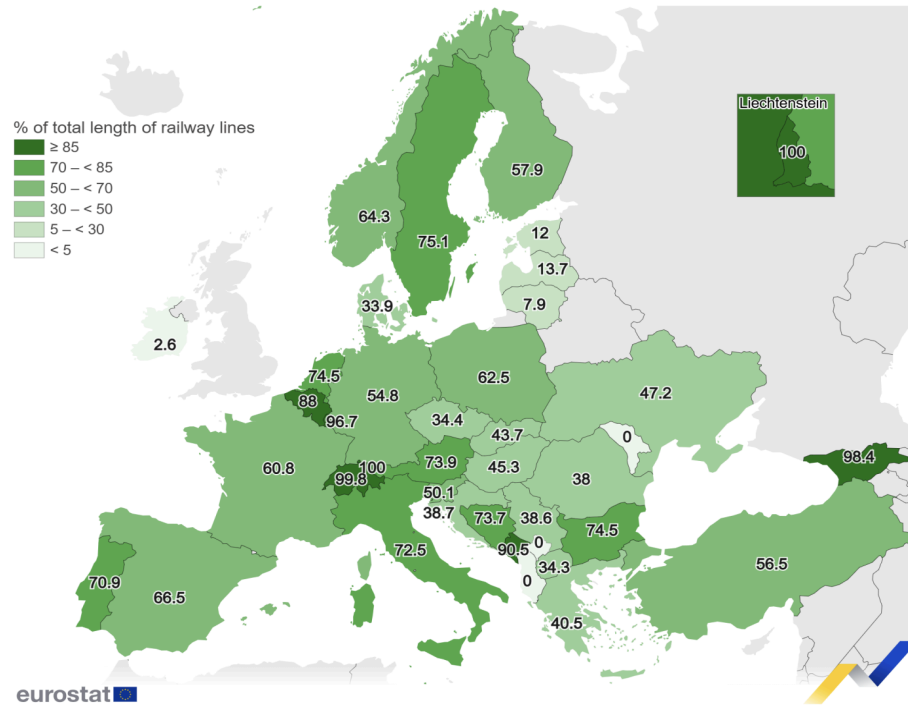


Image 3, Electrified Railway in Europe, 2023, Author

If the rail is electrified, more challenges arise. There is no [electric current or voltage level](#) common across every Member State. Similarly, some [railway tracks have](#) a **large gauge**, while others use a **standard gauge**, and a few others have a **narrow gauge**. These irregularities, combined with the [lack of a standardised communication system](#), lead to safety risks and unnecessarily long travel times.

Attracting customers

Even after standardisation across the EU, increasing customers' demand for railway travel will remain a **significant challenge**. A key reason for this is the unequal level of financial support between transport modes. Aviation is [heavily subsidised](#) by the EU, directly and indirectly, particularly through [tax exemptions on fuel](#). These measures artificially lower ticket prices, making air travel more attractive for consumers. However, although it is **more sustainable**, railway travel receives [far less financial support](#) and subsidies. Thus, it has to cover infrastructure and operational costs through ticket prices. This limits growth for rail travel and **encourages customers to choose planes over trains**.



FURTHER RESEARCH

You are highly encouraged to research this topic on your own. The following links can help you:

- [*“Railway passenger transport statistics”*](#), a detailed statistical analysis of the railway passenger transport, 2025
- [*“High-speed rail plan”*](#), EU plan for future railway network expansions, 2025
- [*“The TEN-T network and the Lyon-Turin railway line”*](#), a video on the implementation of TEN-T and the construction of a new railway line between France and Italy, 2023

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How should Europe respond to challenges in the implementation of TEN-T?
- What measures can the EU implement to further incentivise Member States to develop their national rail networks?
- How can the EU balance infrastructure development and environmental concerns?
- What compromises have to be made when standardising track gauge, electrification, and communication systems?