EURO PROSPECTS

European Politics and Policy

Europe's Role in Global Conflicts



Produced by
Mehak Kulaar and
Francesco Bernabeu Fornara

The Institutional Authority Gap
Bianca Guerrini

The Great Game in Greenland
Golo Vanden Eynde

A Contested South Caucasus
Oskar Genney

A Disunified Libya Strategy
Naid Makhmudov

Pricing Russia's Hybrid War
Berk Tuttup

Trust-Based Aid in Myanmar
Dori Gnadig

europrospects.eu November 2026 IA Unit Series I

Inside:



EU Foreign Policy ..... Page 5

Agreement Without Authority Won't Make the EU a Power

By Bianca Guerrini

Arctic Geopolitics ..... Page 9

The New Great Game in Greenland

By Golo Vanden Eynde





South Caucasus ..... Page 13

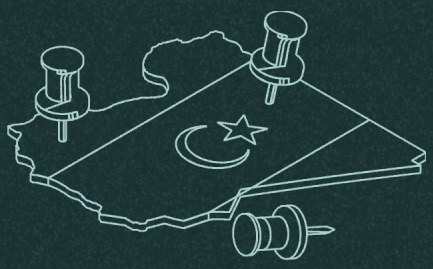
Can the EU Replace Russia as the Dominant Power in the South Caucasus?

By Oskar Genney

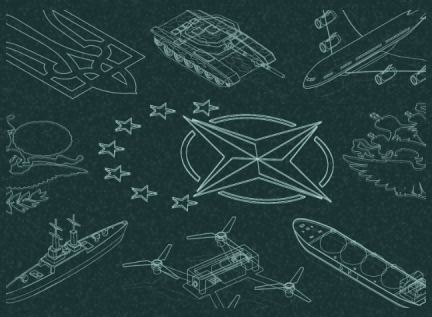
Mediterranean ..... Page 18

Competing European Agendas Are Weakening the EU's Role in Libya

By Naid Makhmudov



Inside:



Hybrid Threats ..... Page 22

Europe Must Set the Price of Russia's Hybrid War Before the Next Attack

By Berk Tuttup

Humanitarian Aid ..... Page 26

Myanmar Needs Trust, Not More Paperwork

By Dori Gnadig



Six theatres



In the issue:

1. **Setting the scene**
   The Institutional Authority Gap · p. 5
2. **Greenland**
   The Great Game in Greenland · p. 9
3. **Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia**
   A Contested South Caucasus · p. 13
4. **Libya**
   A Disunified Libya Strategy · p. 18
5. **Leipzig and Russia**
   Pricing Russia's Hybrid War · p. 22
6. **Myanmar**
   Trust-Based Aid in Myanmar · p. 26

Editor's Note

Conflicts far beyond the EU's borders are increasingly testing its security, economy, and values, and how the Union should respond to them remains a matter of deep debate. '*Europe's Role in Global Conflicts*' is the first issue of Euro Prospects' newly created International Affairs Unit. The question we set out to answer was simple to ask: what kind of actor does Europe become when foreign conflicts break out?

Our issue's six articles approach that question from a wide array of angles. They range from Greenland and the growing competition over the Arctic to the contest for influence in the South Caucasus as Russia pulls back, and to Libya, where member states continue to pull in different directions. They also examine the limits of EU humanitarian aid in Myanmar and how Europe can deter Russia's hybrid attacks designed to stay below the threshold of war. Our opening piece argues that the EU's limited institutional authority, rather than the often-discussed disagreement between member states alone, constrains what the Union can do when sudden foreign crises break out. Across these regions and cases, the same questions recur: who decides, who acts, and whether Europe's tools match its ambitions.

Happy reading,

Mehak Kulaar
Head, International Affairs Unit, Euro Prospects

Co-produced with:

Francesco Bernabeu Fornara
Founder & Editor-in-Chief, Euro Prospects

Meet the Team



Mehak Kulaar
Head, International Affairs Unit



Golo Vanden Eynde
Defence & Foreign Policy Analyst



Bianca Guerrini
International Affairs Analyst



Berk Tuttup
International Security Analyst



Dori Gnadig
International Affairs Analyst



Naid Makhmudov
International Affairs Analyst

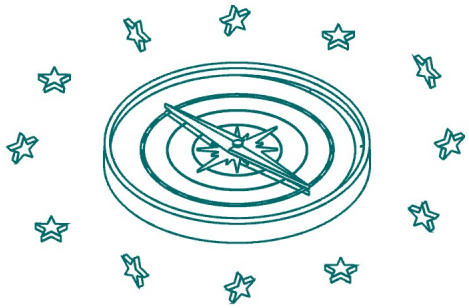


Oskar Genney
International Affairs Analyst



Francesco Bernabeu Fornara
Founder & Editor-in-Chief

Agreement Without Authority Won't Make the EU a Power



By **Bianca Guerrini**, *International Affairs Analyst*
Edited by **Golo Vanden Eynde**, *Defence & Foreign Policy Analyst*

In the struggle to become a global power, political fragmentation is only half the battle for the EU: even when its governments agree, its institutions lack the authority to act as one.

When a new global conflict erupts, the question is rarely whether Europe will be there. From the Sahel to the Black Sea, the EU and its member states sanction, mediate, train soldiers, fund weapons, and send envoys. The real question is what kind of actor the EU wants to be: it can act as a single strategic power that sets priorities and follows through, or remain a collection of governments and institutions reacting case by case, without a wider plan.

Political fragmentation is often identified as the key factor separating these two scenarios, as EU foreign policy must reflect the interests of 27 governments, often watering down the result to their lowest common denominator. It also explains why EU institutions hold so little executive power in foreign policy, as member states that disagree are unlikely to delegate authority to them. But institutional weakness then becomes a problem in its own right: even when member states agree, the tools and channels the EU can use are limited, and its authority is divided among institutions whose competences overlap and increasingly compete.

The European response to the Ukraine conflict since 2022 exhibits this tension. The degree of political alignment member states have shown is rare to say the least, which is what makes the case revealing: even in agreement, the response had to run through stretched or improvised instruments, opt-outs, and member states' own stocks and budgets rather than established EU processes. The crisis in Libya in 2011 offers an interesting contrast to the Ukraine case: here, political agreement was nearly absent, and European states acted through France, Britain, and NATO. What both cases have in common, however, is a response improvised around limited EU authority. Until something in its institutional design changes, the way the EU shows up in global conflicts will keep depending on momentary politics.

Defining the constraints

Although intertwined and easily confused,

there are two distinct constraints that affect the EU's role in global conflicts. The first is political fragmentation: member states retain veto powers over common foreign policy, so disagreement over aims among them can hold up European action until all can agree on what, if anything, should be done. The second is institutional capacity: once aims have been harmonised among member states and a decision is taken, what tools does the EU effectively have at its disposal to carry it out? These can include executive power, a command structure, and a budget it controls. The EU's authority is also split among institutions whose competences overlap and, increasingly, compete: think, for instance, of the reported Franco-German proposal to 'fold' the European External Action Service into the Commission.

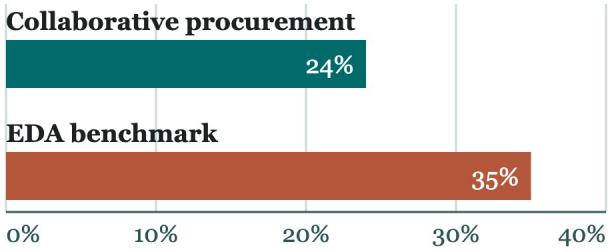
Here, an objection follows: if institutional weakness comes from political disagreement, it is not a separate problem, but rather a symptom of lacking political will. In other words, if governments wanted a stronger EU, they would build one. This argument misses what happens when disagreement eases: institutions do not rebuild themselves once alignment arrives. The way the EU's institutions function did not change between its 2014 and 2022 sanctions responses to Russian aggression, even though the second was far stronger than the first. The European Peace Facility, created in 2021, added a financing tool but not a way of deciding without unanimity. Political will can stretch the instruments, but stretching is slow and improvised, and it leaves the underlying limits in place. That is why the second constraint deserves attention separate from the first, and why the Ukraine case, where political will was at its strongest, is the perfect test for it.

Ukraine's aligned politics and improvised tools

When it comes to conflict engagement, Ukraine since 2022 has shown what the EU can achieve when it acts as a bloc: with the shared sense of urgency that a war on Europe's doorstep brings, governments largely agreed over aims. But what the EU has achieved, it has done through instruments it had to stretch or build as it went. The Peace Facility, which reimburses member states for weapons they send, had never financed lethal equipment before the first Ukraine package in February 2022. A plan to use frozen Russian assets was also on the table for some time and was then dropped due to concerns over legal and financial risks. The €90 billion loan that replaced it was built so that most of it could forgo unanimity, but unanimity was still needed to amend the EU budget. Because of this constraint, the loan was approved in April only after Hungary lifted its veto, and the joint borrowing left out Hungary itself, Slovakia, and Czechia. The new defence financing is also voluntary: the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument offers up to €150 billion in loans for joint defence procurement but leaves purchasing choices with national capitals, and record defence spending has not translated into joint acquisition, with collaborative procurement at 24% of equipment spending in 2025, still below the 35% benchmark. Unity does not flow through the EU's decision-making channels; it flows around them.

Collaborative defence procurement, 2025

Share of EU member states' defence equipment spending (%)



Source: European Defence Agency, 2025 data. Chart: Euro Prospects.

Libya's divided politics and the same constraint

Looking at European engagement with the Libya crisis of 2011 offers relevant context. There, politics were not aligned in the first place, with the UN Security Council vote splitting the European Members. Germany abstained, France and Britain led the campaign, NATO took over command, and American capacity filled in the gaps. The political conditions were nearly opposite Ukraine's, yet the institutional picture looked similar. In Libya the response ran through coalition and NATO, while in Ukraine it did so through workarounds and short-term fixes to EU channels. What both responses share is that they were assembled from what was available in spite of limited EU capacity.

'Unity does not flow through the EU's decision-making channels; it flows around them.'

This is the posture this article describes: not one strategy applied to different circumstances, but a new combination of coalition, workaround, and borrowed capacity each time. What changes between the two cases is the presence or absence of political alignment among member states; what remains is that established EU channels were not the main vehicle for European action.

Strength where competence lies

Many who defend the EU's capabilities as a foreign policy actor would object that the Commission shows institutional strength rather than weakness: it holds together trade, finance, and enlargement as a sort of geopolitical toolbox, and Ukraine has shown that it can act fast. This is true, and the Commission is arguably the EU's most capable external actor. However, this supports the argument of this article rather than undermining it, showing that the EU is strongest where supranational institutions hold competence: the Commission proposed the loan and administers SAFE. On the intergovernmental side, where conflict engagement actually happens, is where it is weakest: the Peace Facility, funded by member states and decided by unanimity, saw a €6.6 billion programme blocked by a Hungarian veto for more than three years.

Conclusion

None of this means the EU cannot act. It means that when it does, it must do so despite significant institutional constraints and on the terms of the moment: a coalition in one crisis, a set of workarounds in the next. In Ukraine, the stronger result came from the political context, not from a more capable EU, so it offers no assurance that a future crisis would be met as efficiently. If Europe wants to be an actor that sets priorities rather

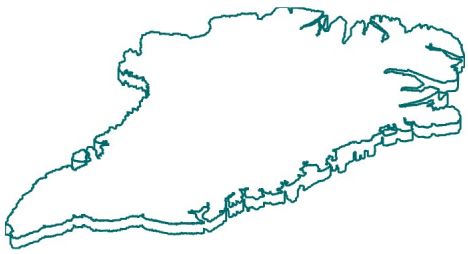
than one that assembles responses, something has to change in how its institutions are designed and how they decide.

The debate now under way risks pointing the wrong way. Proposals to reshuffle the foreign policy roles of the External Action Service and the Commission treat the problem as one of organisation. But analysts have argued that no rearrangement between the two will resolve the veto problem, and a former EU diplomat quoted by the *Irish Times* says that where the service sits matters less than how decisions are taken. A merger that keeps unanimity would move the problem rather than solving it.

The real choice is harder. The EU can either expand its supranational role to foreign policy, which means changing who decides and how: wider majority voting, a mandate to act that does not depend on 27 governments agreeing each time, and established tools it controls. Or, in conflicts, it can scale back its ambitions and remain a forum for 27 foreign policies, at the cost of a coherent EU posture and the authority that comes along with it. The question that opened this piece, of what kind of actor the EU wants to be, has an answer only if its member states choose one. Right now, foreign policy integration is stuck between two options: member states giving up veto powers to give the EU some real decisional leeway or accepting that each member will conduct its own foreign policy where it really matters. The middle path, a common line wherever 27 governments happen to agree, is not a third option but the stall itself. Conflicts move fast, and a response improvised case by case is slow to assemble. The cost of staying there grows with every crisis.

Originally published on europrospects.eu, 10 November 2026. Illustration: Euro Prospects.

The New Great Game in Greenland



By **Golo Vanden Eynde**, *Defence & Foreign Policy Analyst*
Edited by **Bianca Guerrini**, *International Affairs Analyst*

Competition over Greenland is quickly heating up. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has made it her ambition to strengthen the EU's ties with the Arctic island, but there is still a long way to go.

Due to its strategic location and abundance of critical materials, Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, has become a focal point for great power competition in the Arctic, with Russia, China, the EU, and the US as the main players. Having left the European Economic Community (EEC) in January 1985, Greenland is currently not a full member of the EU, although it is associated with the EU as an Overseas Country and Territory (OCT). This article examines what the EU can do to increase its influence in the region. After all, Greenland's rapprochement with Europe should not be taken for granted.

Canada's closer alignment with the EU could be seen as a positive sign for the future, indicating that Europe continues to be an attractive ally for democratic countries looking for a stable and reliable partner. Yet, given the recent referendum result in Iceland, rejecting the prospect of deeper political integration with the EU, there is reason to be wary of excessive optimism. A closer partnership with, or political integration into the EU, will be contingent on Europe's ability to persuade the people of Greenland of the practical benefits of EU membership.

Greenland's strategic significance

Greenland is important for several reasons.

First of all, there is the location. Greenland sits directly on the shortest flight path for Russian and Chinese missiles headed to the United States, making it a cornerstone of America's missile surveillance and detection system. Since its establishment in 1951, when the Cold War was starting to heat up, the US has continuously operated Thule Air Base, nowadays known as the Pituffik Space Base, on the island's northwestern coast. It serves as a forward outpost for detecting long-range bombers and ballistic missile threats. Greenland also rests at the westernmost end point of the GIUK Gap, a naval choking point in between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK,

Arctic and Atlantic Ocean.

Secondly, there is the likelihood of lucrative trade routes emerging as an unintended side-effect of climate change. Ever since 2007, both the Northeast Passage (running along the Russian coastline) and the Northwest Passage (running along the Canadian coastline) have experienced ice-free periods. Most important of all, the emerging Transpolar Sea Route (which is the shortest connection between Europe and Asia, stretching roughly 3,900 km across the central Arctic Ocean) lies largely *outside* the territorial waters of any Arctic state. Greenland is ideally positioned to help manage, and therefore benefit from, the resulting rise in Arctic shipping.

Thirdly, there is a vast abundance of rare earths, critical minerals, and untapped energy supplies. The island contains many important materials, which are essential for electric vehicles, wind turbines, defence technologies, and many other highly strategic sectors. These deposits include the Kvanefjeld, Tanbreez, and Citronen Fjord excavation sites, as well as many suspected oil and gas reserves. With China dominating global supply chains in critical minerals, and with the EU's recent push for open strategic sovereignty and greater resource security, Greenland's enormous mineral wealth gives it significant geopolitical weight.

Yet development is not straightforward: Kvanefjeld, one of Greenland's most important excavation sites, has effectively been frozen due to a 2021 ban on mining ore with uranium concentrations above 100 ppm. Since Kvanefjeld's uranium ore averages roughly 250 to 350 ppm, the law has effectively put the project on permanent hold.

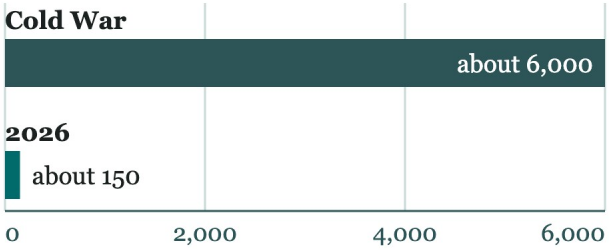
Trump's attempt at establishing 'permanent control'

Following threats by President Trump to use military force to annex the Arctic island (an unprecedented act of intimidation by a sitting US president against one of America's oldest and closest allies) the NATO mission 'Arctic Sentry' was formed to defuse transatlantic tensions and to reassure the president of NATO's operational readiness in the region. Nevertheless, in September of 2026, the US pressured Denmark into agreeing to a deal, reshaping the relationship vis-à-vis Greenland in favour of American interests.

Up to that point, American involvement in Greenland had been shaped by the 1951 Defense of Greenland Agreement, which had been renewed and updated by the Igaliku Agreement in 2004. The 1951 treaty let the US operate the air base under a NATO framework, required the Danish flag to fly alongside the American one, and gave both Denmark and Greenland liaison rights at the base. Yet, by 2026, only about 150 US military personnel remained there, down from 6,000 during the Cold War.

US military personnel at Pituffik Space Base

Personnel, approximate



Source: CNBC, 2026 data. Chart: Euro Prospects.

The new agreement, signed by Denmark, Greenland, and the US on 22 September

2026, has a number of interesting provisions. Experts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), among others, have pointed to three main changes in particular.

Firstly, it enables the United States to build a stronger military presence. It grants the US permanent basing, access, and overflight rights, authorises expansion at Pituffik, and establishes two new defence areas at Narsarsuaq in the south and Mestersvig in the east, with the preamble explicitly mentioning a 'Golden Dome' missile defence system.

Secondly, it grants the US the legal right to block any non-Western (i.e., non-EU and non-NATO) country from investing or establishing a military presence in Greenland. It explicitly bans non-NATO countries from building military bases in Greenland and bars adversaries from sensitive investments in critical infrastructure such as undersea cables, ports, telecommunications, and rare-earth minerals. It also grants unrestricted undersea access for US vessels within Greenlandic territorial waters.

Thirdly, the agreement would continue to apply *even if* Greenland were to gain its independence from Denmark. The new deal has no end date and even contains rules on investment screening and construction projects near defence areas, effectively giving Washington a veto over who Greenland may work with, even after independence.

On the upside, the agreement has momentarily defused tensions within NATO regarding the status of Greenland, without having to grant the US anything truly 'tangible' in return. On the downside, however, it has increased American influence in the region, at the expense of both Denmark and the EU. Even though Denmark has formally retained its sovereignty and Greenland its right to self-determination, the agreement seems to confirm Trump's claim that the US has secured 'permanent control' over Greenland's security.

'Greenland's rapprochement with Europe should not be taken for granted.'

What the EU could do to gain Greenland's support

The emerging power politics surrounding the Arctic in general and Greenland in particular has come to resemble another major geopolitical dispute from history: the 'Great Game' from the nineteenth century, in which the British and Russian Empires competed for control over territory in Central Asia, squeezed in-between British India and the endless Russian steppes. It still remains to be seen, of course, whether this quietly unfolding conflict can remain 'cold' forever, or whether it will eventually spill over into a truly 'hot' one after all. For now, however, the former seems like the more plausible scenario.

In a similar fashion to its nineteenth-century counterpart, the new Great Game in Greenland is playing out over a long period of time, without a major military clash in the conventional sense between the foremost contestants, but with ever-increasing levels of economic and diplomatic influence. The main aim is to project power, exert control, extract resources, and exploit energy supplies,

without having to risk a conventional military confrontation. This raises an important question: what could Europe actually *do* to prevent the region from drifting any closer to the US?

There are two options: the first, 'safe' option entails the accession of Greenland into the EU, transforming Greenland from a mere Overseas Territory *outside* the EU into an Outermost Region *within* the EU, while still remaining an integral part of the Kingdom of Denmark.

This is not without precedent. After all, Greenland already *was* part of the EEC, the EU's main predecessor, from 1973 to 1985. Its decision to leave was inspired by the desire to regain control over its fisheries policy, which, incidentally, was exactly the same topic that persuaded many Britons to leave the EU in 2016 and convinced many in Iceland to vote 'no' on exploring the possibility of joining the EU in 2026. Clearly, island nations like to control their own waters. Nevertheless, the mounting pressure on Greenland coming from the US, together with the fact there is already a precedent, still make this into the *least* problematic of the two scenarios.

The second, politically much more sensitive option, involves Denmark granting full sovereignty to Greenland, in return for Greenland's accession to the EU as an independent state. This is the more difficult option, for two reasons. Firstly, it is contingent on Denmark's consent, which is far from certain. After all, the loss of Greenland would hurt Denmark's position in the region and likely result in political backlash at home. Secondly, accession to the EU takes time: any new candidate must align its legislation with the *acquis communautaire*, across a wide range of negotiation chapters. Even for a law-abiding nation like Greenland, the process might take a while to complete.

The main advantage of this strategy, however, lies precisely in the fact that it offers the people of Greenland something very valuable in return for agreeing to EU membership: full political sovereignty. Perhaps the EU has a unique opportunity to make the people of Greenland 'an offer they cannot refuse'; an offer benefitting *both* parties, defending Greenland's integrity against any future incursions, be they American, Russian, or Chinese, and stretching Europe's wings to the northernmost nation on earth.

Originally published on europrospects.eu, 12 November 2026. Illustration: Euro Prospects.

Can the EU Replace Russia as the Dominant Power in the South Caucasus?



By **Oskar Genney**, *International Affairs Analyst*
Edited by **Berk Tuttup**, *International Security Analyst*

As Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia navigate a complex web of power rivalries, each state pursues divergent geopolitical trajectories. With Moscow's sphere of influence increasingly challenged, the EU faces a crucial opportunity to expand economic and political sway over the South Caucasus.

Russia's costly invasion of Ukraine changed the geopolitical landscape well beyond Europe, raising questions about Moscow's ability to maintain its influence across neighbouring regions. In the South Caucasus, Armenia is pivoting towards the EU, Azerbaijan is asserting greater regional autonomy, and Georgia's relations with Brussels have become increasingly strained. These developments have created opportunities for the EU to expand its influence in a strategically important region. However, a declining Russian influence does not translate into European dominance. The EU is expanding its diplomatic, economic, and security presence, but a crucial question remains: *Can the EU replace Russia as the South Caucasus' dominant external power?*

The South Caucasus as a strategic crossroads

The South Caucasus, comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, connects Europe, Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and Central Asia. Its geographical position makes it significant for energy supplies, international trade, and transport connectivity and places the region at the intersection of competing security interests.

Russian influence over the region began during its imperial expansion and was consolidated during the Soviet period. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became independent and began pursuing their own political, economic, and security interests. Although Russia lost some of its former control, it retained considerable influence through military deployments, economic ties, political re-

lationships, and its role in regional conflicts. This influence is best understood through Armenia's reliance on Russian security, Georgia's 2008 war with Russia, which subsequently drove out US presence, and Azerbaijan's comparatively independent foreign policy. Russia has not simply disappeared from the South Caucasus. Russia is dealing with three sovereign states simultaneously. This opens up a crucial opportunity for the EU and shapes how Brussels has to plan its strategy.

Russia's weakening position and geopolitical strain

Since February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has drained its military resources and political attention. Russia's influence was challenged in other strategically important regions. In Syria, Russia's presence was threatened by the sudden collapse of its ally, Bashar al-Assad, in December 2024. Meanwhile, Armenia pursued closer collaboration with the European Union after its dissatisfaction with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Together, these events in three different regions put heavy pressure on Moscow, stretching the government's attention and weakening its influence in several places at once.

However, not all South Caucasus states have distanced themselves from Russia. Since 2024, Georgia-EU relations have deteriorated due to disputed elections, which the opposition and many Western governments say were marred by irregularities, and because of the Georgian government's growing closeness to Moscow. Benefitting Moscow, the Georgian Dream Party has enabled Russia to deepen its political and economic footprint in the wake of the EU 'deadlock', most notably by refusing to join international economic sanctions and reopening direct flights.

The clearest example of Russia's decreasing security presence is Armenia's deteriorating relationship with Moscow. For decades, Armenia has relied heavily on Russian military assistance and actively participated in the Russian-led CSTO, but after the 2020 war and Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive, Armenia was left dissatisfied with CSTO's action, which ultimately led Yerevan to freeze its CSTO membership. As Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced: 'the Republic of Armenia's membership in the CSTO is frozen, and no steps will be taken to return to active participation…'. However, this does not mean that relations are severed between them, but rather it shows a growing reluctance towards Moscow and towards reliance on the security it can provide.

The shift by Armenia has created an opportunity for the EU. In February 2023, the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA) was officially established. EUMA's task is to monitor and report on civilian security along Armenia's border areas. This provides a civilian presence in a conflict-affected area and the mission also focuses on confidence building between Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, EUMA has no military deterrence mandate, and the EU cannot offer a collective defence guarantee of the kind Russia can.

Armenia's shift away from Russia does not mean that the two are now strangers, or that Armenia has become a close ally of the EU. Armenia still faces difficult security and economic choices that are connected to Rus-

sian-led institutions such as Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and CSTO. This situation is more of an effort by Armenia to diversify and reduce dependence on one external power.

The EU's expanding reach in trade, connectivity, and energy

Lacking Russia's military mobilisation capability, the EU instead leverages its substantial economic presence. The EU's cooperation with Azerbaijan on energy trade and alternative transport routes has become an important cornerstone of the EU's growing influence. According to the European Commission, Azerbaijani gas supplies have increased by nearly 40% to the EU through the Southern Gas Corridor between 2021 and 2024 and the EU has become Azerbaijan's largest trading partner. Under the EU-Azerbaijan Peace Package, Azerbaijan will also receive €200 million for connectivity, with a further €20 million to support peace between Armenian and Azerbaijani civilians. Through the EU4Digital initiative, the EU and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) supported a project in late 2022 to expand broadband infrastructure to over 280,000 households in Azerbaijan, an effort aimed at boosting economic growth and bringing the country more in line with EU norms. This relationship between Baku and Brussels provides an incentive for both sides to collaborate more closely: for Baku, it secures a good economic partner; for Brussels, it creates a base from which to expand.

Furthermore, the EU has also increased its presence by funding the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (TCTC) project. The TCTC creates an alternative for trade that has otherwise been heavily dependent on Russia's Northern Corridor and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The EU's capability to replace Russia as the region's dominant power comes down to initiatives like this, which strengthen the EU's presence through connectivity trade routes. The initiative between Azerbaijan and the EU marks a shift in the region's power dynamics.

However, new independent trade routes, energy independence, and a good financial opportunity do not mean that Baku has a clear political alignment with Brussels. For Azerbaijan, the relationship with Brussels currently rests only on a substantial and mutual economic interest rather than an incentive to join the EU. Azerbaijan continues to pursue its own foreign policy, balancing its relationships between Ankara, Moscow, and Brussels.

One region, three sovereign states

'A declining Russian influence does not translate into European dominance.'

European influence differs significantly across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, so treating the states as a unified geopolitical 'bloc' risks overlooking their differences and political agendas.

For instance, Armenia has sought a greater and closer relationship with the EU. In March 2025, Armenia passed legislation that

established a process towards European Union accession. Armenia has expressed a political ambition rather than secured a candidate position or membership within the EU. Subsequently, the EU-Armenia summit in May 2026 marked a step towards stronger cooperation on security, connectivity, and economic development.

Azerbaijan is a contrasting case. The country has pursued a more autonomous foreign policy: its energy relationship with Europe provides substantial opportunities for cooperation, but Baku has shown a reluctance to integrate further with the EU in an effort to balance between Moscow, Ankara, and the EU.

The situation with Georgia presents a different challenge. In December 2023, Georgia was granted EU candidate status; however, the accession process was halted owing to deteriorating relations with Brussels and democratic backsliding. In November 2024, the Georgian government announced that it would suspend EU accession talks until 2028, which further damaged relations with the EU. This development regarding Georgia complicates the assumption that Russia's declining regional dominance automatically creates a power vacuum that the EU could seize. Georgia occupies one of the region's most strategic locations and, according to *Civil Georgia*, 71% of Georgians support cooperation with the EU; however, the government's political direction is pulling away from EU-Georgian cooperation and back towards the Russo-Georgian relationship it once had.

Between the three independent states, the contrasting political trajectories demonstrate that the EU's influence does not only depend on Russia's weakness, but also on the political desires of these three independent states. Brussels can offer economic cooperation, institutional integration, and diplomatic engagement; however, it cannot assume that all three countries will move towards EU integration at the same time and pace.

By what means could the EU fill Russia's power vacuum?

The EU's initiatives and growing involvement in the South Caucasus does not mean that the EU has the capacity to replace Russia as the dominant power in the region. However, the EU is pursuing a greater and larger foothold, competing with Russia in security cooperation, economic integration, infrastructure projects, and diplomacy. EUMA represents how the EU has the capacity to establish a security presence in the region along with strengthening its trade relations with Azerbaijan linking two markets together. A decisive factor in EU's strategy is its push for logistical independence. Establishing new, resilient trade routes that bypass traditional Russian corridors serves as a monumental shift in the region's power dynamics. Lastly, the EU's deepened political partnership with Armenia provides the EU with a better diplomatic base in the region. With these geopolitical mechanisms, the EU could gradually increase its presence in the South Caucasus in certain areas where the Russian government falls short or where their influence has weakened, without replacing Russia entirely.

A multi-geopolitical competition with Israel, the US, China, Türkiye, and Iran

Furthermore, the South Caucasus should also not be understood solely as a competition between the EU and Russia. For instance, Israel, the US, China, Türkiye, and Iran are heavily influential in the region and have long supported different sides in the regional conflicts as well as investing in the region. Israel has supported Azerbaijan's military assets, China has been an important actor in transport infrastructure and trade in the Caucasus, Türkiye has been a close ally to Azerbaijan while Iran backed Armenia in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh 2020 and 2023 conflicts. The US acted as a crucial diplomatic mediator, as the Washington peace talks highlighted. Iran and Türkiye have increased their influence through their investments in regional infrastructure developments. Iran and Russia, for instance, back the INSTC, while Türkiye has initiated projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline for oil and the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) for gas that links Asia and Europe through Azerbaijan. The EU and Russia are competing for influence over the region at the same time as Israel, the US, China, Türkiye, and Iran. This multi-geopolitical competition for influence in the South Caucasus showcases that Russia's declining influence might create not a 'power vacuum' for one actor to seize, but rather a multipolar environment where several actors compete and cooperate.

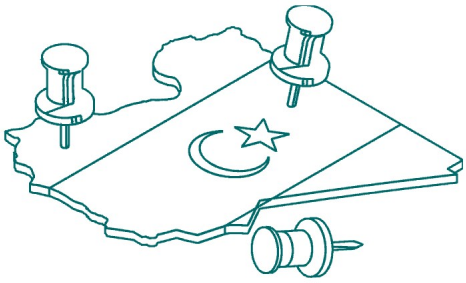
The EU has to some extent, the capacity and ability to become an influential actor over the South Caucasus. However, expecting it to replace Russia completely in this 'power vacuum' would be overly optimistic. The EU can expand its influence through trade, diplomacy, infrastructure projects, and civilian security missions, but becoming the new dominant power in the region would mean outcompeting all other actors, including Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. Instead, the EU may expand its influence through trade and diplomacy while cooperating with other external actors.

Conclusion

The EU is expanding its influence in certain areas such as trade, security, and diplomacy over the South Caucasus in a time of supposed instability for Russia. However, the EU's growing influence and Russia's possible decline do not mean that the EU will, or can, replace a historical actor in the region. As the Georgian case shows, the growing independence of the South Caucasus states could go either way depending on events: the states choose their own path. The multi-geopolitical competition in the South Caucasus shows how interconnected world politics is: conflicts between external actors influence other states, and even a slight weakness can cause a state to lose its political, economic, or military grip over a region.

Originally published on europrospects.eu, 14 November 2026. Illustration: Euro Prospects.

Competing European Agendas Are Weakening the EU's Role in Libya



By **Naid Makhmudov**, *International Affairs Analyst*
Edited by **Dori Gnadig**, *International Affairs Analyst*

France, Italy, and Greece are weakening the European Union's influence in Libya by backing rival approaches just as a US-sponsored power-sharing initiative offers a chance to end the country's more than 15-year conflict, with stakes for Mediterranean security, migration, and energy.

With a recent US-sponsored initiative to unify Libya by a power-sharing deal, the Libyan conflict has a chance to be resolved after more than 15 years since the start of the first civil war. The EU and its member states have been supporting or engaging with two rival governments. Beyond the domestic crisis, the fate of Libya has direct impact on the EU and its member states in Mediterranean security, migration affairs, and energy diversification. Yet, the different approaches of France, Italy, and Greece, key European actors in the Libyan conflict, have undermined the EU's ability to pursue a coherent policy and exert influence.

Summary of the Libyan conflict

Early in the 20th century, Libya had become an Italian colony. After the Second World War, France had assumed control over the Fezzan region in southern Libya. And by 1951, Libya became an independent kingdom, constituted of three parts: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan. According to its 1951 constitution, Libya had proclaimed two capitals: Tripoli (in the west) and Benghazi (in the east).

In 2011, following the Arab Spring, revolution broke out in Libya. By mid-March, France and the UK had launched a military operation against Muammar Gaddafi, the country's longstanding ruler. By the end of the month, the operation's command was handed over to NATO forces. It was these actions that led to the first civil war and sowed the seeds for the instability in Libya that persists. Since 2014, the second civil war has in effect divided Libya into western and eastern parts. Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, prime minister of the UN-recognised Government of National Unity (GNU), is headquartered in Tripoli. Field Marshal of the Libyan National Army Khalifa Haftar, ex-colonel under Gaddafi and ex-CIA asset, took control of the

eastern part of Libya and became de facto leader of the Government of National Stability (GNS) in Benghazi.

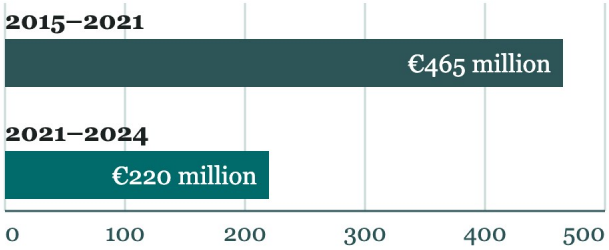
In 2019, with the Libyan National Army, Haftar tried to advance towards Tripoli and to reclaim the western part of the country. However, the Government of National Accord (GNA), the GNU's predecessor, stopped Haftar with the support of Türkiye; Haftar was backed by France, Greece, Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Russia. While the EU, together with the UN, has called for a ceasefire and diplomatic resolution to the conflict, the different approaches of the EU member states have made the resolution hard.

The EU vs France, Italy, and Greece in Libya

Despite the instability, Libya continues to play a vital role in the EU's strategic interests. The EU is devoted to the so-called 2020 'Berlin Process', which supports a diplomatic resolution of the Libyan conflict. The bloc formally recognises the GNU. The European Union is the largest provider of humanitarian support to Libya and is interested in managing migration flows from Libya. In 2015–2021, the EU provided €465 million, and, in 2021–2024, €220 million to Libya, with most of the sum directed at migration programmes. Moreover, the EU assists the Libyan Coast Guard in Tripoli under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In 2026, the EU started to cooperate with eastern Libyan authorities on migration issues despite the EU not recognising them.

EU funding to Libya by period, 2015–2024

Millions of euros



Source: European Commission, 2015–2024 data. The two periods differ in length. Chart: Euro Prospects.

Energy is another key sector of mutual interest. Before 2011, almost 85% of Libyan oil was exported to EU countries, including Germany, France, Spain, and Italy. Moreover, all Libyan gas flowed to Italy. When it comes to renewable energy, Libya has a big potential to become a solar energy hub for Europe. With the current instability in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, Libya could provide energy solutions to the EU. In addition, Libya is the door to the Sahel region, which is of strategic interest for EU security. Toppling Gaddafi has provided the ground for instability, through ongoing movements of arms and militants in the Sahel region. These movements start from the Fezzan region in southern Libya. Moreover, smugglers facilitate migration from the Sahel through Libya to southern Europe, primarily Italy.

Libya, as a Mediterranean neighbour, is one of the key actors in Italy's foreign policy. Both countries share a common history, as Libya was once an Italian colony. After initial hesitation, Italy took part in NATO operations in Libya in 2011, providing bases and aircraft. Libya matters to Italy in the areas of migration, energy, and security. That is why Italy works with the GNU, the UN-recognised

government of Libya. Moreover, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has pursued a policy of 'Wider Mediterranean', destined to expand Italian economic, security, and energy interests in the region. Meloni has also pursued the so-called 'Mattei Plan', aimed at establishing equal partnerships with regional countries, including Libya, promoting private sector involvement rather than the donorship and conditionality favoured by the EU. In Italy's pursuit of becoming an energy hub, Eni, its state-controlled energy company, has signed gas deals with Libya, Algeria, Egypt, and Israel. Since the beginning of the first civil war in 2011, Italy has been trying to support Eni's position in the Libyan oil market.

While French influence is declining in sub-Saharan Africa, Libya continues to attract the attention of Paris. Among the EU countries, it was France, together with the UK, who supported the Libyan rebels against Gaddafi. Libya is vital for France, as Paris wants to prevent migration flows to the country. In addition, France is interested in the Fezzan region, due to its proximity to Sahel, where French interests collide with counterterrorism operations. In this regard, France sees Haftar as a strong leader and a reliable partner. France is also the second-largest importer of Libyan oil. It hopes that Haftar will secure oil flow to Paris and support French energy giant TotalEnergies' oil interests in Libya. However, after Haftar's failed offensive of 2019, France has tried to revisit its support for Haftar. In 2025, France met with GNU representatives to talk about economic investments. For Italy, it means the continuation of French-Italian rivalry, as both EU countries compete in energy sector and geopolitical influence.

Historically, Libya was not a foreign policy priority for Greece. Yet, the Eastern Mediterranean dispute between Greece, Cyprus, and Türkiye has made Libya vital for Greece. This maritime dispute started with a 2019 maritime memorandum between Libya's GNA, superseded by the GNU in 2021, and Türkiye. The memorandum, which Greece has since objected to and considers illegal, establishes exclusive economic zones (EEZs), while ignoring Greek islands between Libya and Türkiye. That is why Greece supports Haftar, even going as far as providing military vehicles to Haftar, in violation of the UN arms embargo. Despite this, in June 2026, the GNU's Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Taher Al-Baour and Greece's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexandra Papadopoulou discussed bilateral relations, focused on energy and economic partnership.

The new US plan for a united Libya and the EU

'Seeking consensus on sensitive foreign policy strategies between 27 members is no easy task.'

A new US plan was proposed by Donald Trump's special adviser on African and Arab affairs, Massad Boulos. The plan attempts to unify Libya, its state budget and oil revenue shares between the Libyan west and east. Under the plan, Saddam Haftar, son of Khalifa Haftar, would become the next president and Ibrahim Dbeibeh, nephew and adviser of Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, the next national se-

curity adviser. Boulos has already met with officials from both the western and eastern parts of Libya. Despite mutual confrontation and mistrust, representatives of the western and eastern Libya have discussed the US plan. Türkiye, France, and Greece also support this vision for Libya, while other EU countries are hesitant.

Within Libya, there are opposing voices to the American plan. For the Libyan population, this plan would appear to be a failure of the promise by Western powers, especially the EU, for a democratic transition. In western Libya, forces opposing the GNU are against the plan, as they fear being left out from future political landscape. In eastern Libya, there are also factions against the plan, due to their opposition to foreign interference. On top of this, voices in both western and eastern Libya continue to propose a return to a constitutional monarchy.

An alternative to Trump's plan exists. The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has proposed presidential and parliamentary elections with a view to forming a new unified government. The EU declared its support but did not propose its own plan.

Conclusion and recommendations

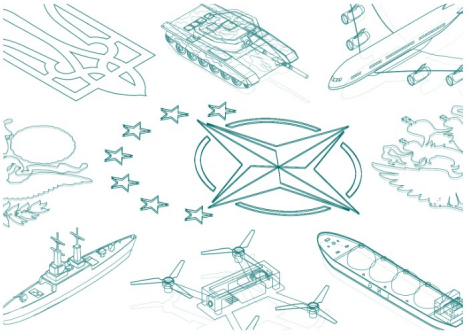
The Libyan crisis is just one of numerous examples underlining a common challenge for the EU: its fragmentation. Seeking consensus on sensitive foreign policy strategies between 27 members is no easy task, especially when the alternative of pursuing them at a national level is always there.

After the 2015 migration crisis, member states did agree on a shared vision to stop migration through Libya. And continued common interests in Libya remain: the EU and its member states continue to see Libyan energy as an opportunity and consider stabilisation of Libyan security a priority. At the same time, countries like France, Italy, and Greece are focused on their own post-colonial legacy, proximity to Libya, attempts to establish dominance within the regional arena, or historic rivalry with neighbours. Yet, the division is establishing fragmented leverage in the Libyan conflict and weakens the EU position as an international actor, while other actors like the US, Türkiye, the UAE, Egypt, and Russia strengthen their role.

As the complexity of EU-US relations continues to increase, any challenge to Trump's plan could add to the upheaval. The EU needs a long-term unified strategy to either facilitate democratic elections or continue to cooperate with both rival parties in a uniform way. The EU could also endorse the American or the UN plan, or modify them into a plan of its own.

Originally published on europrospects.eu, 17 November 2026. Illustration: Euro Prospects.

Europe Must Set the Price of Russia's Hybrid War Before the Next Attack



By **Berk Tuttup**, *International Security Analyst*
Edited by **Oskar Genney**, *International Affairs Analyst*

In September 2026, Germany blamed Russia for an explosive drone found next to a cargo plane at Leipzig airport. Russia's hybrid attacks in Europe are no longer deniable, so the real question is who will make Moscow pay and how that price can become predictable.

On the night of 4 to 5 August 2026, a drone carrying explosives was found next to a Ukrainian cargo plane at Leipzig/Halle Airport. The device failed to detonate because of a faulty trigger. On 1 September, Berlin formally blamed Russia, closed the Russian consulate in Bonn and promised tighter controls on Russian citizens.

For Germany, this was a strong reaction. For Moscow, probably not. Former CIA officer David Gioe argued in *Foreign Policy* that such steps are almost costless for the Kremlin, because Russia escalates step by step while Europe answers each step alone.

The debate around this has changed. Writers in *Foreign Affairs* and experts at the EU-NATO Hybrid Centre of Excellence now say the same thing: resilience alone does not deter. But one question remains unanswered. Who in Europe should decide the costs, and should they do it before or after the next attack?

From deniable to undeniable

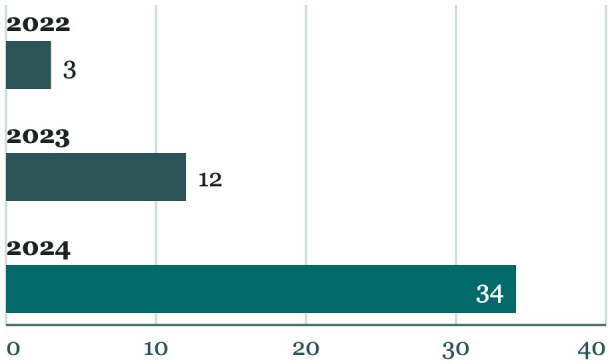
Hybrid warfare means using non-military tools such as sabotage, cyberattacks, disinformation, and pressure on infrastructure, to weaken an enemy without open war. Since 2022, Russia has increasingly used these tools in Europe.

The numbers show a clear trend. A Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) dataset counts three Russian attacks in Europe in 2022, 12 in 2023, and 34 in 2024 An International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) study, as reported by *Texty*, finds a similar rise. In Germany alone, authorities recorded 320 suspected sabotage cases in 2025 and 165 between January and August 2026.

The methods have also changed. After many Russian intelligence officers were expelled from European capitals, Moscow began recruiting local people online. A study by the

Russian hybrid attacks in Europe, 2022–2024

Number of recorded attacks



Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2022–2024 data. Chart: Euro Prospects.

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism found that about 95% of 172 perpetrators had no formal link to Russian intelligence. The targets have moved too. Today they are often the weapons and logistics chain that supports Ukraine.

Former US ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith describes this as a move from deniable to undeniable attacks. Leipzig is the clearest example: an explosive drone at a civilian airport is no longer a small grey act.

Why the grey zone works for Moscow

The 'grey zone' is the space between peace and war. Russia uses it for three reasons.

First, attribution is slow. A democracy must prove who is responsible before it acts. Berlin needed almost four weeks for Leipzig. By the time a response comes, the public has moved on and the link between the act and its cost is weakened.

Second, the threshold is unclear. NATO said in 2016 that hybrid attacks could lead to Article 5, but it never said when. In September 2025, when around 20 Russian drones entered Polish airspace, Warsaw chose Article 4 consultations, not Article 5. This was wise, but it also told Moscow where the line was not.

Third, Russia believes it can win a contest of nerves. Political scientist Alexander Lanoszka showed already in 2016 that hybrid tactics are designed to make a strong military answer look risky. A 2026 study by Alexander Mattelaer for The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) goes further. It calls the hybrid campaign a partial deterrence failure: NATO still deters a tank invasion, but Moscow thinks European democracies fear escalation more than Russia does.

So Article 5 itself is not broken. It works for the war it was designed for. Russia just acts in the space where it cannot reach.

The debate between resilience and punishment

Deterrence theory, going back to Glenn Snyder, separates two ideas. Deterrence by denial makes an attack fail. Deterrence by punishment makes the attacker pay. In the current debate on Russia's hybrid war, experts and governments mostly disagree about which of these two approaches Europe should choose.

The resilience camp argues that democracies should use their own strengths. Mikael Wigell's idea of democratic deterrence focuses on transparency, strong institutions, and an active civil society. Others, like Jennifer Kavanagh in *War on the Rocks*, warn that visible retaliation against a nuclear power could turn probes into a real crisis.

The punishment camp has grown fast since 2025. Samuel Greene and Christopher Walker argue in *Foreign Affairs* that late, legal responses break the link between act and cost. Seth Jones at CSIS asks for costs that are clearly tied to Russian behaviour. A third group, including Liana Fix at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues that Europe should respond via Ukraine, for example by providing long-range weapons after each serious attack.

Even the EU-NATO Hybrid Centre of Excellence now warns that a posture built only on resilience signals reluctance and can invite more attacks. The resilience camp is right that denial matters and escalation is a real risk. But denial alone cannot protect thousands of airports, factories, and cables at the same time.

Why case-by-case punishment fails

Europe does punish Russia. It expels diplomats, seizes tankers, and adds names to its hybrid sanctions list. The problem is how it punishes.

The Israeli scholar Uri Tor has a useful idea here: cumulative deterrence. Against repeated low-level attacks, credibility does not come from one big threat. It comes from a long record of responses that are reliable and visible: a record Europe currently lacks. Each capital reacts alone, with different tools and on a different timeline, and EU sanctions often take months. For Moscow, the cost of the next attack remains a guess.

The data also suggests that Europe's punishment often hits the wrong level. After the mass expulsions of 2022, Russia did not stop. It switched to recruiting proxies online. Arresting these disposable agents is necessary for justice, but it costs the Kremlin almost nothing. If punishment is meant to deter, it has to reach the Russian state, its intelligence services, and its revenues.

'Europe does not need a new treaty to respond. It needs a group of states willing to agree on the price before the attack, not after it.'

Who should decide the price?

Most recent proposals ask for 'predictable costs'. Few explain who would set them. NATO cannot impose sanctions or expel diplomats. The EU can, but it needs unanimity, and one member state can block a decision. On 28 September 2026, High Representative Kaja Kallas proposed an EU emergency protocol for hybrid attacks. It is a useful step, but without agreed consequences it may stay only a consultation tool.

A more realistic answer is a coalition of the states that are most exposed and most willing to act: the Nordic and Baltic states, Poland, Germany, France, and the UK. The European Policy Centre suggests a similar model, where responses come from national governments who have the legal powers to act. Such a coalition could agree on a short menu in advance, building on an International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) matrix that links attack types to countermeasures:

- **Damage to cables or energy links:** joint port bans and inspections for shadow

fleet tankers, as Polish researchers have recommended.

- **Sabotage against defence industry:** coordinated expulsions in all coalition states at once, plus sanctions on the intelligence units involved.
- **Explosives near civilians, as in Leipzig:** additional long-range weapons for Ukraine, or a fund from frozen Russian assets that, in Gioe's idea, makes each attack pay for its own damage.

The menu does not need to be public. Thomas Schelling's old point about threats that 'leave something to chance' still applies: Moscow only needs to know that a response will come, not exactly what it will be. To avoid slow attribution, the coalition could act on a joint high-confidence assessment, as Western states did after the Skripal poisoning in 2018.

There are real risks. Retaliation can escalate, and in Germany offensive cyber measures still face legal limits. But doing nothing new also has a cost, and that cost keeps growing.

Can Europe deter what is designed to avoid war?

Europe has become better at defending itself, and the debate has moved past the idea that resilience is enough. What is still missing is a credible answer to a simple question: what will happen to Russia after the next Leipzig?

Article 5 remains strong for the war it was built for. Russia knows this, and that is why it acts below it. Europe does not need a new treaty to respond. It needs a group of states willing to agree on the price before the attack, not after it.

After Leipzig, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz promised that those behind hybrid attacks would pay a price. The next step is to make sure Moscow knows that price in advance.

Originally published on europrospects.eu, 19 November 2026. Illustration: Euro Prospects.

Myanmar Needs Trust, Not More Paperwork



By **Dori Gnadig**, *International Affairs Analyst*
Edited by **Naid Makhmudov**, *International Affairs Analyst*

Despite years of calls from Myanmar's civil society for localisation, the EU has not substantially changed its aid delivery, leaving its transfers open to co-optation, and the way forward is trust-building rather than more bureaucratic requirements.

Since 2021, Myanmar has been categorised as a failed state and has been subject to protracted conflict. A devastating earthquake struck central Myanmar in 2025. The disaster especially affected key agricultural regions, damaging irrigation systems and destroying crops and grain stores. Furthermore, the earthquake has ruined houses, dozens of roads, bridges, and health facilities, disrupting essential services. As a result, severe shortages of food, fuel, and other essential items persist.

The EU has allocated €16.2 million in its humanitarian response plan, further highlighting its commitment to humanitarian help in the Indo-Pacific region. However, in the case of Myanmar, there are increased worries about the co-opting of humanitarian aid and using it to prolong the conflict. One reason for this is the international aid infrastructure, with its rigidity and inability to adapt to the particularities of different conflicts. The EU aid architecture is no exception. Despite years of calls from Myanmar's civil society for localisation, the EU has not substantially changed its aid delivery, leaving its transfers open to co-optation. The EU should take these calls seriously and commit to reform how international aid is provided to avoid further prolonging the conflict by providing finances to the parties.

International donors typically entrust the government, alongside local civil society actors, with coordinating the allocation of these resources. However, the EU does not recognise the legitimacy of the junta. Hence, the Union needs to find alternative methods for aid provision. The EU provides aid through either UN institutions or vetted non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The rigid structures of these organisations fail to account for contextual obstacles such as the *Organisation Registration Law*. This legislation effectively criminalises civil society organisations, many of which have dissolved legally for fear of reprisal while continuing to

operate in practice. As a result, international donors, who rely on legally registered partners, can no longer fund them. Meanwhile, organisations that remain legally viable are often partially co-opted by the junta, which fuels concerns within the international community that aid is being weaponised.

Weaponisation of aid

Humanitarian aid can be misused and manipulated by conflict parties, particularly governing authorities, to advance political or military objectives rather than addressing humanitarian needs. This includes disproportionately allocating resources to areas under their control, obstructing delivery to opposing regions, misappropriating supplies, using aid as a bargaining tool, or exploiting aid operations for surveillance and intelligence gathering. Myanmar has been a victim of this practice.

Historically, the military (Tatmadaw) has been using 'divide and rule' tactics to instrumentalise aid to consolidate their power and suppress opposition. It has been reported that aid is often repackaged to appear as regime-sponsored assistance, diverting credit from international donors. Nonetheless, as Myanmar has been affected by conflicts, it is one of the most access-constrained environments for humanitarian aid organisations. For example, the de facto authorities have heavily restricted civilians and aid organisations in their movement of people and goods. Humanitarian organisations operating in Tatmadaw-controlled regions must obtain travel authorisations for any movement of either staff or resources, and these authorisations are often denied. Moreover, humanitarian workers are often arrested and detained, while the supplies are seized by the junta and distributed in the regions under their control. Obtaining visas and their renewal is also increasingly difficult. Hence, most formal international humanitarian response is limited to junta-controlled areas and official camps for internally displaced people, or operates along the border from neighbouring countries. This limits the effectiveness of international aid distribution and its geographical reach. If the agencies would like to increase this, they have to rely on local actors and run the risk of aid co-optation.

A solution to the constrained access would be to channel aid through local humanitarian and civil society organisations. However, the junta has enacted the *Organisation Registration Law*, which requires these organisations to register and abide by strict rules imposed by the de facto authorities. Hence, the co-optation of aid remains a threat if the given organisation has officially been registered, as the junta restricts agencies to work in areas under its control, effectively instrumentalising aid. If the organisation opts not to adhere to the law, then they are faced with severe penalties. However, many agencies have gone underground and operate illegally.

Provisionally, this places more strain on the international community, including the EU, to provide the necessary help. These actors are also confronted with the dilemma of continuing to collaborate with unregistered groups, requiring them to change approaches and reform their aid policies as the current infrastructure presupposes a legal sphere in which these operate. The other option is to continue with the current framework and dis-

tribute aid to local registered agencies, risking that aid might be weaponised. Both of these have severe implications for the people of Myanmar.

The EU aid infrastructure

The EU provides funds directly through humanitarian organisations, avoiding cooperation with the junta. The *Humanitarian Implementation Plan* of the EU acknowledges the complexity of the ongoing conflict in the country and also provides frameworks to provide financial help for displaced people who are outside the borders, including in Bangladesh, Thailand, and India. As for addressing the crisis within the borders of Myanmar, the Commission does acknowledge the risk of aid weaponisation and instrumentalisation while also keeping in mind the access limitations for NGOs.

'The way forward is not to increase the bureaucratic requirements for these local organisations, but rather to focus on trust-building and strengthening local communities.'

The EU focuses on three main sectors in its assistance to Myanmar: (1) Peace and Governance, (2) Education and Human Development, and (3) Sustainable Livelihoods and Green Growth. The policy explicitly focuses on the support of the most vulnerable communities. To achieve these policy goals, it emphasises the need for collaboration with civil society and local actors to deliver the aid most effectively and efficiently. However, this does not acknowledge the fact that many civil society organisations needed to go underground, dissolving their official bank accounts as well, in fear of Tatmadaw violence. Many of these organisations remain operating in the field, relying on their local networks to distribute aid. Those who have registered are subject to co-optation, as the junta can coerce them to distribute aid only in areas that are favourable to them.

The current EU aid infrastructure cannot address this issue. It requires the organisations to prove not only that they exist in the legal sphere, but also to provide detailed documentation about how the aid was distributed and who received it. These are often hard, if not impossible, to provide, as people fear the junta and would like to remain in the shadows. Moreover, the UN often requires that its officers visit sites to oversee how aid is distributed and verify the process. For this, they need to use UN vehicles, which expose the local NGO and draw attention to them, which they would like to avoid because of the junta and its violence. As a result, even though the EU invests and allocates aid to Myanmar, these monetary funds often remain outside the country due to access issues or are given to NGOs that are under threat of co-optation.

Localisation of aid

However, the way forward is not to increase the bureaucratic requirements for these local organisations, but rather to focus on trust-building and strengthening local communities. To mitigate potential co-optation of aid, the target should be to support and strengthen civilian-led, inclusive, and accountable governance systems and discard one-size-fits-all approaches.

Localisation of aid is not a cure-all. Local actors can be co-opted by the regime as well. However, after the coup and the Covid-19 pandemic, local civil society organisations have been working alongside international actors, and they have been pushing for further localisation. The main limitation in this case is the registration of civil societies by law, which makes many NGOs choose to go underground and cease to officially exist. Hence, international aid agencies that need to fill out bureaucratic forms and justify the money flow can no longer prove that the money goes to a real organisation, as it no longer exists on paper. Thus, donors need to rethink the rigidity of the aid system to ensure that the aid reaches the people who need it the most.

Conclusion

Currently, the majority of the aid provided by the EU goes through UN agencies and international NGOs, which can be insensitive to the local contexts. Hence, the EU should establish more direct relationships with local civil societies to truly deliver humanitarian assistance to those who are in need in Myanmar. Moreover, it needs to rework how it works with local agencies, and rely on already established connections while also finding new ways to reassure donors that the aid reaches its intended recipients.

Originally published on europrospects.eu, 21 November 2026. Illustration: Euro Prospects.

About Euro Prospects

Euro Prospects is an independent platform for in-depth analysis of European political affairs. We publish articles and policy briefs on the issues shaping Europe today, from the EU-Mercosur trade agreement and Europe's semiconductor supply chains to the EU's strategic positioning on Syria and Serbia's global arms trade.

But informing readers is only part of our mission. Euro Prospects was founded to help cultivate a European public sphere, a transnational space of political curiosity and civic engagement among Europe's citizens. A healthy European democracy depends on citizens who transcend pro- or anti-EU debates and instead engage in the substantive policies before them.

To this end, Euro Prospects offers a platform for reflection and debate on Europe's politics, policies, and prospects, bringing together a diverse team from across the continent.

Visit Euro Prospects

Partnerships

Are you an organisation interested in partnering with Euro Prospects? The IA Unit is actively building relationships with researchers, institutions, and publications working on European foreign policy and international affairs. If you would like to discuss this issue or explore ways to work together, email us.

Contact Us

About the IA Unit

The International Affairs Unit (IA) is Euro Prospects' dedicated section for analysing global affairs and events to explain Europe's place in the world, from global conflicts to the EU's own mechanisms to engage overseas.

IA Members

Mehak Kulaar
Head, International Affairs Unit

Golo Vanden Eynde
Defence & Foreign Policy Analyst

Bianca Guerrini
International Affairs Analyst

Berk Tuttup
International Security Analyst

Dori Gnadig
International Affairs Analyst

Naid Makhmudov
International Affairs Analyst

Oskar Genney
International Affairs Analyst

Francesco Bernabeu Fornara
Founder & Editor-in-Chief