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# How to build public support for defence spending in Europe

## Strategies for preventing a political backlash

By Armida van Rijn

# How to build public support for defence spending in Europe:

## Strategies for preventing a political backlash

By Armida van Rij

- ★ Europe faces a triple threat: Russia's imperialist ambitions in Europe, China's economic coercion, and US withdrawal from its commitments on European security. This has led to acute security risks to European countries. Tackling this threat landscape effectively requires higher levels of defence spending to support rearmament and improve military readiness across Europe.
- ★ A central challenge for Europe's defence build-up is that many European countries have high levels of public debt or large government deficits. To make room for defence spending, countries will either need to cut public spending elsewhere or raise taxes, neither of which will be popular among voters. When public services have been reduced in the past, it has led to increased support for far-right or populist parties. These parties seek to weaken, rather than strengthen Europe's security, and accelerate democratic backsliding.
- ★ Governments have to gain the public's support for the trade-offs involved in increasing defence spending. There are two elements to making this case: the first is internal to the defence sector, and the second is external to the public. First, the defence procurement ecosystem needs to get its house in order, spend public money more efficiently, and demonstrate how this contributes to better readiness. Second, governments need to embark on a communications campaign to raise levels of threat awareness among the public, as this plays a key role in helping to sway public opinion towards supporting the spending trade-offs.
- ★ The key messages the communications campaign should focus on are: what the security threat to European countries is; ways in which each government is preparing to meet the threat; how deterrence works and why it is worth making investments in defence now, with the aim of deterring adversaries from further undermining European security; the likely character of any future war; and underscoring that the required increase in spending is only 1 to 1.5 per cent of GDP.
- ★ Governments should use unconventional approaches to deliver these messages and build consensus around defence investments. Foreign and defence ministries around Europe should host high-level public shows, panel discussions and townhall meetings to engage with publics. Governments should also engage with cultural institutions and provide funding for the arts to contribute to the public conversation on defence. Governments should also look to mobilise popular public figures, such as members of royal families, sportspeople and youth leaders.

- ★ Special efforts should be made to reach younger audiences through social media, including using social media influencers, and through classrooms by designing curricula to teach national security courses in schools.
- ★ To finance higher levels of defence spending without fueling support for populist parties, European governments should use a combination of higher taxes, some spending cuts, and increased government deficits in those countries that can afford them.

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**Europe faces a triple threat: Russia’s imperialist ambitions in Europe, China’s economic coercion, and US withdrawal from its responsibilities on European security. This has led to an acute security risk to European nations. Tackling this threat landscape effectively requires higher levels of defence spending to support rearmament and improve military readiness across Europe.**

By and large, European populations support rearmament, but only as long as it does not involve increasing taxes or reducing public services.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the financial markets may drive up borrowing costs for governments that borrow more to pay for defence. The challenge for European governments is to create a national consensus in favour of more investment in defence and the trade-offs this involves, at a time when populist far-right and far-left parties are looking to consolidate their power in the European political landscape.

This paper outlines how to gain the public’s support for increased defence spending, despite the challenges of today’s political climate. It suggests key messages and unconventional delivery mechanisms to reach publics beyond the national security establishment and gain their backing for rearmament policies.

*“The challenge for European governments is to create a national consensus in favour of more investment in defence.”*

During the NATO Summit in The Hague in June 2025, allies agreed to commit 5 per cent of GDP to defence spending by 2035, of which 3.5 per cent would be for core defence, such as equipment, operations and personnel, and 1.5 per cent for infrastructure, cybersecurity and other forms of resilience and preparedness.<sup>2</sup> For European NATO allies, this means a collective increase to annual defence spending of \$831.2 billion, up from \$815.6 billion in 2024, based on current growth trajectories compared with 2024 levels.<sup>3</sup> The spending is required to ensure that countries have the capabilities needed to implement alliance plans to defend NATO territory based on threat assessments. The spending target assumes that the US will remain engaged in the alliance and continue to

provide key capabilities. Should transatlantic relations rupture further, even more demands will be placed on European defence spending.

A challenge for Europe’s defence build-up is that many European countries have high levels of public debt or large government deficits. France, Italy and the UK face such constraints most acutely. In the short term, Europe’s low debt countries – including Germany, the Netherlands and some Nordic countries – can borrow on the financial markets. But for all countries, the spending or borrowing will ultimately need to be underwritten by tax receipts. To make room for defence spending, countries will either need to reduce public spending elsewhere – which will often mean cutting public services, or raising taxes – in the future. Neither option will be popular among voters.

Public discussion on these issues has unleashed a ‘guns versus butter’ debate, portraying a direct trade-off between welfare spending and defence spending. Although this framing misses many of the nuances, difficult trade-offs will be required, and how the public may react to these is not well explored.

Increasing defence spending will involve making choices. Welfare spending has been on a structural upward trend as a result of voters demanding greater government protection from risks and of rising costs caused by ageing populations. Government budgets and the GDP of European NATO countries are 1.9 times larger now than in 1990, when adjusted for prices. Yet welfare spending is 2.4 times larger.<sup>4</sup> Economic growth has not kept pace with these levels of spending.<sup>5</sup> All this suggests governments will need to re-organise national budgets and reduce other categories of public spending to allow for higher defence spending – which is easier said than done, given the public backlash this will trigger.

1: Célia Belin and Pawel Zerka, ‘The European archipelago: Building bridges in a post-Western Europe’, European Council on Foreign Relations, policy brief, February 11<sup>th</sup> 2026; YouGov, ‘Many Europeans now see US as a threat to Europe’, February 13<sup>th</sup> 2026.

2: NATO, ‘The Hague Summit Declaration’, June 25<sup>th</sup> 2025.

3: Nan Tian, Lorenzo Scarazzato and Jade Guiberteau Ricard, ‘NATO’s new spending target: Challenges and risks associated with a political signal’, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, commentary, June 27<sup>th</sup> 2025.

4 & 5: Florian Dorn, Niklas Potrafke and Marcel Schlepper, ‘European defence spending in 2024 and beyond: How to provide security in an economically challenging environment’, ifo Institute, EconPol policy report No 45, January 2024.

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## Populist far-right and far-left parties will exploit cuts to public services

The predicament of European countries is further complicated by the rise in support for populist parties, in particular the re-emergence of far-right parties. These parties accelerate democratic backsliding: examples from Hungary and Poland show that once in power, they actively undermine the judiciary, seek to take away individual liberties, and attack the free press. Their nationalistic focus on sovereignty also weakens Europe's collective response to global problems which no country can hope to address on its own. Such parties are a threat to liberal democracy in Europe.

*“Public dissatisfaction caused by cuts to public services to support defence will add to populations’ grievances about politics.”*

In France, Germany and the UK, the far-right could plausibly win the next national elections: they are currently polling between 20-30 per cent in each country, and have made significant electoral gains in recent elections. In Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia and Sweden, far-right parties are either in office or support the government. In Austria, Denmark, and The Netherlands, the electoral weight of the far-right exerts a significant gravitational pull on policy and political processes.

Most far-right parties support a robust national defence policy and strong armed forces. Where European far-right parties differ is in their attitudes to Russia. Some, particularly those in France, Germany, Italy and the UK have historically been Russia- or Putin-friendly and continue to vote against support for Ukraine – even if their recent manifestos have begun to take a stronger line on European security. Others, meanwhile, like Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland and the Finns Party in Finland, consider Russia to be a security threat.

In some countries, there is also pressure from far-left parties which have historically been pacifist and against rearmament. Die Linke in Germany, La France Insoumise

in France, Partij van de Arbeid van België in Belgium and Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy are all actively campaigning against rearmament and have had recent electoral successes, or are in their country's top three political parties in the polls.

Populist parties at both ends of the political spectrum capitalise on popular grievances regarding inflation and cost of living; dissatisfaction with political elites; and a perception that democracy is not delivering. Possible public dissatisfaction caused by cuts to public services or welfare spending to support defence will add to populations’ grievances about mainstream politics. Parties at the extreme ends of the spectrum will seek to exploit this – and as long as they remain in opposition, they do not face the responsibility of making similar difficult political choices.

Evidence from a number of European states shows a direct correlation between the reduction of public services and increased support for populist far-right parties. In the UK, for example, closures of public health facilities increased dissatisfaction with the state, and increased support for populist right-wing parties.<sup>6</sup> In Italy, a reduction in public service provision made citizens more likely to support far-right parties.<sup>7</sup> In Germany, communities that felt ‘left behind’ by political elites who were seen not to have distributed public goods fairly were more receptive to far-right rhetoric.<sup>8</sup> This was particularly the case when the far-right was able to exploit grievances about immigration at the same time.<sup>9</sup> Across Western Europe, where voters count on a certain level of public service provision, reductions raise concerns about the extent to which political elites care about ordinary citizens.<sup>10</sup> As governments carefully consider trade-offs in public spending to boost defence, the staying power of the far-right will complicate the public debate on this.

For centrist governments currently in power, the challenge is to manage the trade-offs inherent in increasing defence spending to confront the security landscape Europe faces, without triggering a political backlash at future elections.

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## There is a lack of public support for the trade-offs required to finance rearmament

Polling suggests there are divergences in national attitudes regarding defence spending. An ECFR poll conducted in May 2025 found respondents were worried about their countries not spending enough on defence in Denmark, Germany, Poland, Romania, Spain and the

UK.<sup>11</sup> But in Estonia, France, Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Switzerland, more respondents were concerned that their countries are spending too much on defence, at the expense of other areas of public spending.<sup>12</sup>

6: Zachary Dickson, Sara Hobolt, Catherine De Vries and Simone Cremaschi, ‘Public service decline and support for the populist right: Evidence from England’s National Health Service’, Under review, 2025.  
7: Simone Cremaschi, Paula Rettl, Marco Cappelluti and Catherine De Vries, ‘Geographies of discontent: Public service deprivation and the rise of the far-right in Italy’, *American Journal of Political Science*, Volume 69, Issue 4, 2024.

8, 9 & 10: Daniel Ziblatt, Hanno Hilbig and Daniel Bischof, ‘Wealth of tongues: Why peripheral regions vote for the radical right in Germany’, *American Political Science Review*, Volume 118, No 3, 2024.  
11 & 12: Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, ‘Trump’s European revolution’, European Council on Foreign Relations, policy brief, June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2025.

In some countries voters simply deny the existence of trade-offs. In Poland, a poll found that 58 per cent of respondents opposed the idea of a suggested temporary tax to fund military modernisation, with only 32 per cent supporting it.<sup>13</sup> In the UK, a YouGov poll from June 2025 found that 49 per cent of respondents were in favour of increasing defence spending, but 57 per cent opposed increasing taxes to pay for it.<sup>14</sup> When it comes to cutting

other areas of public spending to fund rearmament in the UK, 53 per cent opposed it and only 29 per cent supported it.<sup>15</sup> In France, a March 2025 Ipsos poll found 68 per cent of respondents were in favour of increasing defence spending (dropping to 52 per cent among *Rassemblement National* supporters), but 50 per cent opposed cutting public services to achieve it.<sup>16</sup>

## How to pay for defence?

To finance rearmament, there are broadly two sets of measures countries can deploy, depending on how much fiscal room they have. Those with sufficient fiscal space to increase their national deficit and still remain within agreed fiscal rules should do so, especially as for EU countries defence spending is currently temporarily excluded from the EU's fiscal rules. This means they can currently exceed the EU's annual deficit limit of 3 per cent of GDP by a further 1.5 per cent of GDP per year for the four years from 2025-28.

Germany, The Netherlands, some of the Nordic states and all the Baltic states do not immediately need to make choices about cutting social spending to support defence spending. They may even, like Poland, choose to spend on defence and welfare: Poland increased defence spending to nearly 5 per cent, but also introduced a new social benefit offering payments to the grandparents of working parents for childcare (named *babciove* or 'granny payments').<sup>17</sup>

*“In the interests of creating a sense of burden sharing, tax increases should target the wealthiest.”*

The second group of countries who do not have this fiscal space – the majority of European states – need to consider a combination of spending cuts and tax increases. Spending cuts, if they affect public services, are most likely to hit the working and middle classes, and therefore – in the interests of creating a sense of burden sharing – tax increases should target the wealthiest. Service reductions and tax rises may not be popular but

they are necessary. For most countries in this group, the overall cuts need not be dramatic, given that the required increase in spending to reach the NATO target of spending 3.5 per cent of GDP on defence is only 1 to 1.5 per cent of GDP.

Governments in Western European countries often invoke economic growth to gain public backing for defence spending. But the economic benefits of defence spending are unclear. Assessments by the Institute for Fiscal Studies in the UK, the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis and the Royal United Services Institute have all found the macro-economic benefits for these countries from European rearmament will be negligible.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, governments in Denmark and Sweden for example, tell a more honest story about why defence investment is needed to strengthen national defence and meet NATO commitments, and the trade-offs involved.<sup>19</sup>

Defence investments can lift growth if they are tilted towards supporting innovation, but it is not clear if European governments will pursue this course of action. Historically research and development spending in the defence realm has supported the wider economy most if spending has been geared towards dual-use innovation, creating wider productivity spillovers.<sup>20</sup> Much of today's European rearmament effort, however, will be focused on replenishing stocks of artillery shells, tanks and other conventional weapons made for or donated to Ukraine. Such investments rarely lead to long-term economic growth.<sup>21</sup> Using growth as a criterion for decisions on investments in the defence sector risks creating perverse incentives, whereby the economic benefits of a particular capability weigh more heavily than its contribution to defence and deterrence.

13: Polskie Radio, 'Most Poles oppose temporary defense tax, poll finds', January 6<sup>th</sup> 2026.

14: YouGov, 'Do you think defence spending should be increased, decreased, or remain at about its current level?', June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2025.

15: YouGov, 'Would you support or oppose making cuts to other areas of public spending in order to fund an increase in defence spending?', June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2025.

16: Ipsos and *La Tribune Dimanche*, 'L'état d'esprit des Français suite aux positions de Donald Trump sur la guerre en Ukraine', March 2025.

17: Agnieszka Homańska and Wojciech Przybylski, 'The next generations need a new social contract for European defence', *European View*, Volume 24, Issue 2, October 2025.

18: Bee Boileau and Max Warner, 'UK defence spending: Composition, commitments and challenges', Institute for Fiscal Studies, IFS Green Budget Chapter, September 2025; Noah Sylvia and Khem Rogaly, 'The false promise of defence as prosperity', Royal United Services Institute, commentary, August 19<sup>th</sup> 2025; Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, 'The macroeconomic effects of increased defence spending', November 19<sup>th</sup> 2025.

19: Government of Sweden, Ministry of Defence, 'The government presents defence investments for a stronger Sweden', September 15<sup>th</sup> 2025; *The Copenhagen Post*, 'Denmark reaches historic 3.5 per cent of GDP in military spending and lower VAT, but its financial surplus is almost gone', February 24<sup>th</sup> 2026.

20 & 21: Paolo Surico and Will Hotten, 'Can defence spending boost growth and productivity in the UK?', *Economics Observatory*, November 14<sup>th</sup> 2025.

One notable exception to this caveat is Germany, whose large increase in defence procurement spending could bail out Europe's largest manufacturing sector, suffering from years of industrial malaise and increasingly rapacious Chinese competition. German industrial production has recently declined to 2005 levels.<sup>22</sup> As much manufacturing capacity is sitting idle, the surge in defence orders should relatively rapidly convert into output. Beyond Germany, there may also be some economic benefits from European rearmament for specific communities dependent on large defence companies' manufacturing hubs, such as Merignac and Cergy in France, where the Rafale fighter jet is produced, or Barrow and Telford in the UK, where nuclear submarines, and armored vehicles and artillery gun barrels are respectively produced.

But politicians are taking a significant medium-term risk by promising that rearmament will boost prosperity. Voters will punish incumbent governments if defence spending (or other policies) fails to deliver growth. There are good reasons to believe it will underwhelm. Defence is a small sector, and 3.5 per cent of GDP pales in comparison to the overall share of manufacturing in GDP, which is around 16 per cent in the EU. Even if European governments reach the 3.5 per cent target, NATO figures suggest that, in the short-term at least, they will spend a median figure of about 31 per cent of that on equipment.<sup>23</sup> Defence innovation will make up a much smaller share of total spending.

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## Making the public case for defence spending

With public disillusionment with centrist governments risking further gains for populist parties on both ends of the spectrum, governments across Europe need to build public support for higher defence spending and rearmament. Making a case for defence to the public has two elements: the first is internal to the defence sector, and the second is external to the public.

### Cleaning up defence procurement

The first element involves the defence procurement ecosystem – in particular ministries of defence and the defence industry – getting its own house in order.

*“Ensuring taxpayers’ money is well-spent and directly supports Europe’s military readiness is a key aspect of gaining and maintaining public support.”*

For governments to be able to make the case for increased spending to the public, investments in defence must lead to tangible capabilities and improved military readiness, at the lowest possible cost to the taxpayer. Spending on defence is merely an input. Governments will need to show that extra defence spending is not a waste of public resources, even if a country never goes to war. They need to demonstrate that they are buying the right equipment and improving readiness to be able to respond more quickly and effectively in a crisis if needed, in comparison to what could have been done with a smaller budget.

Defence procurement has historically been a challenge. Too many large procurement projects are delayed, leading to cost increases and waste. In the UK, there have been many National Audit Office reports warning that the Ministry of Defence has failed to achieve value for money, spent taxpayer's money inefficiently on major procurement projects and had skilled workforce shortages that affected readiness.<sup>24</sup> As the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute points out, there are clear risks associated with doubling, or in some cases, tripling defence spending over the course of ten years: these include procurement inefficiencies, overpricing, and the misuse and bypassing of oversight mechanisms.<sup>25</sup> A sudden hike in significant investments also increases the risk of a gap between demand and production capacity within Europe, leading to inflationary prices at the taxpayer's expense.

As countries across Europe will all, to varying degrees, need to increase defence spending to meet their new 5 per cent NATO defence and security spending target, there is a high risk of such shortcomings becoming more widespread. Germany, has long faced concerns over absorption capacity regarding new spending – a concern which is all the greater as the country aims to increase defence spending to 152 billion by 2029. Absorption capacity is not just about the money, but also requires production capacity to scale up and having skilled manufacturing, engineering and armed forces personnel to both produce and use new capabilities – all of which take time, resources and facilities.

22: Olaf Storbeck and Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, 'German industrial output falls to 2005 levels as auto sector craters', *Financial Times*, October 8<sup>th</sup> 2025.

23: NATO, 'Defence expenditure of NATO countries (2014-25)', press release, 2025.

24: National Audit Office, 'Improving the performance of major equipment contracts', June 24<sup>th</sup> 2021; National Audit Office, 'The Ajax programme', March 11<sup>th</sup> 2022; National Audit Office, 'The UK's F-35 capability', July 11<sup>th</sup> 2025; National Audit Office, 'Ensuring sufficient skilled military personnel', April 18<sup>th</sup> 2018.

25: Nan Tian, Lorenzo Scarazzato and Jade Guiberteau Ricard, 'NATO's new spending target: Challenges and risks associated with a political signal', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, commentary, June 27<sup>th</sup> 2025.

To gain public support for higher defence spending, governments and industry will have to show that they are making a serious effort to learn from past problems, while avoiding new ones. Taking steps to ensure taxpayers' money is well-spent and directly supports Europe's military readiness is a key aspect of gaining and maintaining public support.

### Communication strategies for building a public conversation and consensus about defence investments.

The second element is the externally focused dimension, which should involve a carefully-designed communications campaign, tailored to each national and local context. The starting point must be raising the level of threat awareness among European publics, as this plays a key role in helping sway public opinion towards spending more on defence and accepting the political choices involved.<sup>26</sup>

*“Raising the level of threat awareness plays a key role in helping sway public opinion towards spending more on defence.”*

High threat awareness of the national security risks Russia poses already exists in the Baltic and Nordic states. In western and southern Europe, however, much more can be done to make the public aware of these security risks. All of Europe – including countries further from the border with Russia like Spain or Italy – is already subject to unconventional warfare like cyber and information warfare, and this is only likely to intensify over the coming years. There may also be the perception among some more cynical members of the public that defence spending has to be increased simply to appease US President Donald Trump. Understandably, there is opposition to this – but it is also not the reality and improved threat awareness will help dispel this idea.

A universal starting point would be for heads of government, ministers, and other politicians to publicly make the case for defence spending, even when this comes at the expense of other forms of public spending. They should be backed by chiefs of defence and heads of intelligence services, rather than (as sometimes happens now) sending out senior defence and intelligence officers to make the case while heads of government and ministers stay silent. If politicians do not speak out, it is easy for a cynical public to assume that generals and admirals just want bigger budgets to play with, rather

26: Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Bastian Giegerich, 'NATO defence spending and European threat perceptions', *Survival*, Volume 60, No 4, 2018; Richard Eichenberg and Richard Stoll, 'The acceptability of war and support for defense spending: Evidence from fourteen democracies, 2004–13', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Volume 61, No 4, 2017; Matthew DiGiuseppe, Angelo Aspide and Jordan Becker, 'Threats and the public constraint on military spending', *British Journal of Political Science*, Volume 54, 2024.

than that they see a real threat that they are ill-equipped to meet. **Key messages** should focus on:

- ★ What the security threat is to Europe, and to individual countries. This should partially be focused on Russia as the most immediate security risk to Europe, but also on China and other state and non-state actors which pose a security risk to Europe.

- ★ The ways in which the country in question is preparing to meet the threat, where military readiness will be in the short, medium, and long term, and what individual citizens and companies can do to support efforts, for example by joining the reserves. There should also be a clear NATO element in this, showcasing how countries within the alliance support one another with their security concerns. The permanent deployment of a German brigade to Lithuania is a good example, as is allied co-operation in the Baltic to protect sub-sea infrastructure. The purpose is to show how the policy (increased defence spending) helps achieve the objective (military preparedness, readiness and deterrence, resulting in national security).

- ★ How deterrence works and why making investments in defence now, with the aim of deterring adversaries from further undermining European security, is worth it.

- ★ The character of any future war. Invoking images of tanks rolling over borders and other such violations of sovereignty as happened in Ukraine will not prepare the public for the more likely scenarios of future warfare in the rest of Europe. These include large-scale cyber-attacks, disinformation designed to cause panic or spark civil unrest, severe disruptions to energy and water supplies, communication failures and drone swarms, to just name a few. The absence of fighter jets in the sky or tanks on the ground may still mean Europe is at war – but it could look very different from past European wars.

- ★ Russia's possible next steps when a peace agreement is reached in Ukraine. Contrary to what publics may believe, from the moment an agreement is signed, the security risks to the rest of Europe rise. A peace deal in Ukraine will not mean the threat has gone.

- ★ The amounts involved. To reach 3.5 per cent on core defence spending, most European NATO allies need to find an additional 1 to 1.5 per cent of GDP – which is a lot more reasonable to communicate had countries needed to start from scratch. The 1.5 per cent target on infrastructure will have limited wider societal benefits

too, as this will help improve infrastructure, digital connectivity and other aspects of daily life.

For those countries that have been reluctant to increase defence spending for historical and societal reasons, or because they are geographically much further removed from Russia's threat and therefore feel safer, there are a few extra considerations. In addition to the messages above, the following should also be incorporated:

- ★ Destabilising actions in neighbouring countries by adversaries – whether conventional or unconventional – are likely to have cross-border spill-over effects such as refugee flows, interruptions in data transfers and disruption of supply chains. It is not possible for one country to insulate itself from security threats. Investments in helping neighbours deter threats are also a financial investment in one's own security.

- ★ Higher levels of defence investment, particularly that which falls under the 1.5 per cent resilience target, will also in a smaller way help improve the country's resilience to non-kinetic forms of warfare and natural disasters, the last of which has plagued central and southern Europe in recent years. This message should not be overstated however, for risk of overpromising and underdelivering.

Then there is the challenge from those who have concerns that rearmament sets Europe on a baked-in pathway to war, at the expense of diplomacy, negotiated settlements and (in the case of poorer countries in the EU's neighbourhood) development assistance.<sup>27</sup>

*“Investments in helping neighbours deter threats are also a financial investment in one's own security.”*

Unfortunately, diplomacy and development budgets are often the first to be cut when government savings need to be made, including to fund defence. Such decisions are short-sighted and will backfire. By using the financing mechanisms outlined above, governments should not need to cut funding for humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding work to increase defence spending. They should treat diplomacy, development and defence as complementary tools. Equally, the legacies of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are often rightly cited as examples of the failure of warfare and military campaigns. For the public, arguments should be framed around:

27: Niamh Ni Bhriain, 'Europe's €800bn militarisation – 'peace through strength' or path to war?', *EUobserver*, December 19<sup>th</sup> 2025; Thor Olav Iversen, Kristin Bergtora Sandvik and Cedric de Coning, 'The risks of a war economy mentality', Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, January 13<sup>th</sup> 2026; *The Guardian*, 'Spending even more on defence won't buy us peace', Letters to the editor, February 19<sup>th</sup> 2026.

- ★ The difference between expeditionary wars of choice, such as wars in Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Africa, and territorial defence driven by necessity. Current levels of preparedness and armament in Europe are insufficient for the continent to defend itself in the face of a very real, long-term threat.

- ★ Showcasing continued investments in diplomatic efforts to achieve peaceful resolutions to conflicts, and investments made in conflict off-ramps and de-escalation pathways like maintaining hotlines and the (limited) work the OSCE continues to do in engaging with Russia.

As for the **delivery mechanisms** for a national conversation on defence, governments should be thinking of non-traditional approaches, designed to reach audiences beyond the defence and national security establishment. They should take inspiration from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' and NATO's (now disbanded) Public Diplomacy Division *NAVO door Nederland Tour* (NATO through The Netherlands tour), in the run up to the NATO Summit in The Hague in 2025.<sup>28</sup> Foreign and defence ministries around Europe should look to host high-level panel discussions and townhall meetings involving defence and foreign ministers, intelligence and military chiefs. Their purpose would be to engage with publics on the security risks that particular country faces, and how defence spending will help protect Europe and their country specifically. The exact topics may look different in Estonia from those in Spain, but the purpose is to start an active public conversation about the threats a country faces.

Governments should also engage with **cultural institutions and leaders** like theatre directors, screenwriters, film producers and museums to better tell the story of why these investments in defence are needed, and to reach audiences who may otherwise not engage with international affairs. This involves providing specific funding for the arts to contribute to the public conversation on defence and security. This draws on previous work on storytelling about NATO, which involved bringing Hollywood screenwriters to NATO HQ to learn about security policy. The screenwriters had previously not engaged with NATO, yet during their visit they found that the story of the alliance is about partnerships, connection and protection which they can tell through their creative work.<sup>29</sup>

It would also help to **mobilise popular public figures** in the conversation about defence. In The Netherlands, both

28: Government of The Netherlands, 'Start van NAVO door Nederland tour', January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2025.

29: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'Hollywood goes NATO: Telling the story of the Alliance', July 12<sup>th</sup> 2024; Kathleen McInnes, 'Strategist have forgotten the power of stories', *Foreign Policy*, May 19<sup>th</sup> 2020.

Crown Princess Amelia and Queen Máxima have joined the reserves. The impact was two-fold: first, it contributed to the national conversation about security. Second, it led to a boost in interested people looking to join the Dutch armed forces – the so-called ‘Máxima-effect’.<sup>30</sup> Crown Princess Amalia’s decision was especially important as it spurred young people on to apply for reservist training (she is 22 years old).<sup>31</sup>

*“The story of the alliance is one about partnerships, connection and protection which screenwriters can tell through their creative work.”*

Special efforts need to be made to reach younger audiences. This is crucial for two reasons: first, they will need to support higher levels of defence spending in the medium-term, and perhaps for decades to come; and second, their skills may be required in the armed forces or the wider defence ecosystem. Delivery mechanisms for a national conversation on defence need to have **online elements** too as young people increasingly form views and their identities through engagement online. Using social media influencers on Instagram, TikTok, Youtube and Twitch with existing large platforms and follower bases could help amplify messages.<sup>32</sup> For other age groups too, efforts should be made to deliver key messages online using YouTube videos and other forms of online communication.

## Conclusion

While defence spending is organised at the national level, security in Europe is supranational: one state’s insecurity affects all its European neighbours. The continuous deterioration of the security environment and a new emerging world order based on military power and the threat or use of force necessitates this. Yet public buy-in for the trade-offs involved in increasing defence spending is so far absent – and too many governments in Europe shy away from building consensus on this issue.

Far-right and far-left parties will seek in their own ways to capitalise on the grievances any spending cuts or tax increases may cause. Governments need to confront this challenge head-on and bring the public along with them through an open dialogue about the trade-offs involved in decisions about public services, defence spending and large-scale rearmament. Governments across Europe need to engage in conversations nationally to build public consensus and support for rearmament and higher levels of defence spending. They should

In the offline world, governments should also look to bring the conversation about defence into **classrooms and curricula**. It would be useful to learn from Finland, a country at the forefront of whole-of-society approaches to security and public understanding of security, how it does this. Specifically, governments should look to learn how national security is taught in primary and secondary schools, what materials are used, who teaches it, and what methods are used to make this age-appropriate, with a view to developing a similar curriculum in their home countries.

At the community level, **civil society organisations** and **political parties’ constituency** meetings should look to hold moderated meetings or panel discussions with experts, enabling people to ask questions about defence spending and security and raise their concerns. An open dialogue with the public would help build trust and dispel misinformation about the government’s intentions.

Finally, deterrence and readiness are not just about capabilities and military equipment. Being able to recruit and retain skilled personnel is equally important. While recruitment for defence merits its own strategy, the measures outlined above should also contribute to lifting the visibility of defence as an employer. It should encourage people to join the defence ecosystem – whether working for the armed forces, or non-combat roles like working in manufacturing and engineering, doctors, psychologists, cyber specialists, chefs or lawyers, just to name a few.

focus on communicating key messages about the security threat through unconventional channels to reach audiences beyond the defence and national security establishment. Higher defence spending should not result in abolishing the welfare state or extreme cuts to social and public spending, but it will involve a recalibration of national budgets.

Gaining public support for rearmament policies is essential: not having public backing risks a political backlash and increased support for those forces in Europe more closely aligned with Europe’s prime security threats, or those unwilling to take the necessary steps to deter, and if necessary, defend Europe.

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30: NOS, ‘Vacaturesite Defensie populair door ‘Máxima-effect’, February 10<sup>th</sup> 2026.

31: NU.nl, ‘Aanmeldingen voor Defensy College schieten omhoog door ‘Amalia-effect’, August 5<sup>th</sup> 2025.

32: Pascal Merz and Christian von Sikorski, ‘Social media influencers can increase collective political beliefs and actions: Findings from experiments and a quasi-experimental field study’, Human Communication Research, October 2025.