

The ESCP Geopolitics Institute Policy Papers, IP N° 2025-83

A comprehensive European Approach to Security to Deter Russian Hybrid Warfare

Plottka, Julian*

IEP, Berlin

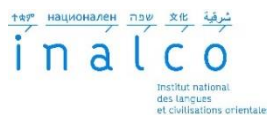
Abstract

While Russia is often perceived primarily as a hard power actor in Ukraine, it also exercises soft power, making it a relevant smart power whose hybrid warfare already affects the EU. Its ability to build a toolbox of military and non-military means to counter Russian aggression is, however, limited by three dimensions of policy incoherence: vertical (diverging threat perceptions among member states), institutional (a dualism between supranational and intergovernmental policies), and horizontal (different procedures across policy areas relevant to security and defence). To overcome these incoherencies, the paper proposes empowering the European External Action Service as a policy entrepreneur in security and defence and increasing exchanges between strategic staff in Member States to foster a mutual understanding of national Strategic Cultures.

Keywords: Ukraine, EU, Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), Strategic Culture, European External Action Service

* Julian Plottka, is a Scientific Senior Project Manager at the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin and contributes to the Horizon Europe project “InvigoratEU – Invigorating Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy for a Resilient Europe”, funded by the European Union. This policy paper is based on research conducted within the project. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the EU.

In collaboration with Sorbonne Nouvelle and INALCO, a Sorbonne Alliance project.



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Against the potential threat of a Russian attack against the EU, its member states undertake considerable efforts to rearm. However, Russian military strategy does not exclusively focus on traditional military hard power, but the country acts as a smart power, combining hard and soft power. The latter is already felt in the EU. Thus, the EU needs a comprehensive approach to security to deter Russian hybrid warfare. The policy paper analyses institutional obstacles to develop this approach combining military and non-military means to security and presents policy recommendations, how a more integrated Common Security and Defence Policy will help to overcome them.

Relevance: Russia is a Smart Power Combining Hard and Soft Power

On 22 and 24 September 2025, Denmark was subject to a “hybrid attack” of drones and cyber-attacks. On 19 September 2025, three Russian fighter jets violated the Estonian airspace. On 10 September 2025, Russian drones entered Polish airspace. In November 2024, Russia was suspected of boosting the online campaign of pro-Kremlin candidate Călin Georgescu with millions of Euros and hundreds of thousands of Tik Tok bots to interfere in the Romanian presidential elections. On 18 November 2024, the “C-Lion1” submarine communication cable connecting Finland and Germany was cut, one day after the “BCS East-West Interlink” between Lithuania and Sweden was interrupted. On 8 October 2023, the “Balticconnector” gas pipeline between Estonia and Finland was destroyed. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, politicians, political parties, government institutions, non-governmental organisations, companies, and research centres in the European Union (EU) have been targets of numerous cyber-attacks and Russian espionage.

So far, all attacks are under the threshold of a conventional war, as are European responses. However, Russian non-military activities in the EU raise the question, whether the Russian and European perspectives on the state of tensions are different. In a speech, later branded a “doctrine” (Galeotti, 2020), the Russian Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov developed a new definition of war characterised by three elements. First, clear lines between state of war and non-war are blurred. Second, armed forces apply approaches like network-centric warfare. Third, modern warfare combines the use of military and non-military means, with the latter given supremacy (Gerasimov, 2016).

Following the begin of the Russian war against Ukraine in 2014, Russia tried to uphold the impression that this was not a state of war between two countries by sending troops without insignia. Since its large-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022, analysts have widely debated in how far Russian troops succeeded or failed to implement a network-centric warfare. Russia still combines the use of military means exclusively against Ukraine and the use of non-military means against Ukraine and its European partners as described above. Against this background, Russia is best described as a smart power combining hard and soft power (Armitage and Nye, 2007).

Analysing Russian interference in EU candidate countries, the “InvigoratEU Foreign Interference Index” (Todorović, 2025) finds entrenched influence in the Eastern Trio (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) and more subtle interference in the Western Balkans. Analysing Russian political, military, economic, and societal interference for the period 2013 to 2023, the analysis shows its soft power declining in Moldova and Ukraine, while increasing in

Georgia. The former two states have undertaken considerable efforts to contain Russian interference since 2014. In the political, military, and economic dimension, they achieved significant success, but in the societal dimension influence remains sustainable. The analysis – showing that Russia remains also an impactful soft power complementing its hard power – raises the question how the EU can strengthen its resilience and deterrence against war efforts of a smart power.

Challenges: A Comprehensive Approach to Security Increases Coordination Requirements

Currently the EU and its Member states focus on increasing military capacities. The challenges of building European deterrence and defence is, however, much bigger. The need to counter military and non-military means of foreign interference complicates the development of a European response in three dimensions: First, in the vertical dimension of coherence,¹ EU Member States lack a shared threat perception. Second, in the institutional dimension of coherence, the EU lacks a responsible political entrepreneur with sufficient impetus. Third, in the horizontal dimension of coherence a diversity of procedures complicates decision-making.

1. Vertical Incoherence – the Lack of a Common Strategic Culture

Different Strategic Cultures of EU Member States (Biehl et al., 2013) are an obstacle to developing Europe security policy. There is disagreement, whether the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) results in their convergence (Meyer, 2023). Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there has been at least some convergence of European Strategic Cultures with Denmark ending its opt-out from CSDP and Finland and Sweden joining NATO. In terms of the felt urgency of the threat, there remain differences, with North and East European countries perceiving it as much more imminent than countries in Southern and Western Europe. While previous European security strategies have addressed the need to develop a shared Strategic Culture, the recently published “Strategic Compass for Security” (Borrell, 2022) does not mention the term at all (Plottka, 2025). The new multi-dimensionality of Russian interference in the EU further diversifies the views as threat perceptions include the assessment of military and non-military means, in many cases of interference with unclear attribution to specific actors. To develop a common EU approach, EU Member States and institutions need to work on a shared understanding of multi-dimensional external threats.

2. Institutional Incoherence – the Lack of a Political Entrepreneur

EU external relations suffer from a dualism of the Commission initiating supranational and the Council initiating intergovernmental policies. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR) is the central actor linking both institutions. With the additional upgrade to Vice-President of the European Commission (VP), she is also in

¹ For the three dimensions of (in-)coherence see Keukeleire and Raube (2020).

charge of coordinating external policy initiatives within the Commission. This was a first step to overcome the institutional and policy area specific differences in the horizontal dimension. However, the dualism between the Council and the Commission has not been resolved and is even increasing in the EU's effort to counter multi-dimensional threats. Serving the HR/VP and 27 national governments, the European External Actions Service (EEAS) lacks the political legitimacy for setting an own political agenda but waits for the Member States to take the initiative. Since they do not chair the Foreign Affairs Council anymore, they lack incentives for this, while in the past the rotating chair undermined continuity across Council presidencies. The prospects of European security policy should neither depend on the individual ambitions of the HR/VP to set the agenda.

3. Horizontal Incoherence – the Lack of a Coherent Decision-Making Procedure

Already in defence policy, European instruments and initiatives are subject to different decision-making procedures, with e.g. the financial instrument “Security Action for Europe (SAFE)” adopted as Council regulation, the reallocation of cohesion funds requiring the Council's and Parliament's consent and the “Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD)” being an instrument of soft governance. Developing a European toolbox for a comprehensive understanding of security policy will further increase the diversity of policy areas and thus decision-making procedures, actors, and interests involved in European security policy. To make European defence politics more efficient, a more coherent decision-making procedure in security policy is needed.

Recommendations: Turn the EEAS into a Policy Entrepreneur and Facilitate the Mutual Understanding of National Strategic Cultures

While the challenges to develop a comprehensive toolbox for a coherent EU approach to address multi-dimensional security threats are considerable, EU foreign and security policy strategies provide solid basis for this. The “European Security Strategy” of 2003 did neither consider military force as the central threat nor the key instrument for guaranteeing security. It proposes to combine civilian and military measures (Solana, 2003). In the following years, this comprehensive approach is even seen as a strength and specific “European way of warfare” (Norheim-Martinsen, 2013, p. 49). The “EU Global Strategy” further propagates an integrated or multi-dimensional approach, adding the concepts of state and societal resilience (Mogherini, 2016). The “European Strategic Compass” upholds this integrated approach (Borrell, 2022).

The main task ahead of the EU is to put its own strategic thinking of integrated security into practice. That the EU's CSDP is a subarea of CFSP and thereby highly integrated into its foreign policy-making structures is a strong advantage, compared to Member States, where foreign policy and defence are institutionally more separated. Without such path-dependencies, the EU is in a better position to develop its integrated approach to security. To maintain and to benefit from this advantage, the EU needs a sufficiently legitimised policy entrepreneur that drives the development of an approach combining military and non-military means. The European Commission has the legitimacy to be a motor of European policy-making and the resources to coordinate EU policies across policy areas. Integrating the EEAS into the Commission would provide it with the necessary institutional legitimacy and political mandate to further develop EU security policy independently from EU Member States and establish a coherent policy agenda of European foreign, security,

and defence policy. This would contribute to overcoming the problem of institutional incoherence and facilitate the coordination of initiatives across policy areas to better establish horizontal coherence. A reform of the European treaties to prepare for the next EU enlargement would be an opportunity to institutionally strengthen the EU's actorness in security policy.

Coordinating the national governments' position on own initiatives would, however, remain a main task of the EEAS. To facilitate vertical coherence in European foreign, security, and defence policy, the EU Member States should develop better knowledge and a mutual understanding of the national Strategic Cultures. The reception of foreign and defence policy discourses of other Member States is still insufficient, beyond staff posted with NATO or the EU in Brussels. To Europeanise national strategic staff, lower ranks in Member States should engage more in European exchanges to learn about other Member States cultural foundations of strategic behaviour. The European Security and Defence College (ESDC), already integrating the military, police and civilian dimension of security in its teaching, provides a platform for this. However, the participation especially of military staff is still too low. Of 3,834 participants in ESDC activities during the academic year 2023/2024, only 30 percent were military staff and more than 50 percent civilians. Military participation needs to increase as should the number of EMILYO cadets, participants of the so called military Erasmus, which were about 4,500 in the same reporting period (European Security and Defence College, 2024, p. 12).

A Comprehensive European Approach to Security

The Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine and its European partner requires a comprehensive EU approach to security in order to preserve peace in the EU. That the EU style of warfare has always combined military and non-military means is a good starting point to develop an integrated strategy against Russian smart power. However, the existing differences in the horizontal, institutional, and vertical dimension of EU policy have to be reduced. A deeper integration of European Foreign, Security and Defence Policy would allow for integrating defence policy with the non-military dimensions of security. A continued focus on national defence would instead be less effective and most notably less cost efficient, undermining the EU's global actorness considerably and thus European security.

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