



# From Soft to Hard Power

Several strategies for  
European liberals to prepare  
to defend their country  
and the continent

## Abstract

As the liberal world order weakens and Russia's aggression in Ukraine persists, Europe must shift from soft to hard power to protect its democracies. This requires bolstering military strength and public resolve amid rising threats, with mainstream parties adapting their strategies. Public opinion polls expose a harsh truth: only one in three Europeans is willing to fight for their country, with youth showing the greatest reluctance. Pro-democratic parties must respond decisively.

The proposal outlines three policy clusters: firstly, military preparedness needs citizen engagement through education linked to economic opportunity. Secondly, politicians can gain backing for defence spending by tying it to economic benefits. Thirdly, liberal leaders must reject populist appeasement and champion a pro-democracy stance.



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# Introduction

The unbearable lightness of being European is over. As the liberal world order teeters on the edge of collapse, a chorus of unease is echoing across Europe. By now it is clear that the era of farming out hard security is over, and EU leaders acknowledge that they must rise to the brutal demands of hard power global competition.

Recent developments underscore this urgency, with liberal-minded leaders from NATO's Eastern Flank sounding the alarm. Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs has warned of Russia's persistent threat, urging Europe to "absolutely" adopt conscription and bolster military strength, while Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has declared, "The war, the geopolitical uncertainty and the new arms race started by Putin have left Europe with no choice. Europe must be ready for this race, and Russia will lose it like the Soviet Union 40 years ago." He then announced large-scale military training initiatives to prepare citizens for potential conflict. These statements reflect a growing consensus that the Eastern Flank—long a sentinel against Russian aggression—is indispensable to Europe's defence. As Tusk emphasises, Europe must now arm itself "more wisely and faster than Russia," signalling a pivotal moment for the continent to transform rhetoric into action.

Yet most of the EU leaders are haunted by a nagging fear: will their voters accept this stark new reality? Put bluntly, can their steely words forge a path to resolute action – both on the global stage and at the polling station? This article explores how pro-democratic parties can rewrite their own rule books, forging peace through strength while outflanking extremist factions – be they right-wing or left-wing – who peddle the siren song of appeasement of Russia.

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Faced with a dramatic retreat by the United States from its decades-long stint as Europe's unwavering security shield, leaders across the continent are racing to forge a defence strategy with real teeth. More nations are rising to the challenge, pumping money into their military

capabilities to stare down Russia's aggression. Through the prism of great power rivalry, the horrors unleashed on Ukraine's civilians and the shadowy sabotage

gnawing at Western democracies lay bare a chilling conviction in Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran: that Europe is a frail, crumbling relic fit only for scorn and domination. It is high time, then, for Europe's top brass to roll up their sleeves to reignite home-grown military industries and rally the troops for a forward-leaning stance in a freshly forged security landscape.

Brave words are not enough. Europe is a well-researched place, and we know that it has neither the troops nor the spirit to fight at the moment. Enter Keir Starmer, seizing the moment by pledging troops to safeguard Europe's future peace deals – casting the UK as the first to step up to the plate. He has boldly vowed 'to guarantee the security of [the European] continent' (Badshah & Sabbagh, 2025), Britain included, even if it means rolling the dice and putting British troops in the firing line should Putin unleash another salvo. Here is the twist: this steely resolve springs from the left of Britain's political playbook – a wake-up call that could jolt Europe's dithering mainstream parties out of their military timidity. Yet grand promises slam headlong into grim truths. Lord Dannatt, a former army chief, cuts through the bluster: 40,000 troops might be the ticket for a Ukraine mission, but the UK 'just haven't got that number available' (Chisholm, 2025). His blunt caution exposes a lingering weakness: Britain and its allies are saddled with armies too stretched to handle the challenges Europe is currently facing.

To shore up our defences, three key actions are required. Firstly, European nations need to dig deeper into their pockets, ramping up defence budgets to remedy years of skimping on kit and vital infrastructure. Secondly, the capabilities of European armed forces need a comprehensive overhaul to form a robust deterrence against potential aggressors – chiefly Russia. Finally, pro-democracy politicians have got to win over EU voters, building solid backing for a fresh defence deal so that Europeans will be geared up and game to stand their ground.

Much has been said on the first point, and the numbers tell the story. Analysts at Deutsche Bank estimate that fixing a decade of NATO underspending to hit the 2 per cent target would set European budgets back a whopping 800 billion euros (Steitz & Inverardi, 2025). No wonder, then, that one of the few bright spots from the rather lacklustre emergency summit in Paris on 17 February was a push to let military spending dodge the EU's 3 per cent budget deficit cap – a rule they are keen to clamp down on in member states. On the readiness front, there is good news from Poland, the Baltic states, and the Nordic countries, who have stayed in fighting trim and in some cases become even sharper (UK Defence Journal, 2024). Sadly, for much of Europe, the picture is more like that of the Bundeswehr: Germany's combat readiness has slumped from 65 per cent to 50 per cent since 2022 (Siebold, 2025). Yet these debates over defence budgets and military kit often miss a vital point: the willingness of Europeans to stand up and defend their countries.

# Complacent Europeans taking the defence of their way of life and their countries for granted

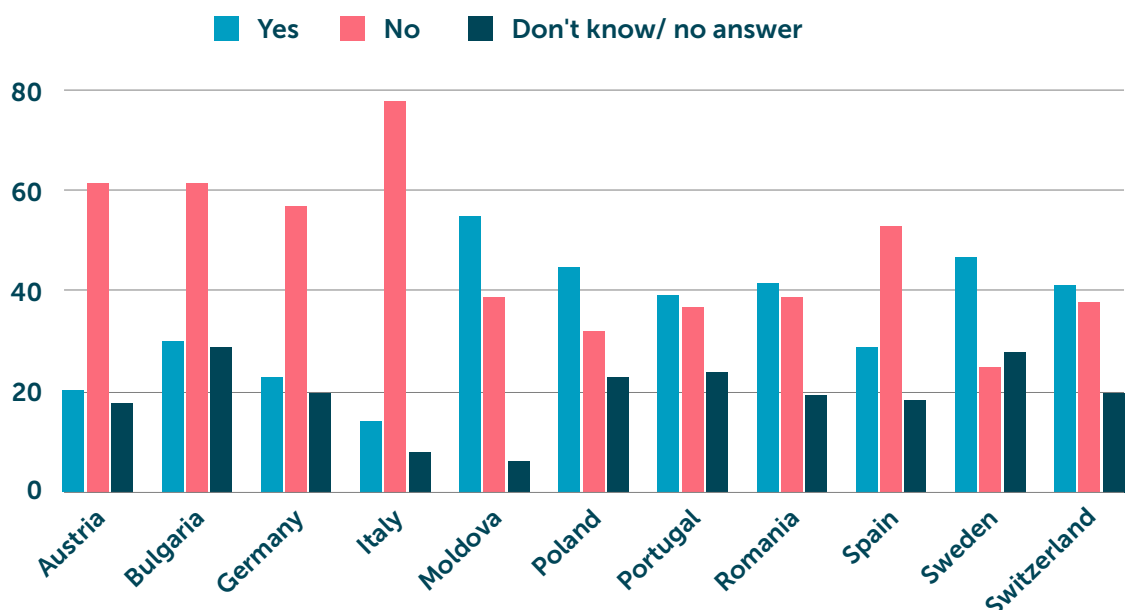
Announcing the results of Gallup's latest global survey on this question, Kancho Stoychev, president of the GALLUP International Association, aptly observes: "The elites in the West might be inclined to solve problems by fighting/supporting a war, but western citizens are twice less inclined to bear arms, compared to the citizens of the rest of the World. The narrative in the G-7 plus EU countries that the war in Ukraine is also their own war seems to bear no correlation with the citizens of these countries' willingness to fight. (Gallup, 2024)".

This Gallup poll shows that only one in three Europeans would fight for their country in a war. Four of the five countries whose citizens are least willing to fight are in Western Europe: Spain with 29 per cent; Austria with 23 per cent; Germany with 20 per cent; and Italy with just 14 per cent, with 78 per cent saying they would not fight (see Figure 1).

This attitude stands out even more among younger cohorts. The Next Generation Security Report provides data from four countries showing that nearly half of young people in Spain, France, Germany, and the UK believe their nation will be directly involved in an armed conflict within the next ten years. Yet fewer than one-third would voluntarily defend it in the event of a military attack (Testoni, de Arriba, & Dinh, 2024).

## Figure 1: Willingness to fight: selected countries

Responses to question in Gallup International Association (GIA) poll: "If there were a war that involved (Your Country), would you be willing to fight for your country?"



Source: Gallup, 2024.

This is the backdrop to all the chatter from politicians about persuading voters of ‘the need to defend one’s own country’ – though precious few have any idea how to pull it off. These figures should not cause panic. It is a perfectly natural reaction for members of the public to be reluctant to jump into the fray themselves, especially since most of them lack training. What is more troubling is the pushback against spending on defence and the dismal state of readiness for any kind of crisis. Last year’s special Eurobarometer laid it bare: over half of those surveyed (58 per cent) ‘do not feel well prepared for disasters’, and less than half (46 per cent) ‘would know what to do in the event of a disaster’ (European Commission, 2024b).

A substantial body of research has investigated the underlying reasons for these attitudes. A report from the Dutch think tank Clingendael identifies several critical factors, including a deepening mistrust of governments perceived as dishonest and untrustworthy; profound weariness and disillusionment with ill-conceived ‘forever wars’ that have ended in failure; an erosion of confidence in Western values; and a pervasive sense of entitlement with which the younger generation appears more markedly endowed than their predecessors (Onderco, Wagner, & Sorg, 2024). Conservatives would likely augment this list with concerns over excessive contrition for historical Western missteps and an inadequate emphasis on instilling pride in the West’s genuine achievements. Other academics attribute this shift to the emergence of post-heroic societies and the subtle foundations sustaining the Long Peace – the absence of conflict between major powers since the end of the Second World War (Inglehart, Puranen, & Welzel, 2015).

Concurrently, survey data reveal a significant decline in the ‘willingness to engage in military conflict’, particularly in regions where governments have actively advanced a pro-peace narrative. This trend is especially pronounced in the context of the Ukraine war. For example, a survey conducted in Hungary documented a notable rise, from 45 per cent to 63 per cent, in the proportion of respondents ‘unwilling to engage in combat’ over the past two years (Publicus Research, 2024). While the drivers of this shift remain diverse and complex, it poses a pressing question: can a unified strategy be devised to reverse this sentiment and bolster public resolve?

# Ideas for action

Despite escalating global tensions and the undeniable need for a strong defence posture, it is remarkable that no nationalist politician – be it in the East or West – has dared to campaign on a platform of preparing citizens for armed conflict (Nadjivan, 2024). This reluctance provides an opening that the pro-democracy camp should seize with confidence. It presents an opportunity for the West to transform their societies, foster a renewed sense of civic duty, and galvanise a collective spirit of resilience. Can pro-democratic movements in Europe recognise this pivotal moment and rekindle their republican core? It is a path well worth pursuing. This is not just about convincing voters; it is about shaping the right sentiment – without scaremongering – and pairing it with the introduction of real, tangible incentives. While ongoing political debates often give the impression of running in circles, three clear clusters of action can be proposed.

The *first cluster* focuses on measures to boost the willingness of citizens to defend their own countries. The *second cluster* offers ideas on how to build a positive sentiment about defence spending, creating – where feasible – economic incentives for citizens to invest in and profit from national defence efforts. The *third cluster* centres on securing the votes of a key electoral base while dismantling the argument of populist appeasers who naively insist an armistice with Russia is possible on favourable terms (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Three clusters of potential actions**

Clusters	Key political questions	Measures and actions	
1. Boost the willingness of citizens to defend their own countries	<p>Separate the question ‘Are Europeans ready to militarise?’ from ‘Are Europeans ready to protect themselves and their own way of life?’</p> <p>As motivations differ between liberal and centrist voters, tailor a specific approach to each group (democracy for the former and national loyalty for the latter).</p>	<p>Frame military education and training as a cornerstone of a broader all-defence strategy, tied closely to disaster management (prestige to take such a career, increase social recognition and benefits; ultimate goal: upward mobility).</p>	<p>Tap into the enthusiasm of those already keen on shooting, paintball, or military video games by fostering flexible state-funded non-formal education instead of Prussian-style formal classes.</p> <p>Any educational effort must hammer home the connection between disaster management and military training rather than assume it is obvious.</p>

<p><b>2.</b> Build positive sentiment about defence spending</p>	<p>A positive attitude towards defence should not be judged only by the ‘willingness to engage in combat’ – it is about larger issues that touch every citizen.</p> <p>Do not characterise the debate about defence spending as a dilemma over ‘butter or guns’ (‘welfare or warfare’) but rather find a way to flip it into ‘butter AND guns’.</p>	<p>Defence spending hand in hand with social spending:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bolstering domestic or pan-European industry and economic growth;</li> <li>• clever subsidies such as child support for parents tied to the defence sector, bonus payments for economically active pensioners who back defence efforts, or special bonuses for families of soldiers running their own small businesses.</li> </ul>	<p>Introduce European defence ETFs (exchange traded funds) with preferred tax breaks or lower fees for long-term holders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• freedom bonds (defence bonds) with favourable tax treatment or exemptions, making them attractive for both everyday savers and big institutional investors.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3.</b> Secure the votes of a key electoral base</p>	<p>Move from an ‘anti-politics’ mindset to actively nurturing civic responsibility and crafting a political argument that inspires citizens to defend their democracies.</p>	<p>Narrative of defending our way of life: a blend of steps – beefed-up military awareness, better education and training, and a mix of personal and shared patriotic incentives.</p>	<p>Putting defence front and centre and fostering a mood where people are ready to stand shoulder to shoulder with their leaders in safeguarding their country: a more switched-on and alert public would neutralise the empty chatter of appeasement.</p>

## Cluster 1: Measures to increase the willingness of citizens to defend their own countries: military education and training

Reports such as ‘Safer Together: Strengthening Europe’s Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness’ – penned by Sauli Niinistö, former President of Finland and Special Adviser to the President of the European Commission – offer a wealth of weighty recommendations (European Commission, 2024a). Take its fourth chapter, for instance, which tackles the empowerment of citizens with thorough insight.

Yet like many such reports, it stops short of spelling out how these ideas can be woven into a winning political narrative, particularly for pro-democracy, liberal-minded leaders. This gap is a missed step, and one that demands attention. Equally, these reports muddle two distinct political questions – and their accompanying narratives – often tripping up pro-democracy politicians: Are Europeans ready to militarise? And are Europeans ready to protect themselves and their own way of life? By bundling these together, they risk glossing over the chance to build individual skills and resilience.

In the light of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the latest policy shifts from the US president and his administration, discussions are understandably zeroing in on rapidly bolstering military preparedness – a move that inevitably calls for more people with combat-ready skills. Yet, as outlined earlier, this push clashes with a widespread reluctance to fight, often falling on deaf ears and risking unintended backlash. Therefore, the first step must be to frame military education and training as a cornerstone of a broader all-defence strategy, tied closely to disaster management.

Europe needs societies that see military training and service not as a sidestep from but as a springboard to enhance labour market prospects. For instance, military training should open doors to better job opportunities post-service, alongside networking and professional retraining woven into the fabric of this military education, training, or service. What is more, military service should be explicitly tied to an economic promise of upward mobility to win over the middle class – the centrist voters who hold sway.

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On pages 84–85, the Niinistö report outlines a range of ideas for government and EU initiatives to make careers in defence, security, and emergency response more appealing to younger generations. It also stresses the need to bolster channels



and opportunities for young people to take an active role in preparedness efforts, particularly by ramping up support for the voluntary sector. These initiatives must be shaped to fit cultural and educational norms. In Scandinavia, the Baltic states, and parts of Western Europe, formal education offers a solid platform to weave in more teaching on these topics. In Eastern Europe, however, the lingering shadow of the former communist regimes makes this trickier. Rather than pushing formal Prussian school-style civil defence classes, governments there should tap into the enthusiasm of those already keen on shooting, paintball, or military video games. One practical step is to offer physical training to these groups – imagine avid gamers being groomed as future drone pilots. This approach cleverly embeds military activity into the fabric of society.

Another approach, steadily gaining traction across Europe, is to pitch the military as a solid career choice. A dedicated recruitment pathway could be established for those eager to gain citizenship and feel part of their new country. Making the military more attractive also offers a smart way to bring nationalist groups into the fold. In nations where these groups form a significant proportion of the population – such as Poland – their hobbies and passions could be channelled into state-backed activities, rather than remaining the private pursuits they are now. Beyond this, there is the added bonus of keeping a lid on extremism, steering these groups away from veering too far off course.

While conscription might work in some areas, a rigid, one-size-fits-all model – like Germany's recent top-down effort – does not suit every context. Alternative routes, such as shorter training programmes that boost physical fitness and forge new social networks, could prove more tempting while still ticking the key defence boxes. Before rushing to expand professional armies or enforce full-time military service, governments should roll out thorough basic training in survival skills and societal resilience. Ukraine's recent battlefield success shows that reserve forces can be whipped into combat readiness surprisingly quickly, proving a balanced approach often sits better with peace-minded societies than a sudden leap to a militarised set-up.

Nonetheless, conscription should not be brushed aside entirely. Several NATO member states, such as Latvia, have brought back a national service draft (Gijs, 2022), while Sweden and Estonia have widened their conscription nets to cover more of their populations. Former Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves has made the case that conscription can act as a glue, binding together social and political divides. What is more, polling data show that young people in the Baltic and Scandinavian regions are far more willing to defend their nations than their peers elsewhere in Europe – demonstrating a clear link between conscription and citizens' 'willingness to fight', as highlighted in the Clingendael report.

All education and training programmes must be flexible. We offer four key insights and cautions for shaping them. Firstly, motivations differ even among liberal and centrist voters. Socially conservative and patriotic types might be spurred by old-school national loyalty, while others are driven to stand up for core values such as democracy, freedom, and an open society, not religion or flag-waving. The

Clingendael report identifies morality as a top concern – many participants said they would defend their country only ‘in the event of an attack’, with willingness peaking against an external aggressor.

Secondly, the same report reveals that outright moral objections to violence are rare, suggesting that hardcore pacifism is not widespread – a crucial nugget for policy makers in an age where conflicts are ever more common. Thirdly, another poll shows that solidarity with other countries (even those under attack) does not stir much enthusiasm, a vital pointer for tailoring interventions (Sayers, 2024). Fourthly, the Next Generation Security Study warns that young people often overlook the defence sector’s role in preventing crises; protecting lives, ‘our values and vital infrastructures’; and restoring ‘damaged ecosystems and post-conflict areas’ (Testoni, de Arriba, & Dinh, 2024). Any educational effort, then, must hammer home that connection rather than assume it is obvious.

## **Cluster 2: Positive sentiments about defence spending and economic incentives for citizens to invest in and profit from defence at the national level**

A positive attitude towards defence should not be judged only by the ‘willingness to engage in combat’ – it is about larger issues that touch every citizen. Sadly, Europe, along with many of its member states, has not yet entered into a proper debate on these topics. Many studies show the public is either in the dark, not bothered enough, or a bit of both. Take one report, for example: it points out that huge swathes of Europeans do not have a firm view on whether European defence should mean shifting decision-making from national capitals to the EU – potentially spelling the end for NATO (Mader, Olmastroni, & Isernia, 2020). What is more, defence spending is often reduced to a straight choice between it and other budget needs, summed up in the old ‘butter or guns’ (‘welfare or warfare’) dilemma. This idea, which is tied to the tight-fisted economics of public policy, spotlights the tough trade-off between spending on civilian benefits or military kit when public resources are limited (Testoni, de Arriba, & Dinh, 2024). The smart move, though, is to flip this on its head and tie together ‘butter AND guns’ as a joined-up solution.

Since security is a basic human need, progressive political leaders must firmly state that the time for taking hard security for granted has ended. They need to insist on accountability – covering everything from keeping local streets safe to upholding the defensive shield that protects our skies from enemy missiles. This is not merely a matter of budgetary compromises; it is about setting out rock solid priorities with clarity and purpose.

We can pinpoint two key areas of focus: defence spending and how the funds are sourced. Firstly, defence spending must go hand in hand with social spending while also making solid economic sense. The best approach is to roll out a balanced plan: blend purchases from NATO partners with investment in domestic production; ensure foreign deals include offset investments from sellers into our own industries – bolstering domestic or pan-European industry and economic growth; and, alongside this, fund clever social subsidies that fuel progress, not ones that provide no gains, such as Germany’s migrant subsidies that pay to keep workers on the sidelines. These should be targeted measures, such as child support direct subsidies for parents tied to the defence sector, bonus payments for economically active pensioners who back defence efforts, or special bonuses for families of soldiers running their own small businesses or working outside the military. These steps lift productivity and spending, feeding back into the public purse; such schemes have already paid off in countries such as Poland, where along with the beefed-up defence budgets the liberal government increased smart child daycare subsidies for working families, with a positive effect on households and, more importantly, public finances balance sheets.

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Secondly, sourcing the funds is trickier and demands political guts, but these are precisely the times for pro-democracy leaders to step up. Creating targeted financial tools – such as an exchange traded fund (ETF) or dedicated national defence bonds – with clear perks for individual and institutional investors is an area ripe for exploration yet largely untapped. In an age of growing geopolitical unrest and soaring defence expenditures, European defence firms offer a double win: they are vital for national security and promise hefty investment returns. Look at Rheinmetall,

Germany’s top defence company – its share price doubled in just a few months. This standout performance proves the sector’s profit potential. Yet, as Letta (2024) notes, vast pools of idle capital in Europe are either sitting unused or being siphoned off to foreign markets, especially the US. To plug this gap, bold financial instruments can rally domestic cash to bolster European defence.

One promising idea is for a European defence ETF. This would pool money from individuals and institutions into a spread of European defence companies. Focusing on firms that shore up national security, it could deliver strong returns – defence industry surge backs this up – while tying investors’ gains to Europe’s strategic needs. To sweeten the deal, the ETF could come with perks such as tax breaks or lower fees, making it highly attractive to those wanting to grow their money securely. It would aim to channel idle funds into strategic investments in domestic defence companies, backed by government guarantees and preferential rates. This could neatly align investor profits with security goals without muddying the waters between public funds and private profit.

Another option is for EU member states to launch special defence bonds ('freedom bond' would be even a catchier name for such a bond). Drawing on the legacy of war bonds, no country today offers a defence-specific bond quite like this. With government backing and potentially better rates, these could unlock those dormant funds. Retail investors with significant savings might jump in if it is pitched as a way to both safeguard national defence and pocket decent returns. This could be a gold mine for financing strategic defence investments in Europe.

There is solid precedent across the EU for financial instruments with preferential tax perks, crafted to steer investment into strategic priorities. Take Green Bonds, for instance – countries such as France, Germany, and others have rolled these out with tax incentives to encourage investment in environmentally sustainable projects. These bonds often come with favourable tax treatment or exemptions, making them attractive for both everyday savers and big institutional investors. Then there are Social Bonds and Infrastructure Bonds: some member states have launched these to fund social projects or public works, offering preferential tax conditions. They are built to tap into domestic savings, with tax breaks or lower rates that cut the cost of capital for schemes that benefit the public.

Another possibility is Tax-Advantaged Savings Instruments. In several EU countries, products such as Italy's 'Buoni Fruttiferi Postali' or similar government savings bonds come with favourable tax treatment to nudge people into saving. While not tied directly to defence, these examples prove governments know how to shape financial products to pull in retail cash through tax incentives. It is a tried-and-tested playbook that shows what is possible.

### **Cluster 3: Winning the votes of key electoral bases against Russian-sponsored appeasers**

In an era defined by a fierce clash of strategic narratives, it is proving nearly impossible to unpick the tale spun by so-called peaceniks – appeasers who push for negotiating peace with Russia. This approach would throw Ukraine's interests under the bus and ditch extra security guarantees for the rest of Europe. For this reason, pro-democracy liberal politicians need a fresh game plan, one sharp enough to win over the hearts and minds of centrist and left-leaning voters.

Pro-democratic leaders must break free from the 'anti-politics' mindset, once championed by the likes of Václav Havel, if they are to stem the growing tide of illiberalism (Buldioski & Przybylski, 2024). That philosophy played a decisive role in toppling old communist regimes, but it is now a stumbling block to rallying people against today's external and home-grown threats. Liberals have to step

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up, actively nurturing civic responsibility and crafting a political argument that inspires citizens to defend their democracies. This will require a gripping story and a razor-sharp communication strategy to gain public backing. A blend of steps – beefed-up military awareness, better education and training, and a mix of personal and shared patriotic incentives – could pave a sensible way forward.

Pro-democracy politicians have a golden opportunity to rally round a powerful cause: defending democracy itself (or even better,

defending our way of life). By putting defence front and centre and fostering a mood where people are ready to stand shoulder to shoulder with their leaders in safeguarding their country, liberal voices can forge a more switched-on and alert public. This could sap the strength from populists and neutralise the empty chatter of appeasement. Only then will our democracies stand a fighting chance against the complex threats we face today.

## Conclusion

Improving European defence is not just about squaring up to Russia on the military front. A potential US–China clash would only ramp up the pressure for Europe to step onto the global stage, defending our core interests and standing firm for freedom and prosperity. Likewise, our economic security relies on strengthening our militaries – not only to shield us from sharp power tactics that chip away at our strategic assets, but also to project hard power that steadies the world's trade choke points. These vital arteries of global commerce underpin Europe's wealth, and we cannot afford to leave them exposed. Europe needs to beef itself up on the inside and the outside. The path ahead demands a sharp, clear-eyed rethink: pro-democracy leaders must fuse tough, no-nonsense defence upgrades with a compelling strategy that pulls citizens in who will be ready to safeguard what matters most – their security. History shows time and again that success depends on winning not just the hearts but also the minds of voters, rooted firmly in their household economic prospects (democracy that delivers) but also in the belief that democracy is worth fighting for. Now is the moment for liberal mindsets to approach this crisis as a rare chance to rebuild their political manifestos from the ashes of globalism into a bold vision for Europe's future power.

## Author bio

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## About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 56 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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