



Speech by President von der Leyen at the Munich Security Conference 2026

Munich, 14 February 2026

"Check against delivery"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, an unflinching ally and friend. Dear Keir, we both know the backdrop to our discussion – the nature of today's transatlantic relations.

We are now almost four years into the reckless aggression against Ukraine by Russia. We face the very distinct threat of outside forces trying to weaken our Union from within. The return of overtly hostile competition and power relations. The European way of life – our democratic foundation and the trust of our citizens – is being challenged in new ways. On everything from territories to tariffs or tech regulations. Fundamentally, all of this points to a simple reality in today's fractured world. Europe must become more independent – there is no other choice. Independent in every dimension that affects our security and prosperity. Defence and energy. Economy and trade. Raw materials and digital tech. Some may say the word 'independence' runs counter to our transatlantic bond. But the opposite is true. And we've just heard it from State Secretary Rubio. An independent Europe is a strong Europe. And a strong Europe makes for a stronger transatlantic alliance.

Today is the time for action and I want to focus on Europe's plan for independence. To help frame this, I will borrow a line by Jerry Friedheim – the US Assistant Secretary of Defence – spoken here in Munich in the 70s: *'Unless a nation feels itself primarily responsible for its own security and wellbeing, it will leave the task to others and fail to marshal its resources and political will in its own defence'*. I chose this line because it reflects some uncomfortable truths over many decades. About how Europe's security was not always seen as our primary responsibility.

But this has fundamentally changed. Also, because the very same argument is true today: Europe needs to step up and has to take on its responsibility. Admittedly, it has taken some shock therapy. And some lines have been crossed that cannot be uncrossed anymore. But on the 'what is needed', at least, we all now agree. And we are delivering. The numbers tell their own story. Defence spending in 2025 in Europe was up close to 80% since before the war in Ukraine. The EU is mobilising up to EUR 800 billion. With our SAFE programme, we are investing in the capabilities we need. From air and missile defence. To drones and militarily mobility. We have remained relentless and creative in the way we maintain our support for Ukraine. This includes most recently with our EUR 90 billion loan, that Ukraine only has to pay back, if Russia pays reparations. By 2028, defence investment in Europe is even projected to exceed the amount the US spent on such equipment last year. This is a true European awakening.

And this is only the start of what we need to do. We must grow a European backbone of strategic enablers: in space, intelligence, and deep strike capabilities. No taboo can go unchallenged. I believe the time has come to bring Europe's mutual defence clause to life. Mutual defence is not optional for the EU. It is an obligation within our own Treaty – Article 42(7). For good reason. It is our collective commitment to stand by each other in case of aggression. Or in simple terms, one for all and all for one. This is Europe's meaning. But this commitment only carries weight if it is built on trust and capability.

This is why we must be collectively ready. We must make decisions faster. And this may mean relying on the result of a qualified majority rather than unanimity. We do not need to change the Treaty for

this. We need to use the one we have. And we have to be creative. Take the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force which is outside – but complementary – to NATO. It brings together 10 European countries to deter and reassure in the High North of the Baltic region. With an operational command in Northwood, UK. Or take the Coalition of the Willing, led by you Keir, and President Macron. Headquartered in Paris, this Coalition is devising meaningful security guarantees for Ukraine. More than 30 countries, some not even in Europe, are involved. These examples tell us that this can work.

But what we need to do now, is formalise the ad hoc beginnings of new security collaborations. This starts by working of course with our closest partners, like the UK, Norway, Iceland or Canada. The EU now has a full range of defence and security partnerships with countries around the world. We want to increase our offer to many of these vital partners. This means, in this acutely volatile time, Europe and in particular the UK should come closer together – on security, on economy or on defending our democracies. Ten years on from Brexit – our futures are as bound as ever. So, it is in our common interest to be ambitious about our partnership. Because the EU, the UK – in fact all of Europe – we are in this together. And we will always stick together.

This brings me to my second priority. The need for a new European Security Strategy. I believe we must urgently recalibrate the way we use our entire policy toolbox. Trade, finance, standards, data, critical infrastructures, tech platforms and information. In essence, each and every one of our policies needs a clear security dimension in this new world order. We in Europe should be ready and willing to use our strength assertively and proactively to protect our security interests. We need a new doctrine for this – with a simple goal: to ensure that Europe can defend its own territory, economy, democracy and way of life at all times. Because this is ultimately the true meaning of independence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

So how do we bring all of this to life? For the answer, I look to Ukraine. Ukraine has shown that strength and deterrence, and ultimately lives, depend on industrial capacity. Producing, scaling and sustaining the effort over time. As they say in Ukraine, you change or die. We must adopt this mantra too. We need to tear down the rigid wall between the civilian and defence sectors. Europe is a powerhouse for car manufacturing, aerospace and heavy machinery. We should not look at these industries as purely commercial but as core to the defence value chain. We have inspiring European defence tech champions; we just need to incentivise them. This is especially true for the dual-use tech fields – AI, cyber, drones and space. Their journey to market must be rapid. This is another battlefield lesson from Ukraine. That is why the EU's new Defence Innovation Office in Kyiv is merging European scale with Ukrainian speed and ingenuity. With this approach, we can close our capability gaps quickly. Drones are the most obvious example. They are inflicting around 80% of battlefield damages on both sides in Ukraine. So, we are massively speeding up innovation and production in this area. Or look at command and control. We know that we have too many different weapons systems, tanks, jets and ships. But new technologies – like AI and software – can help forge interoperability between Member States, NATO and the EU. This is what Europe is good at.

We have all agreed to spend more. We need to get the money out the door and turn this into real defence capabilities. Some ask whether we can afford this? But I say, we cannot afford not to. And if we get it right, and we will, we will turbocharge a new industrial deal that will not only keep us safe, but be an engine of growth, delivering prosperity for Europeans for decades to come. So yes, there is a lot at stake for Europe, but there is so much potential for us to seize.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have spoken a lot about equipment, investment and doctrine. But I would like to leave you with a last thought from Ewald von Kleist. It is from an address he gave standing outside of the Reichstag speaking to new recruits in 2010. He knew better than most that peace could never be taken for granted. And investing in security is never just about hardware. It goes far beyond. As he put it: *'Peace and freedom – these two are interlinked. And it has to be the goal of security policy to protect them.'* Peace and freedom. This is what Ukraine is fighting for today. We must honour their sacrifice with our quest for an independent Europe. And it will always remain Europe's purpose. Our Union's *raison d'être*.

Long live Europe.

Press contacts:

[Paula PINHO](#) (+32 2 29 20815)
[Arianna PODESTA](#) (+32 2 298 70 24)
[Olof GILL](#) (+32 2 29 65966)

General public inquiries: [Europe Direct](#) by phone [00 800 67 89 10 11](#) or by [email](#)

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