

Embedding Ukraine's defence know- how in EU defence planning and industrial strategy

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Event report

This online conversation organised by the [Jacques Delors Friends of Europe Foundation](#) and Friends of Europe sought to identify lessons from Ukraine to inform EU defence policy planning and industrial strategy. The webinar brought together over 100 participants from across the private, public, and civil society sectors in a pan-European exchange. The conversation felt all the more timely in light of the escalating regional confrontation involving Israel, the United States and Iran, which has reinforced the strategic relevance of (low-cost) unmanned systems and highlighted how they are reshaping assumptions about air power, resilience and escalation.

Moderated by **Thomas Van Vynckt**, Head of Peace, Security & Defence at Friends of Europe, the debate brought together **Bertrand de Cordoue**, Special Advisor on Defence and Armament at Institut Jacques Delors – Notre Europe; **Tomasz Husak**, Director for Defence Policy at the European Commission (DG DEFIS); **Marco Lotz**, Business Development and Governmental Relations Manager at Quantum Systems and co-Chair of the Ukraine Working Group at ASD Europe; **Mārtiņš Mežulis**, Advisor to the Secretary of State for Defence Industry and Innovation at the Latvian Ministry of Defence (MoD); and **Polina Istomina**, Associate Fellow at the Sahaidachnyi Security Center. The conversation built on an earlier discussion held on the occasion of four years since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and aimed to remain explicitly recommendation-oriented.

Spending better in a changing battlespace

A central message of the discussion was that spending better is not simply about spending less or even spending more efficiently in an administrative sense. It is about aligning defence investment with the speed, cost logic and operational realities of contemporary warfare. Ukraine's wartime adaptation is reshaping how Europe should think about defence policy and industrial development, particularly in an era defined by drones, counter-drone systems and rapid battlefield innovation. Polina Istomina reinforced this logic from the Ukrainian perspective, arguing that in wartime "time saves lives", and that procurement therefore cannot remain static but must prioritise speed, agility and battlefield feedback. Mārtiņš Mežulis stressed that defence planners must be ready to shift priorities quickly, involve industry earlier, and support capability development well before the formal procurement phase. From a Latvian perspective, he underlined the importance of building ecosystems of know-how, industry capacity and skilled personnel that can be relied upon in crisis.

This wider idea of spending better also came through in the discussion of cost-effectiveness. Several speakers suggested that battlefield advantage increasingly depends not on fielding the most sophisticated system in every case, but on procuring systems that are affordable, relevant and available at speed. Tomasz Husak argued that "good enough" solutions should be taken more seriously, particularly where the pace of adaptation means that stockpiled systems can become outdated within weeks. Marco Lotz reinforced this point by contrasting Ukraine's focus on operational

value with Europe's more compliance-heavy approach, warning that excessive emphasis on technical perfection and procedure can slow down the delivery of genuinely useful capabilities.

Procurement agility, testing and rapid adaptation

A second theme was the urgent need to make procurement systems more adaptive. Mežulis pointed to Latvia's counter-UAS project portfolio as an example of what faster procurement can look like in practice, with contracts launched within months and structured in a way that allows them to be amended and extended as requirements evolve. He also argued that flexible procurement tools, cross-border cooperation and rapid access to testing environments are now essential if capabilities are to remain militarily relevant. Husak made a similar point at the EU level, noting that Europe still operates through 27 fragmented defence markets and that procurement cooperation remains too limited, despite the clear economic and operational case for doing more jointly.

Testing was treated throughout the event as a major bottleneck. Lotz described the difficulty of testing unmanned systems in Europe under realistic conditions, especially when electronic warfare effects are involved, while Ukraine is able to test systems more organically and under real operational pressure. He argued that this difference helps explain why Ukrainian innovation cycles are far shorter. Systems are refined continuously in response to battlefield feedback, whereas many European procurement systems still freeze hardware and software for years. The implication was clear: Europe cannot truly absorb lessons from Ukraine without also creating the testing and validation structures that make fast adaptation possible.

Software, integration and the role of the end user

The discussion also highlighted the growing weight of software, data and systems integration in defence capability development. Lotz argued that Europe should separate software from hardware wherever possible, open up more room for software competition on existing platforms and avoid long-term vendor lock-in. He described Ukraine as a much more open innovation environment, where information-sharing on architectures and operational concepts makes faster iteration possible. Polina Istomina complemented this point by explaining that Ukraine's drone procurement reform is increasingly built around battlefield data and verified end-user feedback, drawing on digital systems that track both operational use and user experience.

Istomina also added an important human dimension to the conversation. She warned that procurement reform, industrial adaptation and technology transfer are not enough on their own if the end user is neglected. Effective battlefield-tested systems still require personnel who are trained, equipped and ready to use them well. Her intervention widened the debate from acquisition and production to readiness and force adaptation, reminding participants that successful innovation depends not only on what is bought, but also on whether soldiers can absorb and operate it effectively.

Industrial resilience, European cooperation and questions from the audience

Industrial resilience emerged as another strong theme. Mežulis stressed the importance of security of supply, while Husak linked common procurement to stronger production resilience and lower costs. Lotz pushed this further by arguing that resilient production is inherently less efficient in peacetime terms and therefore requires deliberate incentives. In the discussion, participants raised concerns about Chinese dependencies, especially for inputs such as fibre optics and critical materials and questioned whether Europe's current just-in-time logic is compatible with defence resilience. The exchanges suggested broad agreement that security must sometimes take precedence over short-term cost optimisation.

Audience questions also explored how far EU instruments such as SAFE can benefit Ukraine and why they appear less attractive to Germany. The discussion suggested that the financial logic of the instrument differs between member states and that procedural complexity can also limit uptake. Another question focused on what it would take for European states to procure more directly from Ukrainian producers. Here, speakers pointed to partnerships, standardisation, licensing, compliance and political will as the main enabling factors, while also warning that some established European firms may resist deeper competition from Ukrainian companies. The broader point was that Europe should move towards learning with Ukraine, not only from Ukraine, through a more integrated defence industrial ecosystem.

Taken together, the discussion suggested that spending better is not simply about efficiency, but about reshaping defence planning around operational relevance, cost-effectiveness and adaptability. Participants repeatedly stressed that battlefield advantage now depends not only on the quantity of spending, but on the ability to procure affordable and effective systems at speed. The debate also underlined the growing weight of software, data and IT content in defence capability development, requiring planners and industry alike to rethink legacy investment models. At the same time, participants cautioned against drawing overly narrow lessons from Ukraine alone: the most effective future European defence posture will need to combine lessons from Ukraine with lessons from other theatres, while balancing emerging technologies with existing capabilities.

Recommendations and ways forward

- **Create dedicated fast-track procurement channels for emerging capabilities** such as drones, counter-drone systems, software-enabled tools and low-cost strike or reconnaissance assets, with lighter procedures and shorter approval cycles.
- **Move from static procurement to upgrade-based procurement** by designing contracts that allow regular hardware and software updates, instead of locking forces into fixed configurations for years.
- **Invest in realistic European testing and training ecosystems**, including shared

test ranges, electronic warfare testing environments and rapid user feedback loops that mirror battlefield conditions more closely and with fewer administrative obstacles to experimentation.

- **Reduce barriers for start-ups and scale-ups** by easing front-loaded compliance requirements in early procurement stages and allowing some certification steps to follow initial selection, where operational value is already clear.
- **Strengthen common procurement incentives at the EU level** so member states are rewarded more clearly for buying together, sharing demand signals and sustaining common production lines.
- **Build resilience into industrial policy** by supporting redundant production capacity, distributed manufacturing sites, stockpiles of critical inputs and diversification away from external supply chains, such as China's.
- **Develop clearer mobilisation planning across Europe**, including reservist models, industrial conversion scenarios and frameworks for linking civilian production capacity to defence needs in crisis.
- **Deepen EU-Ukraine defence industrial integration** by expanding joint development, testing and procurement opportunities, supporting partnerships between European and Ukrainian firms, and removing practical barriers to market access.
- **Put the end-user at the centre of reform** by linking procurement, doctrine, skills and training more closely, so new capabilities are not only acquired faster but also fielded, absorbed, and used effectively.



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