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A Danish Presidency with an unprecedented embrace of the EU

In late June 2025 after a conference on European security in Warsaw, and on arrival at the airport in Warsaw, a large sign was to be seen bearing the slogan of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union which was then just ending: it declared "Security, Europe!". It felt like an almost seamless transition from one Presidency to another, as back in Copenhagen Denmark was just finalizing its preparations for the [Presidency of the Council](#) in the second semester with the catchphrase "Strong Europe in a changing World". The feeling of urgency and gravity has become a shared leitmotif across the Presidencies.

DANES AND THE EU

Denmark last held the Presidency in 2012. The change since then in the public perception and understanding of Denmark's place and role in both Europe and the wider world, of the EU and of the interplay between Denmark and the EU is staggering. A clear sign of this, Danish voters in [June 2022](#) decided to [abolish](#) the opt-out on defence co-operation, otherwise in place since 1993, and they did so with the largest gap between "yes" and "no" votes in the history of Danish EU referenda. Traditionally hard-fought political battles, this time there was little discussion and even less uncertainty about the outcome. The full-scale, unprovoked, illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 swiftly moved the Danish public to support the notion of unrestricted Danish involvement in EU defence co-operation^[1].

Opinion polls [confirm](#) this development. A [Eurobarometer](#) (Winter 2025) survey shows that 66 per cent of Danes believe that "over the next few years" the role of the EU will become "more important" (EU average is 44 per cent). Moreover, a full 82 per cent of Danes expect that in the future the role of the EU "to protect European citizens against global crises and security risks" should be "more important" (EU average is 66 per cent). When asked in greater detail about the most important policy areas for the EU, Danes identify "Defence and security" (52 per cent), "Energy independence, resources and infrastructures" (36 per cent), and "Competitiveness, economy and industry" (30 per cent) as a top three.

[Speaking](#) just before Parliamentary recess, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen declared that "for many Danes, European co-operation has never really been a darling"; however, she added, "the old world is no longer. We are in new times". Widely used – from political debates regarding public culture to family conversations around the dinner table – the notion "Down in Brussels" was for decades for Danes an easy and easily understood reference to political matters that were distant, bureaucratic, elitist and essentially very un-Danish. This has changed. "Down in Brussels" is now where Denmark finds its closest partners and allies, and "Down in Brussels" is now where the continued prosperity and wider security of Denmark is secured. The Danish Presidency rests on an unprecedented embrace by the Danish public of all things EU.

[1] Three opt-outs remain: They concern The Monetary Union (EMU), Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) and the citizenship of the EU.

DANISH PRIORITIES

The Danish Presidency has [identified](#) two priorities which, when combined, reflect those pointed to by the Danish respondents in the Eurobarometer survey: "A secure Europe and a competitive and green Europe". The approach is characterized by urgency: "The EU is facing a new international order marked by uncertainty, global strategic and economic competition, and rising levels of conflict". Four areas stand out.

ENLARGEMENT

The first is enlargement. The Danish Presidency is adamant that the enlargement process be carried forward and accelerated. This is primarily about Ukraine, and secondarily Moldova and about unspecified applicant states from the Western Balkans. This insistence is founded on a perceived geopolitical imperative: "Current geopolitical developments highlight the need for EU enlargement", so states the Presidency programme. This priority reflects a dramatic political coming-together in Denmark, where parliament stands in near-universal agreement that Ukraine must be supported militarily, economically and politically, including through a fast, albeit still merit-based, entry into the EU. Denmark is among Ukraine's [leading](#) supporters, and this support will be brought into the Presidency. In a [poll](#) this March, 46 per cent of Danish respondents declared their willingness – fully or mainly – to accept Ukraine as an EU member state *even if* Ukraine should fail to meet the formal requirements.

Of course much work lies ahead before Ukraine will join the EU, and the six months of the Presidency must be used to remove as many obstacles as possible. This includes assisting Ukraine in its reform efforts, adding more substance to the debate about the way ahead and essentially *normalizing* the view that Ukraine belongs naturally in the EU. The time between Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the start of the Danish Presidency saw Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen travel to the Ukrainian

capital Kyiv on a total of six occasions, including to mark the first 1,000 days of the invasion in November 2024.

CONTAINING RUSSIA

Secondly, a central protagonist behind the "current geopolitical developments", Russia will need to be contained. The ambition to bring Ukraine into the EU through an accelerated process will need to be completed in a complex zero-sum environment. While Russian officials have declared that Ukraine will be free to join the EU – thereby revealing the Moscow mindset that the former Soviet territories still need permission to perform identity-defining steps – this should not be believed. As the most optimistic supporters of Ukrainian membership of the EU point to 2030 as a target, clearly there is time for Russia to attempt to obstruct this. There is no need to engage in this now – better focus on the more immediate demand that Ukraine should not be allowed to join NATO. The question of EU membership may be handled after this.

In this zero-sum environment, the Danish Presidency will insist that Russia must be weakened or, as a minimum, not be allowed to increase its influence. A failure to do so may jeopardize the ambition to bring Ukraine – and Moldova – into the EU. However, it is not just about the enlargement of the European Union. It is about its security as a whole and that of the individual member states. The Presidency programme notes how it will "pursue an ambitious approach in the continued work on countering hybrid threats emanating from Russia". Denmark is a leading advocate for a robust policy against Russia, that is, a policy which raises the costs for Russia of its current aggressive actions and deters it from pursuing similar actions in the future: "The Presidency will continue to work to maintain and adopt the toughest possible sanctions against Russia. The Presidency will also work to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of sanctions throughout the European Union and a common effort against circumvention of sanctions". As the Danish Presidency starts

on 1st July, the EU has a total of 17 sanctions packages against Russia (at the time of writing, the 18th package has been blocked by Hungary and Slovakia). It is to be expected that the Presidency will work determinedly to add more measures and to raise the standards of their implementation. This strategy is likely to include the challenging issue of the Russian [shadow](#) fleet, which transports the country's oil to the international markets. As Russia is threatening to raise the stakes to prevent a more forceful implementation of oil-related sanctions - including by deploying naval vessels and fighter jets for protection - the issue is likely to become more contentious within the EU and therefore more challenging for the Danish Presidency to handle.

ACCELERATE DEFENCE CO-OPERATION

Thirdly, a recent convert to European defence co-operation, it is remarkable how prominent this policy field now is for Denmark. It is a clear indication of the gravity with which the geopolitical challenges are viewed. In the words of the Presidency programme, "It is (..) essential that Europe strengthen its ability to defend itself by 2030 at the latest, also as a credible contribution to Euro-Atlantic security. This requires the development of critical defence capabilities, a more robust and resilient European defence industry, including enhanced production and supply chains, and deeper European Union-NATO cooperation". Denmark seems committed to securing progress within this area and to think and to table new ideas and approaches to succeed. The Danish Presidency has strong domestic backing for this - in a March 2025 [poll](#) 82 per cent of Danish respondents expressed their agreement with the statement "the EU should become stronger in the military field" (in polls conducted in the years 2022-2024, the positive response was 45 per cent, 61 per cent and 70 per cent respectively).

Upon closer inspection of the political debate in Denmark, it seems that there is a "Plan A" and a "Plan B" behind this. "Plan A" is to increase defence spending and to strengthen co-operation in the hope of securing a continued US commitment to Europe. Witness

for instance the Presidency Programme statements about "complementarity with NATO" and "work[ing] alongside NATO where possible". This is obviously not done by Denmark in isolation. Ideally, from a Danish perspective, all European NATO member states should meet the defined defence spending target (defence expenditure as a share of Gross Domestic Product). [This is now set at 5%](#). For those European Union member states who also belong to NATO, this will add to their EU contributions. The explicitly direct calls for defence spending to be increased to meet this new target, which will also be made by Danish government representatives during the six-monthly Presidency of the Council of the European Union, are designed to secure domestic support and to shame those NATO members, which fail to do so according to the agreed speed and timeframe, thereby jeopardizing the relationship with the USA as they remain below the target.

In the likely case that even five per cent defence spending in most or all European NATO member states is insufficient to secure continued US commitment - or the European Allies arrive at the painful conclusion that the USA can no longer be trusted- "Plan B" would be activated. This plan is for the EU member states - possibly in close co-operation with other states such as Norway, the United Kingdom and Canada - to act alone and without the USA. 5% defence spending would strengthen the ability of these states to act in this manner. The "new"-found Danish support for EU defence co-operation in this way serves a dual purpose: To secure continued US commitment and to increase EU capabilities. The latter is, as an immediate goal, a means to the former. However, it may eventually become a final goal. In fact, behind-the-scenes talk in Denmark suggests that "Plan B" is now the new "Plan A", even though this has not been stated openly. The deterioration of relations between the European allies and the USA, and between the Kingdom of Denmark and the USA, since January 2025 has been so rapid and dramatic that the break-up may even become a reality during the Danish Presidency.

It should be added that the target of 5% is broken down to two separate components: military spending at 3.5 per cent and wider security spending at 1.5 per cent. The latter will boost societal resilience across domains – physical, cyber and cognitive. There is a well-established understanding in Denmark that this societal resilience in general is best secured through the EU. It is done in both wide and deep co-operation with EU member states on common standards for instance; an example is the [Network and Information Security Directive \(NIS 2\)](#) directive, which defines new and higher standards for cyber security for critical sectors. “The EU must (...) better address critical capability gaps in Europe. The Danish Presidency will work to ensure that the European Union is able to protect its interests by strengthening its resilience, robustness, and deterrence against complex and hybrid threats”, states the Presidency Programme.

GREEN TRANSITION

Judging from the Presidency Programmes alone, Denmark is greener than Poland. This may be one of the areas, where the transition from the Polish Presidency to that of Denmark will be more visible. The Polish Presidency Programme mentioned the word “green” 11 times, the Danish Programme does so 36. The [agreement](#) behind the current Danish coalition government states that “Denmark should be a pioneer, identifying and meeting ambitious climate targets and climate actions, thereby inspiring others to follow”. The green transition will therefore be about *green* transition as an objective in itself. However, the green transition is to a large extent about security also, and in this way the slogan “Security, Europe!” is carried forward here too. “The green transition is essential for building a more secure and competitive Europe”, states the Danish Presidency Programme. It continues by noting that “the green transition must be continued in a way that maintains the level of ambition while also supporting EU competitiveness, security of supply, and ensuring Europe’s independence from Russian energy”.

Given the overall tone of the Danish Presidency Programme, it is to be expected that the green transition will be mostly tied to discussions of a wider security agenda. The reason for this is not merely instrumental – making it easier to convince otherwise more hesitant member states of the good of the green transition – it also reflects an urgency felt in Denmark. As the EU maintains and possibly even increases its focus on how to contain Russia, a loosening of the energy grip of Russia over several member states will be viewed as a high priority, legitimizing higher costs and drastic policies.

GREENLAND AND THE ARCTIC

The Kingdom of Denmark consists of Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Greenland. The two latter territories are not part of the EU however. Denmark is currently facing unprecedented external pressure as the US administration under Donald Trump is upholding its [threat](#) to take over Greenland. This pressure neither is, nor will it be, on the Danish Presidency agenda. However, it is very likely that the conflict over Greenland will remain — and possibly even be exacerbated — during the Danish Presidency. It will then form part of the background against which the Presidency will be executed.

The position of Denmark has until recently been that the Arctic region is for its bordering states only. However, following the announcement by Donald Trump that he intends to take over Greenland, this position has been relaxed. The visit by French President Emmanuel [Macron](#) to Greenland on 15th June, together with Greenlandic head of government Jens-Frederik Nielsen and Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, is the most spectacular illustration of this change to date. “It is important to show that Denmark and Europe are committed to this territory”, said Emmanuel Macron. The Presidency Programme emphasizes the critical role of the EU to “continue to safeguard the international rules-based order”. This is primarily a reference to Russia’s full-scale unprovoked, illegal invasion of Ukraine, but that the international rules-based order is also under acute pressure from the USA.

The enhanced status and visibility afforded by the Presidency will give Denmark more weight and more opportunities as the country works to defuse the tension over Greenland or, if this fails, to win support from its allies. All support within the EU – institutions as well as individual member states – will be seen as critical. It is therefore to be expected that Denmark will seek to engage some of these

partners in the second semester. This would not be as the holder of the Presidency, but it would happen *during* the Presidency. The distinction is important, but it is also difficult to uphold in the eyes of the public. This latter fact will be welcomed by the Danish authorities hoping to win as much support and sympathy as possible in the conflict over Greenland.

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