Research Report

The case for development in 2025

ODI Europe

Exploring new narratives for aid in the context of the EU's new strategic agenda

Claire Kumar, Karen Hargrave, Nerea Craviotto and Jessica Pudussery

June 2025

The case for development in 2025

Exploring new narratives for aid in the context of the EU's new strategic agenda

Claire Kumar, Karen Hargrave, Nerea Craviotto and Jessica Pudussery

ODI Europe

ODI Europe
35 Square de Meeûs
1000 Brussels
Belgium

EU transparency register: 051479091677-17

Front page photo: Shutterstock

How to cite: Kumar, C., Hargrave, K., Craviotto, N. and Pudussery, J. (2025) *The case for development in 2025: Exploring new narratives for aid in the context of the EU's new strategic agenda*. Report. Brussels: ODI Europe.

Acknowledgements

We are immensely grateful to the many experts who took time to talk to the research team and shared their perspectives, which were essential to developing this paper. We would also like to thank Nilima Gulrajani, Dora Meredith, Aline Burni, Jessica Hagen-Zanker, Oskar Chmiel, Ida McDonnell and Emily Wigens for their peer review and very helpful feedback. Thanks to Sherry Dixon for coordinating production of this report, Matthew Foley for editing and Aaron Griffiths for typesetting. Opinions and any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

About the authors

Claire Kumar
Claire Kumar is a Senior Research Fellow for the ODI Europe team.

Karen Hargrave
Karen Hargrave is a Research Associate for the ODI Europe team and an independent researcher and policy analyst.

Nerea Craviotto
Nerea Craviotto is a Senior EU Policy Analyst with the ODI Europe team.

Jessica Pudussery
Jessica Pudussery is a Senior Research Officer for ODI Global's Development and Public Finance team.

Contents

Acknowledgements / V

Display items / VIII

Acronyms / IX

Executive summary / X

The context / X
ODA narratives in Europe / X
ODA and the EU's strategic agenda / XI
Unifying narratives / XIII

1 Introduction / 1

2 Context / 3

2.1 An overview of ODA trends / 3
2.2 The added value of the EU's ODA / 8
2.3 Public opinion around the importance of aid / 11

3 Understanding narratives / 13

3.1 What are narratives? / 13
3.2 Narratives and policy-making / 13
3.3 Effective narrative strategies / 13

4 Exploring ODA narratives / 18

4.1 Political context / 18
4.2 Narratives justifying ODA spending / 19
4.3 Critical narratives / 25
4.4 Stakeholder conclusions regarding the future of aid / 27

5 The EU's new strategic agenda: narratives, policies and implications / 30

5.1 Introduction / 30
5.2 Aid and migration / 31
5.3 Aid and defence / 35
5.4 Aid, security and global public goods / 40
5.5 Aid and competitiveness / 45
5.6 What risks being overlooked? / 50

6 Making a new case for development / 52

6.1 Unifying narratives / 53
6.2 Allies and messengers / 57

6.3 The role of evidence / 58
6.4 More divisive narratives / 59

7 Concluding thoughts / 60
Recommendations / 60

References / 63

Appendix 1 Overview of positions of European political parties on external action / 80

Display items

Boxes

Box 1 The EU's Multiannual Financial Framework / 5
Box 2 Message testing in the Netherlands / 16
Box 3 Balancing short-term gain with long-term transformation: humanitarian sector narratives / 17
Box 4 The impact of the far right on the EU's development policy / 18
Box 5 The economic impact of European ODA in Europe / 22
Box 6 Migration in the manifestos of the parties in the European Parliament / 32
Box 7 Aid and defence spending / 37
Box 8 Public opinion around climate action / 42
Box 9 Global Gateway: key areas and approach / 47

Figures

Figure 1 Share of EU institutions and EU Member States in DAC ODA, grant equivalent / 4
Figure 2 Public announcements in 2024 on bilateral aid cuts, US$ billions / 4
Figure 3 An overview of the current MFF (2021–2027) / 5
Figure 4 EU spending on humanitarian aid and migration-related priorities / 7
Figure 5 Views about the EU from partner countries / 10
Figure 6 Trends in public support for increasing ODA, 2020–2025 / 12
Figure 7 What determines the popularity of a narrative? / 14
Figure 8 Public priorities for EU action in the next five years / 30
Figure 9 Global defence and aid targets of EU, DAC and NATO members / 38
Figure 10 EU-DAC members' defence and aid spending, 2024 / 38
Figure 11 The demand for political action on climate change / 43
Figure 12 How aid investments benefit Europe / 52

Acronyms

AfT	Aid for Trade
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CRM	Critical raw materials
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DEL	Development Engagement Lab
DFI	Development finance institution
DG ECHO	Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG INTPA	Directorate General for International Partnerships
DG MENA	Directorate General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists Party
EDP	European Democratic Party
EFA	European Free Alliance
EGD	European Green Deal
ELA	European Left Alliance for the People and the Planet
EPP	European People's Party
ESN	Europe of Sovereign Nations
EU	European Union
EUDR	European Union Deforestation Regulation
GDP	Gross domestic product
GNI	Gross national income
GPG	Global public good
HUMA	Humanitarian Assistance Instrument
LDC	Least developed country
MFF	Multiannual financial framework
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDICI	Neighbourhood, development and international cooperation instrument
ODA	Official development assistance
OECD	Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development
PEL	Party of the European Left
PES	Party of European Socialists
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
WHO	World Health Organisation

Executive summary

Foreign aid is in crisis, with development budgets being drastically cut and the legitimacy and relevance of the entire aid model in question. This moment of disruption is seen as a chance to fundamentally reimagine the aid system and explore new models of cooperation. This report seeks to rethink the narratives that could drive Europe's development cooperation in future, specifically exploring this question within the more narrow confines of the European Union's (EU) new strategic agenda. We look at three aspects:

1. How narratives around official development assistance (ODA) have shifted in Europe.
2. The narratives emerging with the EU's new priorities and their implications for ODA.
3. Which narratives might have most traction with policy-makers in maintaining robust developmental efforts and ODA spending.

The research combined 42 semi-structured key informant interviews with a rapid consultation with 12 respondents from EU delegations and a desk review. Respondents for the study included researchers and academics, representatives from EU institutions, bilateral donors and NGOs, as well as experts from the security community. Stakeholder views are widely cited throughout this report.

The context

Collectively, the EU's Member States and EU institutions are the largest contributors to ODA among Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members. However, European ODA spending is under pressure, with major European donors announcing significant cuts to their aid budgets. This budget squeeze comes at a difficult time: progress on human development has reversed since the Covid-19 pandemic, poverty is increasing, conflict is widespread and low- and middle-income countries are facing the twin impacts of the accelerating debt and climate crises.

ODA narratives in Europe

In policy terms, ODA has typically been seen as a largely technocratic issue and, with the exception of the far right, there has been long-standing cross-party consensus supporting aid spending. More recently, however, development policy has become more politicised, in part due to the growing prominence of migration as a topic of relevance to the development agenda. There was consensus among most stakeholders interviewed for this research that the concept of solidarity and the moral argument for aid, while maintaining traction with the public, are no longer enough to justify spending to policy-makers. Critical narratives around ODA often present it as wasteful and inefficient, and highlight the unequal and neo-colonial power dynamics embedded in ODA systems.

More transactional, 'nation-centred' narratives have emerged around European ODA. At the EU level this shift is directly connected to the EU's new strategic priorities. However, many stakeholders consulted for this study felt the most significant change in recent years is not that aid has become more transactional, but that its transactional nature has become increasingly explicit. Some welcomed this as enabling ODA spending to be maintained in the current fiscal and political context. There is strong evidence that aid can effectively deliver economic returns (boosting exports and enhancing EU firms' market reach and

competitiveness), as well as delivering benefits for European donors in areas such as soft power. A more transactional approach was also welcomed as enabling more honest discussions between governments.

A 'supranational' narrative that emphasises the importance of investing in global public goods (GPGs) – from pandemic prevention to a stable climate and global security – is also considered both highly relevant and likely to have traction with European policy-makers. Investing in GPGs is clearly in the national interest and delivers mutual benefits, and the EU has traditionally been a leader in this area.

There was also a widely held perception that we are moving towards a new post-aid paradigm. Although a majority of respondents see a future for ODA spending, there was '*pragmatic acceptance*' that spending would be significantly reduced and likely streamlined, with a much tighter focus on poverty reduction. Our consultation revealed little pushback against budget cuts, which are driven by a complex set of factors including austerity, declining living standards in Europe and increasing geopolitical fragmentation and competition. There was broad agreement that '*it's not public opinion that is driving any of this*'; in fact, public opinion is seen as '*the least important factor*' determining policy reforms and budget cuts.

Rethinking aid in line with the EU's new strategic agenda prompted the conclusion that the development community should take aid out of its '*political silo*' and move away from '*the ODA mindset and the DAC rules*'. Many felt a more flexible approach, embracing concepts of '*mutual interest*' and '*mutual benefit*', alongside new partnerships outside of the traditional ODA frame, was the best way forward.

ODA and the EU's strategic agenda

Aid and migration: Delivering aid in line with the EU's own interests is not a new concept. It is already a well-established approach in relation to migration, for both bilateral donors and the EU. However, while tackling the root causes of migration through development and humanitarian aid was the broad framing adopted since 2015, the narrative is now more tightly focused on preventing irregular migration and achieving the return of third-country nationals. The EU also maintains a secondary narrative around legal pathways for labour immigration; however, it is far less prioritised in terms of policy effort. Stakeholders interviewed for this research noted that the EU's migration narrative is simply not credible: it is not based in evidence, migration-related aid has not delivered what it promised, and conditionalities related to accepting returnees are seen as controversial. There is evidence that European governments have particularly increased spending on aid to curb migration in contexts where far-right parties are gaining strength electorally. Migration narratives are perceived as self-interested and crafted for domestic political gain. This clashes directly with emerging narratives around mutual benefit partnerships. Overall, the EU's framing is characterised as '*simplistic*' and as reinforcing far-right discourse.

Aid and defence: The EU sees defence exclusively through the lens of Ukraine and Russian aggression. A narrative of solidarity with Ukraine has gone hand in hand with urgent efforts to increase defence budgets and accelerate defence investments. The symbiotic relationship between aid and defence is missing; instead, a narrative of competition between aid and defence spending is starting to emerge. This strongly contradicts the stance of military and security experts who have

long recognised the contribution of aid in conflict prevention and creating more stable societies. Given evidence that countries that typically meet defence spending targets do not commonly meet aid spending targets, the current context is likely to have ongoing negative consequences for ODA allocations.

Interviewees felt there was potential for some spending earmarked to meet new defence targets to be spent on aid. This would imply widening the classifications used in defence accounting systems. This is an area which may gain political traction in light of the challenges in meeting a difficult spending target and the interests of some NATO countries in addressing more complex, hybrid threats, as well as NATO's own prioritisation of climate adaptation, for example. There is a clear opening for more discussion in this area in some Member States; the development community should be at the table for these conversations.

Aid and security: While the EU has recognised the need for a comprehensive concept of security, there is a discernible shift in the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass to focus more heavily on internal aspects than global challenges. Health appears a particularly neglected issue. None of the stakeholders interviewed for this research felt that a narrow 'military-security' lens was an appropriate starting point. Instead, there was broad agreement that the concept of security should accommodate the concept of GPGs, notably climate, public health, water security and food systems. According to survey evidence, these aspects resonate strongly with the public.

Climate and health also have significant traction with the military and security communities. In some countries security sector stakeholders are actively shaping debates on development cooperation; message testing efforts have also highlighted the success of narratives linking ODA to security (including with segments of the public that favour the far right). The opportunities for new alliances, in particular with military and security sector stakeholders as credible new messengers, is clear; this is also a useful strategy to reduce polarisation around these issues.

Aid and competitiveness: The Draghi report proposes a new industrial strategy for Europe with a narrative of opportunity for Europe to take the lead in clean technologies and become more energy secure. The Global Gateway initiative links competitiveness to economic security, while seeking to advance mutually beneficial partnerships. However, there is a lack of consensus around this initiative and, in practical terms, leveraging private sector investment remains a challenge. Still, from critical raw materials to renewable energy or pharmaceutical manufacturing, the mutual benefit opportunities are real. Achieving progress will depend on the EU's willingness to balance its economic interests with partner countries' industrialisation aims. Questions remain over the space for partner countries' own industrialisation priorities. The neglect of labour migration within the EU's competitiveness agenda is also striking.

What risks being overlooked: There are concerns about what will be neglected under the EU's strategic agenda, particularly gender equality, rights, LGTBQI+ inclusion and democracy promotion, as well as a perceived drift away from the EU's fundamental character as a values-based donor. Interviewees also raised concerns that the EU's strategic agenda would impact the geographic focus of EU ODA, with less going to lower-income countries and a significant loss of support in conflict-affected and fragile states. Stakeholders noted this would potentially undermine the EU's security agenda over the long term.

Unifying narratives

This research identified several unifying narratives that provide opportunities to build political consensus around a new aid paradigm, and the wider developmental investments that should result from the EU's external action. Summarised here are areas of relative consensus regarding narratives that would resonate with policymakers.

1. Narratives which emphasise common global challenges

Many stakeholders felt the strongest framing for policy-makers lay in emphasising '*common global challenges*' and '*shared security*.' This is one that policymakers can relate to, as long as challenges can be linked to domestic priorities in a tangible way. There are very high levels of recognition among the European public of the need to tackle global challenges and a clear preference for the EU to increase resources in this area. Climate, public health, food and water are all key areas to make this agenda tangible. It is also highly likely that extreme weather events, water scarcity, severe food supply chain challenges, or outbreaks of infectious diseases will increase the salience of global challenges and the plausibility of these narratives in future. Given the potential for co-option by the far right, careful testing of potential messages with the public would be wise.

2. Narratives that emphasise refocusing and streamlining aid

The stakeholder consultation and desk research revealed a consensus across the political spectrum that ODA budgets should have a more streamlined focus on poverty reduction and high-priority geographies. Tried and tested, cost-effective interventions delivered at scale should come to the fore, as well as a resurrection of the 'division of labour' concept among EU donors. Given current fiscal constraints, there is likely to be value, in terms of plausibility with policymakers, of conceding the need to improve the focus and efficiency of ODA spending. This approach would also resonate with the public who tend to favour clarity around how aid is simply doing good.

3. Narratives around Europe's role in providing humanitarian assistance

There is strong consensus around humanitarian aid and highly receptive recipients for this narrative. The public is supportive and – even in the context of right-ward political shifts and a far stronger transactional discourse around aid – there is no pushback against humanitarian assistance (including from far-right parties). Increasing humanitarian budgets – and ring-fencing humanitarian spending within the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework – should be viewed as an achievable goal, as well as a priority given the stress on humanitarian systems and record funding shortfalls.

4. Narratives linking development efforts with the competitiveness and economic security agenda

There is substantial overlap between the development agenda and the EU's narratives around competitiveness and economic security. Plausible arguments can be made in areas related to Aid for Trade, ODA investments that unlock new markets and build enabling environments for business and resilient supply chains. There are receptive recipients given narratives in this area will closely align with policymakers' priorities. Private sector messengers are seen as more credible in this area than the development community. There is also scope for mutually beneficial partnerships designed around third

countries' industrialisation goals, though questions around the quality of partnerships remain which may undermine the narrative, especially in the eyes of partner countries.

There was significant consensus in the consultation that thinking 'beyond aid' means *not* limiting the discussion to what is 'DAC-able' (i.e. what can be reported as aid under DAC rules). Other EU policies and funds are relevant, such as the forthcoming European Competitiveness Fund (under the next MFF) that could include an external dimension. This requires thinking around how to mainstream development cooperation principles across the EU's policies and programmes to support the development of partnerships outside of traditional ODA budgets. It will also require clarity from the EU on its external action plans and resources across all relevant areas, and enhanced transparency. Recommendations are included in full in the final section.

1 Introduction

Foreign aid is in crisis, with development budgets being drastically cut and the legitimacy and relevance of the entire aid model in question. This is not necessarily new; official development assistance (ODA) has been seen as an outdated, 'dying' concept for a while (Severino and Ray, 2009). Longstanding critiques of the donor–recipient model have led to a rejection of the North/South binary on which the delivery of development cooperation rests; the aid model has lost ground both with those who fund it and with aid recipients themselves (Gulrajani, 2022; Aly et al., 2024). The dismantling of USAID under the second Trump administration has resulted in an even more serious reckoning that 'this could truly be the end of foreign aid as we know it' (Usman, 2025: n.p.). This comes at a difficult time. Progress on human development has reversed since the Covid-19 pandemic, conflict is widespread, and low- and middle-income countries are facing the twin impacts of the accelerating debt and climate crises. Still, a return to the 'old normal' of the aid system is seen as increasingly improbable (Muggah and Salmon, 2025).

Those working within the development sector are now faced with hard choices. These are not necessarily as straightforward as defending the status quo or simply accepting that aid funds will decline (Aly et al., 2025). This moment of disruption can also be seen as a chance to fundamentally reimagine the aid system and explore new models of cooperation (ibid.; Kinsbergen and Rana, 2025). This report critically examines the narratives that could drive Europe's development cooperation in future. Specifically, we explore this question within the narrower confines of the EU's strategic agenda, which prioritises defence, security, migration and competitiveness.

In this report we explore how narratives around ODA have shifted in Europe; the narratives emerging with the EU's new strategic agenda and their implications for ODA; and which narratives might gain traction with policy-makers to encourage ODA investments and developmental efforts. This is a difficult moment to address these questions given the level of political polarisation in Europe and the urgent global challenges we face. However, as this report lays out, there are unifying perspectives that provide opportunities for broad mobilisation around a new aid paradigm and new partnerships.

This report combines 42 semi-structured key informant interviews with a rapid consultation with 12 respondents from EU delegations and a desk review. Most interviews were conducted remotely, and on an anonymous basis, and followed a guide questionnaire tailored to individual respondents' areas of expertise. Anonymised quotes are included (in italics and block quotes) to illustrate the perspectives of stakeholders.

Respondents for the study included researchers and academics, representatives from EU institutions, bilateral donors and NGOs, as well as experts from the security community. We particularly sought the views of respondents from institutions representing the right and centre right of the political spectrum, since right-leaning parties are now the dominant political force in Europe. In addition, given the focus of the research, most interviewees were based in Europe. The research team conducted a small number of interviews with stakeholders taking a global perspective on ODA, including those familiar with

views in Europe's partner countries. A focus on the global North nonetheless remains a limitation of the study.

The next section sets the context for this report, looking at ODA budgets, the nature of the EU's ODA portfolio and how the public generally feel about ODA spending. Section 3 introduces the concept of narratives, what they are and how they influence policy. Section 4 unpacks historic and current narratives around aid, how these have shifted, and the key results from our comprehensive consultation. Section 5 explores the narratives around the EU's new strategic agenda and its key policy priorities, how they intersect with ODA, and the implications of this new agenda for the development community. In Section 6 we explore opportunities for new (more unifying) narratives that could resonate with policy-makers, before offering concluding thoughts and recommendations for policy-makers, donors and the wider aid community.

2 Context

2.1 An overview of ODA trends

ODA reached a peak in 2023 of $223.4 billion (OECD, 2025).[1] However, latest estimates from the OECD (2025) suggest that ODA fell to $212.1 billion in 2024, a 7.1% decline compared to 2023; average ODA/GNI across all DAC countries fell from 0.38% in 2023 to 0.33% in 2024. The record numbers for 2023 were largely due to ODA to Ukraine and spending on hosting refugees in donor countries (which depending on the country can be very significant)[2] (Gulrajani and Pudussery, 2025a). In 2023, Ukraine became the single largest recipient ever of aid, receiving the equivalent of about 86% of all ODA disbursements to Africa in the same year. In 2024, ODA to Ukraine fell by 16.7% in real terms to $15.5 billion; ODA for 'in-donor refugee costs' also fell (ibid.).

2.1.1 European ODA budgets

Collectively, the EU Member States and EU institutions account for around half of all ODA provided by DAC members,[3] making them the largest ODA contributors and almost twice as large as the US. Their total share reached 51% of ODA in 2020, falling back to 48% in 2024 (see Figure 1). In 2024, the EU's combined ODA represented 0.47% of EU gross national income (GNI), above the OECD DAC average (OECD, 2025). As of 2023 four EU Member States met the 0.7% of GNI target – Luxembourg, Sweden, Denmark and Germany.

2.1.2 European ODA budget cuts

Major DAC donors including Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland have all announced significant cuts to their aid budgets from 2024 to 2029 (see Figure 2). For Germany, the cuts to foreign aid in 2024 are the first time the country has missed its ODA spending target since 2019. The EU institutions also planned to reallocate up to €2.6 billion within the main development envelope from supporting poverty and climate-related work to tackling pressures from increased migration (Merrick, 2023) (see Box 1). European ODA budget cuts of course pale in significance beside the budgetary impact of the dismantling of USAID.[4]

---

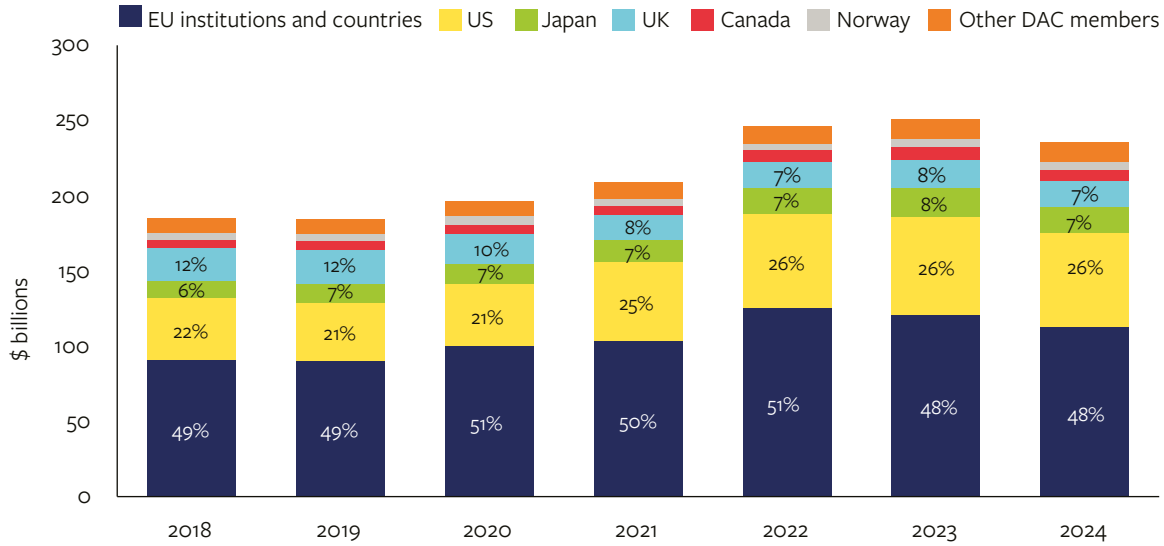
1 All figures provided here are in USD, grant equivalent and at constant prices.

2 For example, if in-donor refugee costs were excluded from Poland's 2022 ODA statistics, Poland's ODA/GNI figure would fall from 0.51% to 0.18%, far below the EU's target of 0.33% set for countries that joined the EU in 2004 (Chmiel et al., 2023). Note that OECD-DAC rules only allow costs for hosting refugees in the first 12 months to be ODA-eligible.

3 Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the EU, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the US.

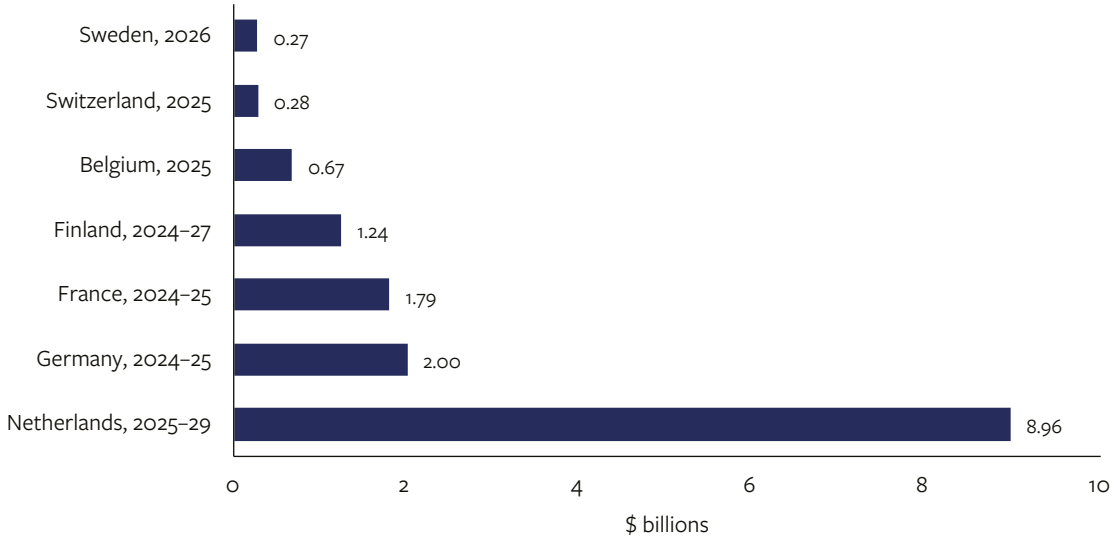
4 The impact of the USAID cuts are not fully clear. However, only a small fraction of staff remain and the scope of US assistance has reduced dramatically, with the largest cuts (by value) borne by programmes in Ukraine, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia and Uganda (Kenny and Sandefur, 2025; Sandefur and Kenny, 2025).

Figure 1 Share of EU institutions and EU Member States in DAC ODA, grant equivalent



Source: OECD (2025)

Figure 2 Public announcements in 2024 on bilateral aid cuts, US$ billions



Source: Authors' compilation updated from Gulrajani (2025)

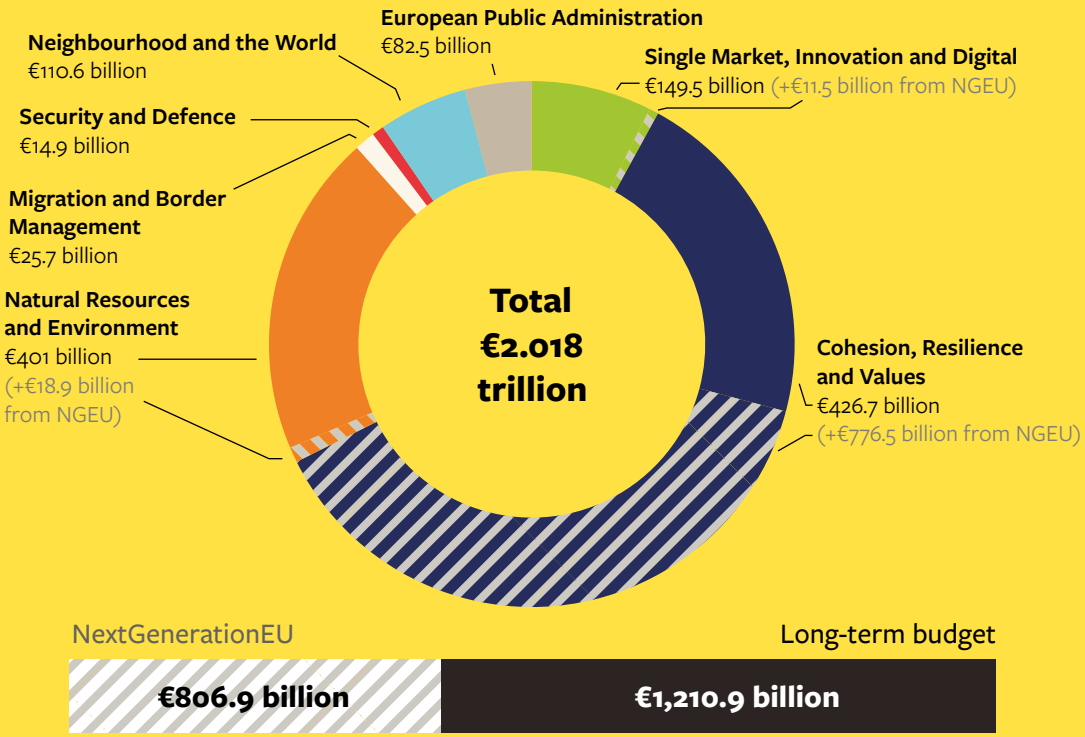
The rationale for these cuts varies. For Germany they are clearly driven by fiscal pressures, as the country implements a wide range of austerity measures to counter a slowdown in economic growth and demographic pressures from an ageing population, while also drastically increasing the defence budget (Chadwick, 2024a; Siebold et al., 2025). France announced a cut to aid of $808 million in early 2024, following lower than expected growth forecasts (Donor Tracker, 2024); by October 2024, cuts totalled $1.79 billion. Shifting domestic policy priorities also play a role. The Netherlands, for example, is set to cut aid by over €8 billion by 2029, in line with an election

pledge by the right-wing coalition (Chadwick, 2024b). Similar political shifts mean Sweden is abandoning a 60-year commitment to spend 1% of its GNI on ODA (Le Monde, 2023). While the fiscal crisis in many European countries is real,[5] there are other factors including the rising pressure to increase military spending across the EU discussed in Section 5.

Box 1 The EU's Multiannual Financial Framework

The EU's current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) covers the period 2021–2027. It consists of €1.2 trillion topped up by up to €800 billion available under the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument (NGEU).[6] There are six policy areas (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 An overview of the current MFF (2021–2027)



Note: All amounts are in EUR billion, in current prices, as of November 2020.

Source: European Commission, n.d.a

5 Two-thirds of euro area countries are set to implement discretionary fiscal tightening in the coming years; the EU Spring 2024 Economic Forecast noted only 4 EU countries (Cyprus, Denmark, Ireland and Portugal) operating primary surpluses in 2024 (European Commission, 2024c).

6 NextGenerationEU is a temporary recovery instrument planned for 2021 to 2026. It aims to support Europe's economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and the transition towards a more sustainable Europe.

The EU's external engagement policy area sits under the 'Neighbourhood and the World' category, with a budget of €110.6 billion. This includes the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) (which encompasses development cooperation) and the Humanitarian Aid instrument (HUMA).[7] In 2021, NDICI was allocated €79.5 billion,[8] to support projects and programmes based on three pillars: geographic, thematic and rapid response. HUMA was allocated €11.6 billion (European Court of Auditors, 2023). In February 2023, leaders of the EU's 27 states agreed to amend the current MFF to boost support for Ukraine and reinforce migration-related spending (Chadwick, 2025).

The next MFF covers a period of between five and seven years starting in 2028. Negotiations begin in a context of significant public finance-related challenges, which will likely affect the level of financial resources dedicated to external action (at EU level). When the current MFF was adopted in 2020, the external action envelope represented a modest real-term increase of nearly 4% compared to the 2014–2020 MFF.[9] To maintain a comparable level of ambition in the next MFF period, the Neighbourhood and the World budget would need to increase to at least €123.4 billion (in today's prices).[10]

The European Commission may push for further streamlining of the external action envelope by merging the NDICI-Global Europe, Humanitarian Aid and Pre-Accession instruments. The Commission will publish its proposal for the next MFF in July 2025.

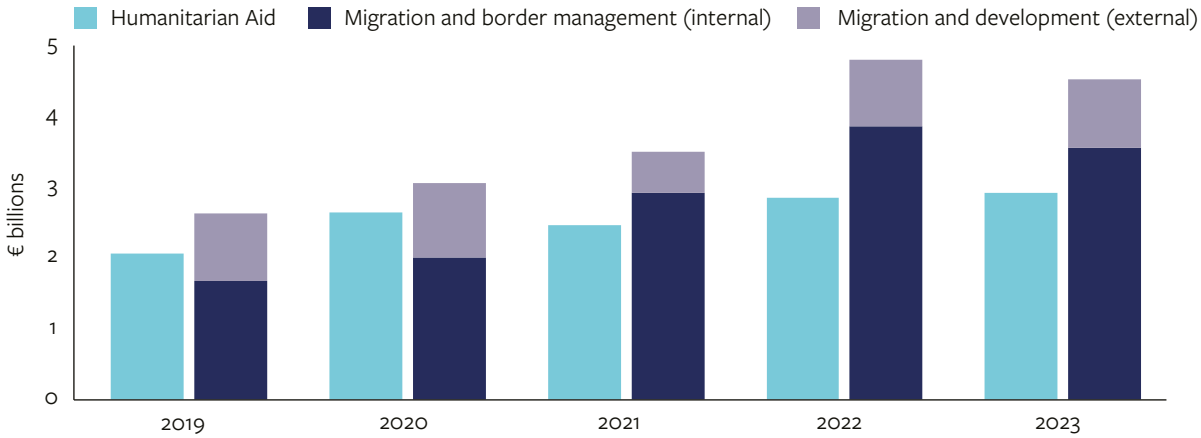
2.1.3 The EU's spending on migration-related priorities

The increasing prioritisation of migration management has significantly impacted the EU's budget allocations since 2015, when 1.2 million people sought international protection in the EU (Eurostat, 2025). This has had implications for both internal and external spending, most notably on the current MFF (2021–2027). Initially allocated €22.7 billion, the mid-term review of the current MFF and related negotiations at the EU Council level led to an increase in the overall resources for migration and border management (European Parliament, 2021; European Council, 2024). Annual spending under the migration and border management cluster is growing, reaching just under €4 billion in 2022 (see Figure 4). This is in addition to the budget allocated under NDICI (from 2021), which includes a 10% target

7 The HUMA budget is managed by the European Commission Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) and implemented through programmes and projects contracted with international organisations and international non-governmental organisations.
8 The benchmark for NDICI is that 93% of the budget will qualify as ODA, as defined by the OECD DAC.
9 Authors' calculation.
10 Authors' calculation.

of development funding to support migration-related projects and programmes.[11] though the European Parliament has already criticised the Commission for over-spending on migration-related cooperation (which hit 14% in 2023) (European Parliament, 2023). Analysing both internal and external migration-related spending[12] together shows the significant – and increasing – spending on this priority. This can be contrasted, for example, with the far smaller budgetary increases allocated to humanitarian assistance (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 EU spending on humanitarian aid and migration-related priorities



Note: Humanitarian aid data (OCHA, n.d.) uses ECB currency USD/EUR exchange average for the related years. Data on migration and border management is built from information on EU spending and revenue data (for 2019 to 2023), Cluster 10 – Migration (total) and Cluster 11 – Border Management (total for IBMF BMVI and IBMF CCEI) (European Commission, n.d.h), plus annual financial reports from the European Union Agency for Asylum (European Court of Auditors, 2019; EASO, 2021; EUAA, 2022; EUAA, 2023; EUAA, 2024) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) (Frontex, 2020; Frontex, 2021; Frontex, 2022; Frontex, 2023; Frontex, 2024). Data on migration and development is built from annual reports from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa for 2019 and 2020 (EU Emergency Trust Fund, 2020; EU Emergency Trust Fund, 2021) and EU spending data (2021 to 2023), Cluster 14 – External Action (a 10% of the total for NDICI, corresponding to the migration target agreed under the NDICI-Global Europe) (European Commission, n.d.h).
Source: Authors' compilation (current prices) as per documents noted.

11 The NDICI Regulation sets six main areas for cooperation on migration, forced displacement and mobility: 1) ensuring access to international protection; 2) addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement; 3) enhancing border management and pursuing efforts to prevent irregular migration; 4) fighting against trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling; 5) working on dignified and sustainable returns, readmission and reintegration; and 6) engaging with diasporas and supporting legal migration pathways (Weisner and Pope, 2023).

12 External migration-related spending is calculated based on the 10% target within NDICI rather than actual expenditure, likely underestimating overall expenditure on migration given the tendency to overspend in this area.

2.2 The added value of the EU's ODA

The European Consensus on Development (2017),[13] which defines the EU's vision and action framework for development cooperation, embraces a comprehensive approach to development, using the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framing and aligned with development effectiveness principles. As noted above, the EU, with its 27 Member States, is collectively the largest donor globally. Respondents interviewed for this research emphasised both the EU's sheer size and the predictability of its funding, which position it as an ideal development partner. EU ODA is based on a seven-year budget horizon, locked ceilings and identified envelopes, so '*in essence you have a predictable pot of money*'.

Stakeholders consulted also pointed to efforts towards more coordinated approaches. This refers broadly to the Team Europe[14] approach, and the pooling of resources through initiatives such as the European Development Fund, Trust Funds or more recently the Global Gateway strategy.[15] These collective approaches are seen as important given the '*heterogeneity of Europe itself*', described by an African commentator as a '*powerful canvas for different ideas*', which provides a rich foundation if there is a real '*commitment to work together and synergise*'.

This coordination capacity has contributed to the EU's leadership role in global debates and has helped forge alliances to secure key international agreements (Bodenstein et al., 2017; OECD, 2018). The EU is also seen as having been a major driving force behind the promotion of specific global public goods (GPGs) (e.g. in relation to climate change policy), with climate action a central piece of the EU's external action (Gavas et al., 2014; OECD, 2018). The Global Challenges thematic programme[16] has (in coordination with the EU's country and regional-level programmes) been effective in advancing the GPG agenda (Particip et al., 2024).

Stakeholders interviewed also pointed to the variety of instruments in the '*EU's investment toolbox*', notably '*an innovative use of budget support*' with a strong emphasis on '*supporting country systems*'. This is in addition to '*the setting up of the EFSD+,*[17] *the use of guarantees and blended finance*'; the EU is considered

13 Prepared and agreed after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015.

14 The Team Europe approach is a way to design and visibly label the joint external cooperation of the EU, its Member States and European development financing institutions. It aims to strengthen coordination, coherence and complementarities among EU development finance actors.

15 The Global Gateway is a worldwide strategy by the EU to invest in infrastructure projects and establish economic partnerships. It aims to tackle the most pressing global challenges, from fighting climate change to improving health systems, boosting competitiveness and the security of global supply chains and furthering the digital transition. The Global Gateway aims to mobilise up to €300 billion in investments through a Team Europe approach – by bringing together EU institutions, Member States and their financial and development institutions under a specific initiative (European Commission, n.d.e.).

16 This is a programme within the NDICI that aims to cover the global and multilateral dimension of EU action to deliver the Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreements.

17 The European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) is the financing tool of the Global Gateway. It aims to promote sustainable investments in the EU's partner countries, offering risk-sharing instruments (i.e. guarantees, blended finance). It is deployed via a range of development finance institutions, which act as the EU's implementation partners (European Commission, n.d.b).

to have been an early mover in this field. The mid-term review of the EU's external financing instruments identifies both their geographical spread and their scope – from grants to budget support, blending and budgetary guarantees – as important to deliver impact (Particip et al., 2024). The introduction of the Team Europe approach, growing coalitions of development finance actors and the generally enhanced coordination efforts of European financial institutions is evident.[18] The EU offer to partner countries also extends beyond aid and development finance. As an interviewee highlighted '*it* [*the EU*] *is very attractive for partnerships around the world*' because of the trade dimension and the ability of countries to '*tap into the EU market*'. EU development assistance has a role to play here, including via Aid for Trade initiatives and Global Gateway infrastructure projects.

The EU has a commitment to integrate human rights and democracy into its engagement with partner countries in line with its regulatory frameworks and strategies, as well as a history of supporting civil society, which '*is still relatively well engaged in EU aid in comparison to other donors*'. One survey in Latin America found that partner countries appreciate the EU for these specific contributions: although China and the United States are perceived as the most influential countries in economic terms, Europe is preferred when it comes to protection of the environment, poverty and inequality, democracy and culture and education (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung et al., 2021). The consultation for this research indicated the value attached to aspects such as democracy, human rights, gender equality and environmental sustainability. Compared to other development cooperation actors, the EU '*in some ways, is potentially a model for others*'. That said, centre-right commentators and respondents from EU partner countries expressed discomfort around an '*imposed value system*' and its impact on aid-recipient countries.

The EU's focus on socioeconomic development and its high social and environmental standards also enhance its credibility as a partner in relation to the green transition and distinguish it (positively) from China (Di Ciommo, Veron and Ashraf, 2024). The Global Gateway, which came up frequently in the consultation, is essentially built around high standards of sustainability, governance and transparency, specifically 'in contrast to Chinese finance' (Gavas and Pleek, 2021: n.p.). Again in contrast to China, the EU's approach and the added value it brings to partnerships may open up space to advance a shared interests agenda (Chen, Faure and Gulrajani, 2023; Di Ciommo, Veron and Ashraf, 2024).

In line with the Global Gateway's '360 degree' approach,[19] respondents also highlighted the EU's comprehensive support packages in education (including vocational education and training), governance and regulatory aspects. Interviewees noted that '*it is a different offer and proposition*' compared to other development initiatives (notably China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)), and that the EU seeks to present '*a whole of society approach*' to its partners. While there was some scepticism about the genuineness of the

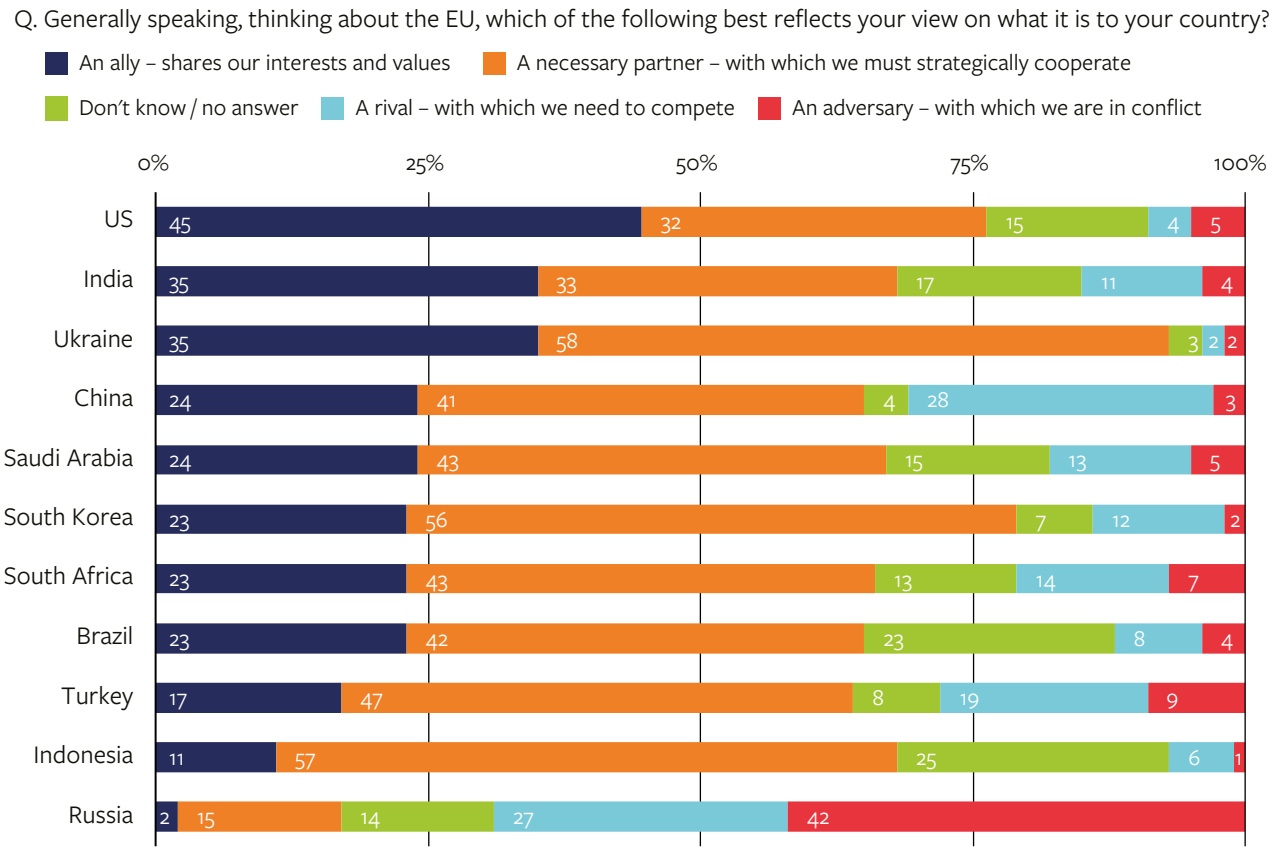
18 See Gavas and Pérez (2022) for more information on the European Financial Architecture for Development, and coordination among European actors within this process.

19 The Global Gateway 360-degree approach aims to create an enabling environment for sustainable and quality investments. It promotes high social, environmental and governance standards (ESG) and includes fundamental principles such as respect for human rights and the rule of law (European Commission, n.d.f).

360 degree approach, examples given by multiple EU delegations consulted for this report – from urban transport to green hydrogen – illustrate that staff are actively looking for opportunities to make Global Gateway projects inclusive and to mainstream gender equality principles.

Public opinion polls affirm that many around the world see the EU as a major global power and a potentially important partner (Garton Ash et al., 2025). ECFR polling shows that 'majorities in most countries consider the bloc capable of dealing on equal terms with the US and China'; this is the case for countries such as Brazil (61%) and South Africa (59%), for example (ibid.). When asked about potential partnerships, people in emerging economies see the EU as an ally or a necessary partner (see Figure 5). Ironically, ECFR polling consistently shows that the people with least confidence in European power and who 'tend to see the EU in a gloomier light than most counterparts elsewhere in the world' are Europeans themselves (Garton Ash et al., 2025; Puglierin et al., 2025: n.p.).

Figure 5 Views about the EU from partner countries



Source: Garton Ash et al. (2025)

An additional strength highlighted by respondents was the EU's independence, primarily because '*the supranational perspective*' means the EU 'goes beyond the vision, priorities or interest of one country'. A commentator from Africa reflected:

> *Brussels is more technocratic … unhindered by certain types of domestic politics … it's a kind of anchoring. The lack of domestic constituencies or lobbies can mean that the EU presents a very pure form of technocratic interventionism.*

Some interviewees felt this was a particularly important advantage in relation to conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

2.3 Public opinion around the importance of aid

Since the mid-1980s surveys have typically found high levels of public support for aid, though with fluctuations over time particularly during economic crises (OECD, 2024). There is very high support among EU citizens for humanitarian aid spending: Eurobarometer reports that a large majority (91%) think it important that the EU funds humanitarian assistance, with only 8% thinking the EU should spend less in this area (European Commission, 2024b). A large majority (74%) agree that tackling poverty should be a priority for the EU,[20] though it is seen as a somewhat lesser priority for national governments (62%) (European Commission, 2023c).

While support is high for European ODA, the outlook is changing at national level. The Development Engagement Lab (DEL), which tracks public opinion on aid in France, Germany and the UK (as well as the US), has found that support for aid has declined in recent years. As Figure 6 illustrates, fewer respondents now agree that their government's aid budget should increase, or stay the same, compared to five years ago. The steepest decline in support has been in Germany (though more than half of the German population still do *not* support the idea of cuts to aid spending).[21] While support is down it is clear that aid still remains broadly popular. As Crawfurd (2025) points out, this willingness to give aid remains even though DEL data equally shows that less than a third of people typically think aid is effective.

2.3.1 Aid: a low salience and low information topic

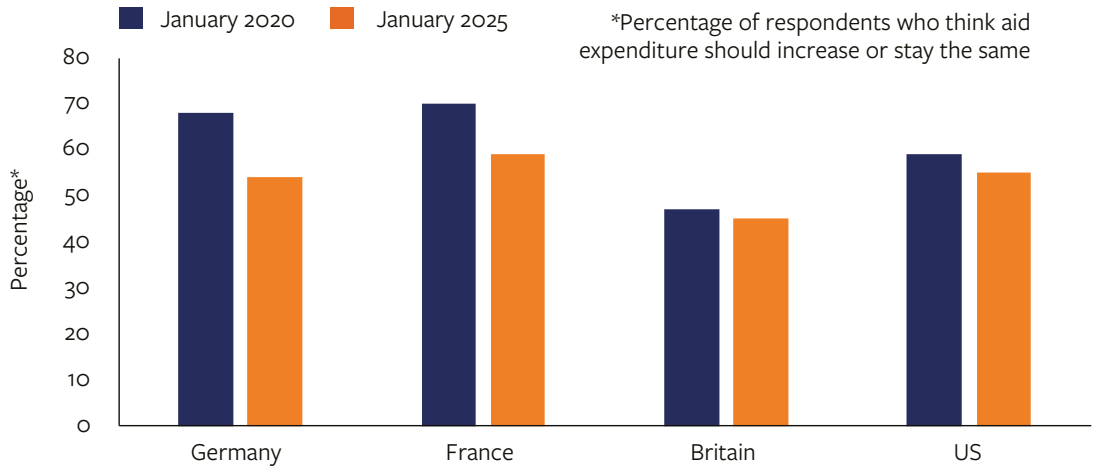
Experts interviewed explained that aid is a low-salience issue and a low-information topic: generally, '*very few people think about aid and few are knowledgeable*' about it. But while aid is noted more for the '*absence of broad public opposition*' there is also a concern that '*it's getting caught up in the culture wars… e.g. are you making [our country] great again or are you for helping those who are not citizens?*'. While the public often think aid spending is too high, misperceptions about how much is actually spent are common (OECD, 2024). Experts also caution that '*the argument has become way too focused on money*' making '*the public focus on money and think something is expensive. And because they don't have a tangible idea of what aid is they fill in the blanks*'.

---

20 While this is the lowest level recorded since 2019, it is still higher than the levels of support recorded between 2013 and 2019. Support is particularly high (over 80%) in Cyprus, Spain, Luxembourg and Italy.

21 This decrease in support in Germany is across all groups, regardless of political affiliation, and has been linked to the high degree of political attention paid to aid by right-wing groups and parties (Leininger and Martin-Shields, 2025). Experts interviewed explained this was linked to a spike in anti-aid pieces in the media focused on German aid spending on bicycle lanes in Peru, not dissimilar to media campaigns against aid in the UK.

Figure 6 Trends in public support for increasing ODA, 2020–2025



Source: DEL, n.d.

Lack of information is a significant challenge: '*when people hear anything negative about aid, they don't have an alternative frame to push back on that*'. Positive feelings about aid are generally abstract and the intangibility of how aid fits into voters' daily lives is seen as a key factor explaining the lack of pushback from the public when USAID was being dismantled (Hirschel-Burns, 2025; Leininger and Martin-Shields, 2025). Making the issue more tangible, as is good practice in polling and communications strategies, does make a difference. As one stakeholder noted:

> *We tested public opinion on USAID cuts and when we asked about HIV it really cut down significantly the support for Trump's cuts.*

With poverty set to increase and an exceptionally difficult economic context, particularly in low-income countries,[22] cuts in aid budgets will have consequences. Still, pushback against ODA cuts has been muted (as discussed in Section 4) and experts concur that '*development cooperation as a whole is an easy target for politicians to balance their books*'. However, there was broad agreement that '*it's not public opinion that is driving any of this*'; in fact, it is seen as '*the least important factor*' in terms of the policy reforms and budget cuts currently under way.

22 See Yusuf et al. (2023) for poverty forecasts and Chrimes et al. (2024) for the World Bank's assessment of the economic context facing low-income countries.

3 Understanding narratives

3.1 What are narratives?

In a broad sense, narratives are stories that help us make sense of, and communicate about, a complex world (Dennison, 2021), allowing us to extract a coherent, simplified story from complicated reality (Gilovich, 1991; Jones and MacBeth, 2010; Boswell et al., 2011).[23] They are an inescapable feature of human thought and communication (Sarbin, 1986; Chafe, 1990; Shenhav, 2006; Jones and MacBeth, 2010).

Dennison (2021) provides a more formal definition of narratives, which emphasises three core criteria: 1) selectiveness in how reality is depicted; 2) inclusion of at least two points in time; and 3) presence of a causal claim. Critically, the selective nature of narratives introduces subjectivity in how they are constructed, with implicit assumptions behind what is prioritised (or not) for inclusion (ibid.).

3.2 Narratives and policy-making

Policy narratives tell a story about public policy, including claims about the nature of a policy problem, its causes and how it might be impacted by policy interventions (Boswell et al., 2011; Shanahan et al., 2017). Jones and MacBeth (2010) describe how policy problems are often defined in a 'narrative structure', as 'stories with a beginning, middle and end ... heroes and villains and innocent victims'. Narratives can influence policy processes in various ways.[24] At the micro level, policy narratives may directly influence individual decision-makers who interact with them (Shanahan et al., 2017). Cairney (2016) describes the 'bounded rationality' of policy-makers who, despite claims of evidence-based policy-making, lack the ability to consider all relevant evidence. Instead, they employ shortcuts, both 'rational' (for example, prioritising certain information sources) and 'irrational' (for example, drawing on 'gut feelings') to make decisions (Cairney and Oliver, 2017). Narratives may be necessary to make sense of the complexities and inter-dependencies involved in policy problems, as well as genuine uncertainties (Boswell et al., 2011; Dennison, 2021). Narratives may also indirectly influence policy outcomes through their impact on public opinion, which may in turn inform decision-making. Burstein (2003; 2006) argues that the higher the salience of an issue, the more likely policy is to be influenced by public opinion.

3.3 Effective narrative strategies

3.3.1 Assessing the popularity of a narrative

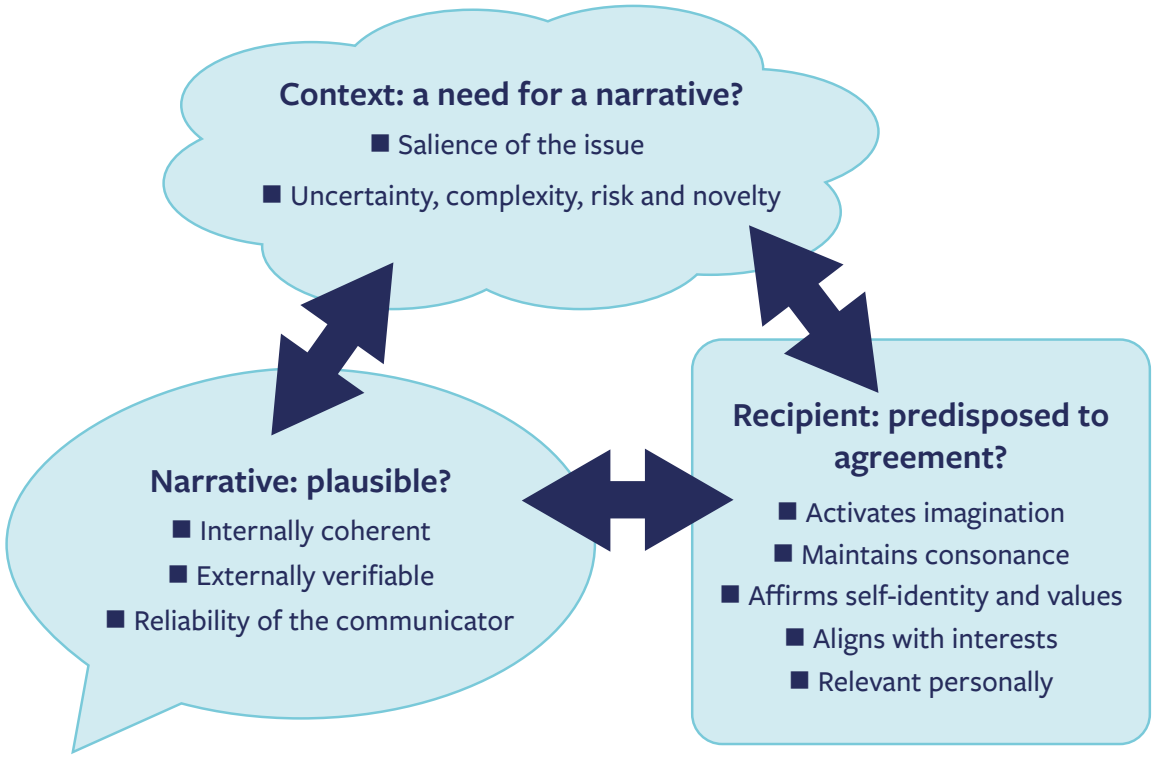
Different narratives exert different levels of influence on policy outcomes. Some fare better

23 Narratives are distinct from frames and discourse. Cullerton et al. (2022) describe how frames raise 'the salience of certain parts of a message via the presence or absence of certain words, phrases and images to provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements'. In order to be communicated successfully, frames require the use of tools such as a narrative to connect different elements of a frame in a meaningful way. Discourse is a broader concept characterised by an 'ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena' (Dennison, 2021).

24 Shanahan et al. (2017) outline three levels at which narratives, and their influence on policy processes, can be studied – the micro level, meso level and macro level.

than others in gaining traction directly with policy-makers or influencing policy through influencing public opinion. Dennison (2021) highlights three core aspects which determine the public popularity of a narrative: a conducive context; plausibility; and receptive recipients (see Figure 7) (elements which are also likely to be directly influential with policy-makers, given human psychology). Generally, why certain narratives become popular remains an understudied area (ibid.).

Figure 7 What determines the popularity of a narrative?



Source: Dennison (2021)

1) A conducive context

A narrative is more widely accepted if it is needed to make sense of an issue. Dennison (2021) links this to an issue's novelty, complexity, risk[25] and salience. People are unlikely to look for a narrative about an issue they are not concerned with, and narratives are likely to fail to gain traction. As a low salience-issue for the public, narratives around the importance of aid spending may struggle to have purchase with electorates (though factors such as salience, novelty and risk would differ for policy-makers).

2) Plausibility of the narrative

One of the most important factors behind effective narratives is their basic plausibility (Boswell et al., 2011; Dennison, 2021). This encompasses both internal plausibility (whether

25 This particularly refers to the risk 'that results from a more interconnected, complex and thus unpredictable world' (Dennison, 2021: 6).

the narrative makes sense in theory) and external plausibility (whether it is consistent with the available information from the real world) (Lodge and Taber, 2005). Essentially, facts matter (Dennison, 2021). While internal plausibility is fixed, external plausibility can shift quickly in line with changes in the external environment (ibid.); a narrative that was initially plausible may become implausible as the world around it changes. Equally, external evidence that supports a particular narrative may accumulate as circumstances change.

For ODA, the external plausibility of different narratives is likely to vary with factors such geopolitics and economic circumstances. For example, in the current context, characterised by pressures on state budgets, it is likely that plausible narratives would need to provide a solid justification for why continued ODA spending should remain a priority. As discussed below, Dennison (2021) argues that the principle of plausibility connects with the credibility of the messenger.

3) Receptive recipients: values, beliefs and priorities

Narratives also tend to succeed when they resonate with the pre-existing values, beliefs and priorities of their target audiences (Dennison, 2021). As Cullerton et al. (2022) put it, people tend to be 'more receptive to narratives that are congruent with their own world view'. In the context of ODA, this implies considering what is likely to resonate with the pre-existing beliefs, values and priorities of those outside what some termed '*the development bubble*'. Respondents highlighted that this should include genuine efforts to understand different audiences' worldviews, rather than making assumptions about them. There may be key differences between the worldviews of policy-makers and the public, meaning that narratives may have differing traction between them.

In terms of beliefs and values that may be influential in the context of ODA, respondents highlighted that aid has often been a proxy for wider issues. The importance of religious values for certain audiences (for example, some conservative policy-makers) was also raised. When seeking to connect with public audiences, respondents highlighted the importance of constructing narratives that make global issues tangible and connected to day-to-day priorities. More in Common message testing has highlighted how messaging around climate is most likely to generate public support when connecting the national to the global – i.e. emphasising domestic problems such as flooding to boost support for international climate action (Rajah et al., 2024).

3.3.2 Other elements of effective narrative strategies

Other factors underlying effective narrative strategies include drawing on real-world experience (including through message testing); thinking about the messenger; and taking a long-term view to avoid unintended consequences.

1) Drawing on real-world experience

While the principles above lay the ground for effective narratives, respondents also highlighted the importance of analysing how narratives play out in the real world. This may involve investment in message testing. For example, Oxfam Novib, in collaboration with Cordaid and ONE, has used message testing to refine narratives intended to persuade the Dutch public of the case for continued ODA spending (see Box 2).

Box 2 Message testing in the Netherlands

In 2023, the right-wing populist Party For Freedom (PVV) became the largest party in the Netherlands House of Representatives. In response, Oxfam Novib, Cordaid and ONE explored ways to convince centre-right politicians in coalition with the PVV, and the public supporting them, of the need to maintain the Netherlands' aid budget. The process began with the use of behavioural science insights and interviews to identify 12 frames on ODA with potential for success (Oxfam Novib, 2024). These were tested using the Crowdrock app, asking voters of different parties to evaluate different statements (ibid.). The process produced two 'winning' frames, which focused on strengthening the Dutch global position to keep the country safe and pride in sharing Dutch expertise globally. The three organisations have also tested messaging that combines a principle of solidarity with a focus on security, which resonates well with most segments of the Dutch public.

Message testing also demonstrates the importance of constructing solution-focused narratives that tell a positive story. In the climate space, results from experiments in China, Germany, India, the UK and US have identified that, with the exception of Germany, an emphasis on opportunities rather than threats increased the likelihood of public support (Dasandi et al., 2022).

Interviewees also highlighted how, in the context of ODA narratives, there is already a wealth of real-world experience from which to draw lessons. Respondents pointed to narratives that had been poorly received when framed in a way that was too adversarial, or approaches such as myth-busting that have been found ineffective. Re-Imagine Europa highlights the importance of identifying and avoiding common 'narrative traps', for example the idea that doing good inevitably involves sacrifice (von Holstein, 2025), framing ODA as part of a zero-sum game with other public expenses.

2) Thinking about the 'who' as well as the 'what'

The messenger can be just as important as the message. Dennison (2021) explains how this connects to plausibility, with narratives more likely to be successful when the messenger is viewed as credible. This can be considered in terms of the messenger's overall credibility – both in theory and in line with previous experience (ibid.) – and in view of the narrative's content or with a particular audience. As an example, one interviewee highlighted how a military commander would likely have the greatest credibility putting forward narratives linking ODA to national defence and security.

3) Taking a long-term view

Finally, effective narrative strategies should also consider long-term outcomes. Analysis of policy narratives in the humanitarian sector highlights how short-term wins (such as increased spending) may nonetheless lead to sub-optimal outcomes in the longer term (see Box 3).

Box 3 Balancing short-term gain with long-term transformation: humanitarian sector narratives

In 2023 the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI and the Centre for Humanitarian Action in Berlin explored the interplay between narratives, foreign policy ambitions and domestic interests in Germany's rise as a humanitarian donor (Kreidler et al., 2023). From 2011 to 2021 Germany's budget for international humanitarian assistance grew from €82 million to €2.6 billion, far outstripping increases in Germany's overall government budget and in development funding. The research found that a narrative of humanity and solidarity with victims of crises enabled arguments to increase Germany's humanitarian budget.

However, narratives focused on humanity required additional factors to 'ignite' the case for humanitarian aid, including a shift towards foreign policy channelled through soft-power instruments and, most prominently, a narrative portraying humanitarian aid as a key lever to stem migration into Germany. While before 2015 senior government officials had shown little interest in global forced displacement, the arrival of approximately 1 million refugees to Germany changed the equation. Fundraising narratives framing underfunding of the humanitarian response in Syria and the region as a driver of mass movement towards Germany permeated the highest levels of the German government and influenced budget negotiations. This narrative – instinctively plausible, simple and repeated across the German media – succeeded in part because it served interests across the political spectrum, while providing a solution to an increasingly salient domestic political issue.

Narratives linking aid with national interest can be fragile as contexts change, creating a volatile environment for aid budgets in the long term. Since the study was conducted, there have been dramatic cuts to Germany's humanitarian aid budget, which in 2024 was reduced by more than half (Südhoff, 2024). While most narratives are fragile as external contexts change, a significant concern in this case is that linking aid to stemming migration has fed into more restrictive migration policies (discussed further in Section 5).

Narratives around ODA should also be viewed in the context of their wider effects, given they can exacerbate (or minimise) the polarisation of politics and public opinion, often for reasons beyond ODA itself. Re-Imagine Europa has highlighted the importance of developing 'narrative bridges', aiming to foster dialogue and mitigate division between communities by pursuing narratives that focus on shared values, emotions and concerns (von Holstein et al., 2024).

4 Exploring ODA narratives

This section explores how narratives around ODA have shifted in Europe. It unpacks historic and current narratives around aid, delving into the different narratives that emanate from different stakeholders, and sharing key results from our comprehensive consultation in this area.

4.1 Political context

There has historically been agreement across European politicians on the importance of increasing aid and tackling poverty, with only the far right deviating from this position (Raunio and Wagner, 2021; Hackenesch et al., 2022) (see Box 4). In policy terms, ODA has typically enjoyed a low profile, seen as a largely technocratic issue and with a small community of policy-makers, implementing agencies and CSOs – that hold largely similar views - dominating the conversation at national and European level (Hackenesch et al., 2021). ODA has been described as 'almost immune from criticism' within EU institutions and spaces (Hefele with Crooks, 2024: 6).

Box 4 The impact of the far right on the EU's development policy

The far right are highly critical of aid and against the basic principle of delivering development aid to poor countries (Raunio and Wagner, 2021). However, Faure's analysis (2014) of party manifestos also found that many far right parties still accepted humanitarian assistance be available for crises and emergencies (with examples cited in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands) (Faure, 2014).

Though the rejection of the principle of aid is strong, the impact of far-right parties on development policy in the EU has historically been minimal, even with their participation in governments in EU Member States since 2015. Development policy is a low-salience issue, and far-right parties rarely focus on it to mobilise votes (Bergmann et al., 2024). The impact increases when governments are far right-led: Bergmann et al. (2024), for example, show how the Polish and Hungarian governments succeeded in shaping more critical language related to migration in the New European Consensus on Development.

In the European Parliament, respondents noted that gender, democracy and support for civil society actors are frequently singled out for attack by far-right parties, and that '*migration, border control, defence and securitisation*' are themes that '*play a big role*'. Looking across the manifestos of party blocs in the Parliament (from 2024), groupings on the right and far right, including the Patriots for Europe (PfE), European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN), make no mention of development policy at all. The most substantive focus on development comes from the left/centre left, with left-wing parties the only ones to use the language of sustainable development (see Appendix 1 for an overview of party manifestos).

As the EU's external relations have become more contentious (Hackenesch et al., 2021; Lauwers et al., 2021; Raunio and Wagner, 2021), development policy has increasingly become a topic of greater public debate and politicisation.[26] This is partly due to the consistent elevation of migration – a highly politicised subject – as a topic of relevance to the development agenda (Hackenesch et al., 2021). Shifting politics, and the politicisation of aid, at the EU level set the stage for multiple, sometimes competing, narratives around ODA and its future in Europe.

4.2 Narratives justifying ODA spending

Gulrajani (2022) suggests three emerging narratives used by donors to justify ODA spending: a solidaristic narrative, which focuses on the shared global challenge of inequality; a nation-centred narrative, where aid is designed to serve the national interest; and a supranational narrative, which refers to investments in global public goods. In the consultation for this research, stakeholders noted that solidarity-based and moral arguments for aid are waning, while more transactional, nationalistic arguments gain traction.

4.2.1 Narratives based on solidarity and the moral argument for aid

The solidaristic narrative focuses on the shared global challenge of inequality; it specifically seeks to challenge paternalistic charitable motivations for aid (Gulrajani, 2022). Compared to the moral argument for aid, the idea of solidarity is a distinct concept 'standing figuratively alongside and providing support to another because of shared aims and empathy, rather than charity and sympathy' (Hargrave et al., 2024: 24). A narrative of solidarity has come to the fore in Europe in recent years in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, where aid to Ukraine has been framed as part of broader European solidarity (ibid.). It is also a prominent theme in traditional characterisations of wider ODA. One bilateral donor explained: '*solidarity is in our DNA*'.

One example of the solidaristic narrative is the call to reframe aid as Global Public Investment (GPI). The GPI concept is founded on the principle that all contribute to and all benefit from investment, under a joint-ownership model (GPIN, n.d.). The narrative highlights mutual benefit, investment over cost, shared returns and equal decision-making (Glennie, 2020; Mazzucato and Glennie, 2024).[27] It essentially aims for a radical rethink – and improvement – of traditional aid models.

Most stakeholders consulted for this research pointed instinctively to the more traditional 'moral argument' around ODA. As one respondent put it, this frames ODA as '*very altruistic, for poverty reduction, capacity building, providing assistance to those who need it*'. ODA spending is justified because it is simply the right thing to do. While, as discussed in more detail below, there are valid questions about how far the characterisation of aid in stark moral terms has matched reality, most respondents agreed that this narrative dominated discussions around ODA in the early 21st century. One development actor pointed to an '*idealistic*

26 Experts define politicisation to include three dimensions: the salience of debates, the polarisation of opinion and an expansion of the actors involved (Hackenesch et al., 2021).

27 While a popular policy idea, as noted by Gulrajani (2022) there are no signs of practical implementation of the GPI concept. However, this narrative remains relevant to the global public goods agenda, as discussed in Section 6.

moment' in the 2000s when '*all the lobbies and think tanks, OECD, they got carried away in the easy world*'. Throughout this period left and right parties in Europe found clear points of agreement on development policy, supporting the provision of aid, with poverty reduction as a key motivation (Hackenesch et al., 2022).

There was consensus among stakeholders that the moral argument for aid was no longer enough on its own to justify spending to policy-makers, While many felt that humanitarian aid fared better, with moral arguments continuing to find significant traction, most felt that, as one security stakeholder put it, the moral argument for development aid had '*clearly lost its potency*'. Some described the development sector's long-standing focus on moral narratives around ODA as a mistake. One NGO representative explained:

> *For way too long we have used the moral argument, and we haven't been educating decision-makers on the value of ODA.*

At the same time, many felt that moral arguments around aid should not be discounted entirely: this narrative continues to find broad traction among the public in Europe, and there remains potential for traction among some groups of policy-makers. While there is clearly some discomfort within the centre-right when it comes to the vagueness of development policy – development goals are often all-encompassing and driven by lofty ambitions to end poverty and inequality – the moral argument for aid still plays an important role, linked in particular to Christian Democratic values in some countries (Hefele with Crooks, 2024). Nonetheless, there was broad consensus that the moral argument no longer insulated development aid from criticism. Many respondents also agreed that actors supporting development aid's ambitions should overcome their misgivings and engage with narratives beyond the moral argument.

4.2.2 Nation-centred (and more transactional) narratives

Under a nation-centred narrative, aid is designed to serve the national interest and closely tied to global geopolitics, diplomacy, trade and security (Gulrajani, 2022). This narrative is particularly prominent among centre-right policy-makers (Hackenesch et al., 2022). Most stakeholders consulted for this study agreed that narratives around ODA at the EU level and from European bilateral donors had shifted in recent years towards a more transactional focus on national interest. Only two interviewees, both bilateral donors, disputed that narratives around ODA had become more transactional. Gulrajani and Calleja (2019) find that, between 2013 and 2017, 23 DAC donors (including 19 European donors) were shifting their efforts away from core development objectives and towards securing their own interests;[28] however, between 2019 and 2021 there have been some small improvements, with self-interested aspects declining mainly due to the responses that donors implemented in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Gulrajani and Silcock, 2023). Many cited the Global Gateway as a key example of how the EU's development

28 This is measured by how much aid is tied (whether formally or informally), the alignment between aid disbursements and UN voting agreements across donors and recipients, the links between aid spending and arms exports, and the share of aid spending that is localised. In this study, these indicators are part of the overall measure of 'public spiritedness', which seeks to assess whether aid is allocated to maximise every opportunity to achieve development impact rather than a short-term domestic return.

cooperation programming is becoming interest-driven, given its direct alignment with the EU's aim of securing access to critical minerals (Gavas and Granito, 2025).

Many stakeholders stressed that, despite past rhetoric around poverty reduction and solidarity, aid has long been transactional in practice. Respondents reflecting on aid's deep transactional roots pointed to the use of logos to brand aid materials, ODA spending in regions such as the Sahel, long-standing connections between European ODA and migration policy (discussed in Section 5) and connections between ODA and military interventions. What seems to have changed is not that European ODA has become more transactional, but that its transactional nature has become increasingly *explicit*, moving away from a 'taboo' around directly articulating donor interests. Several interviewees felt that, while they saw this shift as accelerating since the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the roots could be traced further back, to the start of the 'War on Terror' in 2001 and the 2008 financial crisis. One researcher saw this as a full circle shift from European donors, who had previously, in the 1960s and 1970s, overtly framed ODA as a crucial part of making connections with African markets, which would in turn reduce dependence on the US and Soviet Union.

The shift towards more openly transactional narratives was welcomed by some stakeholders as potentially the most promising strategy to maintain some level of ODA spending:

> *It's not easy from the conservative political perspective … while everything in the country is getting more expensive and harder for many people … If we didn't do anything then the only actor that would benefit is the radical right so it makes sense to have this discourse.*

Others stressed the value of bringing transactional approaches and donor interests into the open:

> *Personally, I'm fine with the transactional. I just want to know what is being transacted.*

Some felt this would enable a more honest discussion with governments in partner countries about cooperation that could work in both sides' interests. One analyst described the previous value-laden narratives around ODA as a 'story' Europe had told itself about its interventions around the world, making the point that '*nobody expects altruism*' and asking '*Why are you [Europe] not owning up to what is actually happening? Which is that there are interests, and it becomes difficult to become useful to anyone if those interests aren't defined*'. This view was also clearly communicated in the second dialogue of ODI's 'Donors in a post-aid world' series, where Southern participants were clear that they would welcome a more honest approach, even if it was more transactional (Aly et al., 2025).

Other stakeholders were more sceptical. Some – including those who saw benefits in more transactional approaches – felt that narrative shifts would mean little change in practice, with existing work continuing but simply being 'repackaged'. For example, one donor representative explained that they '*look[ed] at the aid industry as a branch of the fashion industry … the men's tie colours are changing but it's always the same person in it. Every decade the narrative changes but very little changes on the ground*'. Another explained that '*there has been no pushback from the country programmes on what may be lost*' because '*people are putting a lot of existing programmes into new frames*'.

Others objected from a principled perspective, feeling that instrumentalising ODA risked

losing a key element of the added value of EU and European bilateral donorship. One analyst, speaking from a centre-right standpoint, remarked that the EU should '*not make the mistake to throw everything away to follow short-sighted egoism in the narrative*' while a bilateral donor explained their view that '*we have to recall the fundamental values, foundations, documents … What is the EU for?*' Others saw national interest arguments as creating only fragile support for ODA, which was liable to shift in line with changing national interests. There was also a sense that transactional narratives lacked long-term plausibility, with ODA unlikely to deliver tangible returns on investment. However, there is evidence that aid can effectively deliver in the national interest, particularly in relation to economic returns (see Box 5) as well as soft power.[29]

Box 5 The economic impact of European ODA in Europe

Modelling to quantify the specific impact of EU aid finds that aid spending can help reduce trade barriers and costs and can increase exports from donor countries by indirectly stimulating demand (Holland and te Velde, 2012; Martínez-Zarzoso et al., 2016; Ayele et al., 2025). Research by ODI Global and the Pandemic Action Network, looking at the period 2020–2022, estimates that EU aid increased the EU's GDP by 0.08% as a result of the broader economic ripple effects of expanded trade. This is equivalent to an additional $12.1 billion in annual economic output and roughly equal to the entire annual budget of the NDICI instrument (Ayele et al., 2025). In Germany, aid-induced increases in exports are associated with increased employment of around 216,000 people between 1978 and 2011 (Martínez-Zarzoso et al., 2016).

An important aspect to consider is whether the national interest is enlightened: developed with long-term objectives and mutual benefit in mind, or seeking short-term domestic political gain (Carter, 2016; Gulrajani and Calleja, 2019; Abimbola, 2023). Abimbola (2023) argues that the EU's development cooperation policy around migration clearly fits the definition of aid being instrumentalised for short-term domestic political gain. There is ample evidence of this; researchers have found that European governments have adjusted spending on aid with

29 Empirical research in Pakistan finds that greater provision of humanitarian assistance after the 2005 earthquake resulted in more positive attitudes towards foreigners including Europeans and Americans (Andrabi and Das, 2017). Researchers have found that Chinese financing of development projects increases public support for the Chinese government, with the completion of one additional development project in a recipient country increasing public support by more than three percentage points in the short run, though they also found a backlash against Chinese development projects from individuals close to project localities (Wellner et al., 2022). Moreover, despite the growth of Chinese financial assistance in Africa, survey and case study evidence shows that traditional bilateral and multilateral donors still wield considerable influence (Swedlund, 2017).

the aim of curbing migration in contexts when far-right parties are gaining strength electorally (Hackenesch et al., 2022).[30]

Experts on public opinion around ODA also stressed that, while arguments around aid in the national interest may play well with some policy-makers, as one expert put it '*the national interest is not something the public want to hear about when it comes to aid*'. One of the most consistent findings from DEL's tracking is that the public are less convinced by national interest arguments, whether related to geopolitics, economics or defence (Anders, 2024). In the UK, these combined arguments for aid score lower on message testing with the public than the core moral argument. Hirschel Burns (2025), reviewing US data, finds that Americans rank tackling hunger and infectious diseases as more important goals than combating the influence of China or Russia, or priorities associated with the military, for example. Germans are most convinced by arguments that aid can do good in poor countries (with few resources),[31] though less convinced by purely moral reasoning (Oh, 2025). They are far less convinced by the argument that aid will benefit Germany economically.

This is not necessarily a universal view: message testing in the Netherlands suggests that carefully crafted messages emphasising the benefits of ODA to security may in some contexts gain traction with segments of the public (see Box 2). One expert based in the UK emphasised that, while an argument framed around mutual interest can resonate, it should '*include that you were doing it for the right reasons*'. This point is backed by public opinion research that finds that messaging that emphasises domestic benefits, as well as benefits in low- and middle-income countries, commands significant support (Rajah et al., 2024).

Interviewees also stressed that the public – and perhaps policy-makers as well – are unlikely to find plausible a sudden shift to national interest arguments being articulated by NGOs. Aid sector messengers were considered likely to lose credibility if they abandoned the moral argument completely, while narratives focused on the national interest were considered most persuasive when coming from outside the aid sector.

4.2.3 The supranational narrative (and global public goods)

The supranational narrative refers to investments in GPGs. This is used to justify ODA spending based on the idea that investments in GPGs brings benefits to all, regardless of who paid for them. Examples of GPGs include global security, a stable climate, the natural environment and pandemic prevention (Carter, 2016). A GPG narrative emphasises the 'intrinsic interconnectedness' of challenges as mandating a 'collaborative ethos' that goes far beyond typical international interactions (Lopes, 2024: 50).

This category provides a good example of the overlapping nature of ODA narratives and concepts, given GPGs are also clearly in the

30 This research, looking at the period 1990–2018, measured far-right parties' vote and seat shares across 23 European DAC members. It found that a higher vote and seat share for far-right parties is associated with a higher share of aid allocated to migration-containment objectives. The research controlled for public opinion on migration and the number of asylum-seekers in a country to isolate the impact of the electoral strength of far-right parties (Hackenesch et al., 2022).

31 Germans also find it a convincing argument that aid spending helps reduce the number of refugees coming to Germany (Oh, 2025).

national interest (Carter, 2016) and self-interested donors are more likely to seek to address the 'negative spillovers from violent conflicts, migration and global public bads like climate change' (Dreher et al., 2024: 2). Again, this is not a new narrative, though this framing of the purpose of aid has gained momentum since the Covid-19 pandemic and as the climate crisis advances. This narrative emphasises shared global development challenges, especially in the context of the climate crisis; it also removes the North/South division that has traditionally underpinned development cooperation, as all countries stand to either benefit or lose from the provision or absence of GPGs (Gulrajani, 2022).

The commitment to GPGs has had a clear impact on development policy. The OECD (2023b) estimates that 57% of DAC members' ODA in the period 2016–2020 was spent to secure GPGs, compared to only 30% between 2006 and 2010. However, this trend is not without controversy given the scale of needs and the desire to maintain a focus on poverty and inequality reduction (Gavas, 2013; OECD, 2023b). There is no consensus on whether GPGs should be financed through ODA, and challenges remain to reach an accurate and universally agreed standard to measure governments' contributions to GPGs as a category.[32] It also remains a major concern that there is no clear system of governance to robustly oversee GPG investment (Gulrajani, 2022), though there are also opportunities to rethink these aspects in line with GPI principles – that all countries contribute finance according to their ability and responsibility, and all countries benefit from the investment (GPIN, n.d.). As noted by Gavas (2013), this is also an area where the EU could be selective about the issues it can realistically tackle, and there are opportunities for a division of labour between EU institutions and Member States in relation to the strategic partnerships necessary to deliver GPGs. The fact that funding for GPGs could come from other line ministries, providing new sources of funding as ODA budgets are being cut, has also been noted, as has the potential for funding GPGs from new forms of global taxes (e.g. wealth taxes) and with contributions from emerging donors such as Turkey (Aly et al., 2025).

Stakeholders consulted for this study highlighted significant opportunities connected to a GPG narrative, which was considered likely to find traction with European policy-makers. This was described by a centre-right analyst as '*one of the main arguments for engaging abroad*', while another researcher felt that it was '*a good idea to bring back* [*GPGs*] *to the table*', noting that they '*used to be quite high in the agenda*'. Compared to nation-centred narratives, this narrative appeared a more palatable – and indeed more plausible – message for stakeholders within the development community to convey. Some challenges were also noted, including around the overall concept and language, which were considered '*too academic*' given the '*average perso*n' doesn't know '*what a GPG is or what global commons are*'. ODI Global's second convening of Northern donors (in February 2025) found some pushback on global

32 Through the work of the International Forum on Total Official Support for Sustainable Development (TOSSD) and the related metric, there are efforts to fill this gap (OECD, 2023a). TOSSD is designed to monitor all official resources flowing into developing countries for their sustainable development, but also private resources mobilised through official means. It also measures contributions to International Public Goods. The G20 Development Working Group has the provision of GPGs on its agenda, and efforts continue to create a more accurate mechanism to measure each state's contributions (G20 South Africa, n.d.).

public goods '*in a context of implosion of the multilateral system*' and of the need to '*focus on the most vulnerable affected by cuts*'.

4.3 Critical narratives

While the narratives discussed above centre on different justifications for ODA spending, other more negative narratives focus on the aid system itself, and questions about its future. Many of these narratives do not presuppose that the continuation of development cooperation – in part or at all – is a given.

4.3.1 Wasteful spending and inefficiency

In the context of fiscal pressures and rising populism, ODA has increasingly been viewed as a legitimate target for criticism on the grounds of wastefulness and inefficiency. This critique is particularly characteristic of figures on the far right, who dispute the basic principle of development aid, consistently raise corruption as a major issue, oppose any form of budget support and call for aid spending to be redirected to the national level (and spent on their 'own' people), or tied to promoting domestic interests abroad (Faure, 2014; Hackenesch et al., 2022). This narrative often treats ODA as a proxy for wider 'culture war' issues and broader distrust in European governments, who are accused of wasting public funds at the expense of their own people. This narrative often capitalises on examples of development projects that are considered particularly wasteful, and several interviewees pointed to a BMZ-funded bike path in Peru that had prompted public outcry in the German media. One researcher explained how stories like this make '*a mockery of ODA*', making it '*sound silly … people will think "I don't know anything about how we spend aid but this sounds ridiculous*"'.

Several stakeholders interviewed pointed out that '*the narrative "charity begins at home" has really taken root*' in national debates. Such narratives accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, when far-right parties in Germany and Belgium, for example, advocated for aid funds to be redirected to help domestic populations (Hackenesch et al., 2022). Far-right parties were considered by respondents to have also indirectly influenced the overall tone of national political debate on ODA spending, with similar themes picked up by mainstream politicians seeking to win back voters, particularly as a perceived binary between ODA and defence spending has emerged (see Section 5).

Far-right parties have cast specific parts of ODA spending as the most egregiously wasteful. They generally express strong scepticism of climate policies, dispute the rationale for supporting climate adaptation and mitigation, and propagate very polarising narratives around climate, framing it as an issue for the 'cosmopolitan elite' rather than 'the people' (Lockwood, 2018; Hackenesch et al., 2022).[33] As noted earlier, far-right parties have successfully influenced ODA spending decisions in relation to migration containment; a higher vote and seat share for far-right parties is also associated with reduced aid spending on climate adaptation and mitigation (Hackenesch et al., 2022). Other areas of ODA attacked by far-right

33 Lockwood (2018) explains that this framing combines the far right's core ideological values such as nationalism and anti-elitism alongside typical suspicion of scientists, aggravated by the complexity of climate science and the prominent role of climate scientists and environmentalists in climate policy. He finds this ideological explanation more persuasive than the structural 'left-behind' explanation for far-right narratives on climate.

parties include programmes focused on gender and LGBTQIA+ inclusion, in line with wider anti-gender ideological values.

While taking a very different form, narratives from actors within the development sector have sometimes found some common ground with themes picked up by the far right. Interviewees from bilateral donors, stakeholders from partner countries and development organisations focused on inefficiencies in ODA spending, some pointing to a lack of evidence of impact and a general feeling that, despite decades of investment, aid has not achieved its goals. Many respondents felt that public scandals around specific aid projects reflected valid questions about how public funds were being spent. One analyst from a partner country reflected:

> *If they* [*the European public*] *knew how* [*aid*] *money was spent, I think they would ask more questions than they do now. If they're worried about a bike path in Peru … ask what share of the money leaves Europe? What share is paying staff in international organisations?*

Many of these sentiments are mirrored by more sympathetic stakeholders from the centre-right, who, while supportive of some aid spending, highlight shortcomings such as '*the lack of effectiveness*' or the fact that aid spending is '*very untransparent from the voter's perspective*'.

4.3.2 Unequal and neo-colonial power dynamics

Another key critique of ODA spending focuses on unequal and neo-colonial power dynamics embedded in ODA. This narrative is particularly prominent among stakeholders from aid-recipient countries, but is also echoed in critiques of aid across European political parties, bilateral donors and from within the development sector. Opalo (2025a; 2025b) highlights strongly aspects such as aid dependency, and the fact that aid has been a pretext for interference in low-income countries. Aid dependency is well analysed in the aid effectiveness literature (Wu and Bote, 2025) and is highly visible in some sectors such as health, where it has held back the development of national health systems (OECD, 2023b; Watkins et al., 2024). Equally, there is ample evidence of political interference by donors in aid recipient countries,[34] meaning narratives such as these deservedly gain traction. Respondents speaking from the perspective of partner countries were particularly critical of some elements of European ODA spending, such as democracy promotion. The fact that aid systems have enabled a proliferation of vested interests has also formed a key part of the narrative and understanding of aid from the centre-right perspective (Hefele with Crooks, 2024).

Other commentators have highlighted that development cooperation models are both highly intrusive (Simons, 2025) and have been used as a tool for geopolitical control, particularly to preserve the status quo related to mineral extraction (Gathara, 2025). The Paris Principles

34 Faye and Niehaus (2012) find that donors use bilateral aid to influence elections, with aid increasing during election years in aid-recipient countries if administrations are closely aligned with the donor (and decreasing in election years when administrations are less aligned). No impact is found when aid flows to non-government entities are analysed in the same way.

on Aid Effectiveness sought to address these problems, but their implementation has mostly failed for a variety of reasons (Lundsgaarde and Engberg-Pedersen, 2019). Foreign aid's historical roots mean it is inevitably tied to the paternalistic attitudes of colonialism, with the pervasive narrative of charity seen as perpetuating 'a diminishing and degrading view of Africa' (Lopes, 2024: 40).

Ultimately, the major shortcoming of aid – and the aspect that drives most disappointment – is that, in most cases, it has not led to structural economic transformation (Opalo, 2025b). Governments in low- and middle-income countries are looking for cooperation to support their own industrialisation agendas. In this context, it is more often trade policies, global tax rules and the design of the international financial architecture, as well as cooperation on research and technology transfer, that are seen as potentially transformative.

4.4 Stakeholder conclusions regarding the future of aid

4.4.1 Pragmatic acceptance in a difficult context

Our consultation found many stakeholders feeling that '*the traditional way of thinking of aid – it's over – we're moving to a new era*'. This perception was widely held, with both a '*sense the writing is on the wall*' and that '*nobody will fight for ODA*'. It was also clear from our consultation that there has been very little pushback against this position. Instead, there is a feeling of '*pragmatic acceptance*' regarding the direction of travel within donor institutions themselves, certainly '*on the bilateral side*', but also within EU institutions.

Clearly, the failure of aid to produce structural transformation across multiple geographies – and criticism of aid from partner countries themselves – is a major element. However, stakeholders also agreed that budget cuts are a result of a particular political context that has been building for a while. This is not because the aid industry (and its advocates) has not been good at telling the story of the impact of aid. Rather, a complex set of contextual factors have led to this juncture, including, critically, austerity and declining living standards in Europe. Stakeholders also highlighted a long list of other drivers, from geopolitical fragmentation to increasing competition and migration; as noted earlier, it is certainly not public dissatisfaction with aid that is driving cuts.

4.4.2 A 'no aid' narrative

The implications of this shift are significant, with various competing narratives emerging reflecting diverging views of what the future of aid should look like. First is a 'no aid' narrative, shared both by far-right actors and some stakeholders from partner countries, though with vastly different motivations. Some stakeholders in partner countries put forward a future-looking narrative that aid recipients' interests could be better served through other forms of bilateral cooperation between governments, with aid an unnecessary distraction to economic foreign policy and partnerships.

4.4.3 A 're-imagine (and simplify)' narrative

The second (majority) narrative sees a future for ODA spending, but one where it is fundamentally reimagined. There was a clear sense that donors will '*need to do less with less and do it better*' as part of a '*simplification agenda*'. There was also a recognition that this means there is '*a need to deploy ODA strategically … for the most vulnerable contexts – LDCs, fragile countries*', and a clear

warning that the EU '*really takes a major risk*' if it ignores fragility work in areas like the Sahel. This finding also emerged from ODI Global's 'Donors in a post-aid world' series; a 'back to basics' approach, in which ODA is 're-focused on its original purpose and definition – to help the most marginalised in the least developed and most fragile countries' is one of the three key policy rationales identified for aid (Aly et al., 2024). From a centre-right perspective, the Martens Centre proposes the following aspects as critical to a forward-looking discourse and policy around aid: limitation,[35] subsidiarity[36] and conditionality, with aid provided in the mutual interest with the acceptance of conditions by both sides (Hefele with Crooks, 2024).[37]

4.4.4 Looking beyond traditional aid systems and the ODA mindset

There are clearly opportunities for a new paradigm. Many stakeholders cautioned against remaining caught in traditional aid systems and budget thinking, and encouraged the development of narratives that help move us beyond aid: '*There's a much bigger political game afoot and ODA is a tiny part of that. I think we need to let go*';

> *The worst thing that can happen is if we remain in a development bubble only talking about levels of ODA. We would miss what is happening all around it. Not approaching common goods or common bads; if we don't work together in a meaningful way we are all going to suffer significantly.*

Rethinking aid in line with the EU's new strategic agenda also prompted the reflection that we need '*to see development as more horizontal, a cross-cutting way of thinking rather than a political silo*'. This clearly also has budget implications, as other interviewees pointed out:

> *We need to separate the discussion on budget cuts from the one on looking for a new paradigm... There is a need to rethink where the money for international cooperation comes from, moving away from the ODA mindset and the DAC rules.*

Finance sector stakeholders concurred:

> *We don't look negatively at a more flexible concept of development. And the line between development and competitiveness is not that wide. Developing countries want investment ... Levels of ODA can be maintained, even increased, if the concept of ODA is viewed with more flexibility.*

4.4.5 Embracing mutual interest partnerships

Many stakeholders are ready to embrace the concepts of '*mutual interests, mutual benefits*' and a new partnerships-oriented agenda, a framing which was also seen as having strong traction in ODI Global's 'Donors in a post-aid world' dialogues (Aly et al., 2024). Leaders in aid-recipient countries have also highlighted the potential they see in reorienting future cooperation around

---

35 This is proposed due to the 'deep mistrust and rejection of (allegedly) comprehensive, catch-all solutions' that characterises conservative thinking (Hefele with Crooks, 2024: 10).

36 This is a core concept of Christian Democracy. It implies both 'helping people to help themselves' and ensuring that EU and national development policies have specific competencies and objectives that are complementary.

37 This refers to 'the mutual agreement in development partnerships to adhere to basic values, such as human rights, transparency or gender equality', a principle in line with the EU's view of itself as a values-based donor and partner (Hefele with Crooks, 2024: 13).

'shared prosperity and mutual benefit', noting the opportunity to align aid strategically, both with partner countries' needs and donors' national interests[38] (Custer et al., 2025). The advice was to '*start imagining what kind of partnerships and collaborations exist outside of traditional ODA*'. While we may be moving into an area where the nature and quality of external cooperation depends less on the aid system (and DAC rules governing ODA), this does not mean the logic of ODA is lost. As one interviewee put it:

> *Funding partnerships and engagements in the logic of ODA – building from partner needs, priorities, because we know it is also good for us – it will help us to find political agreements in areas where we do have interests.*

4.4.6 The need for EU leadership to forge a new consensus

There was also a view that the EU needs to do more to forge this new consensus: '*within the EU we don't think that discussion is taking place right now*'. Another interviewee felt the '*conversation is more advanced among some of the bilaterals*'. While there was a strong desire for the EU to have these discussions within its institutions and with Member States, there was also trepidation because '*we are not at the pinnacle of global cooperation … Everyone wants something new, but is now the moment for that?*'.

The EU is in a strong position to develop deep and constructive partnerships – not least because of its '*track record in how it helps its periphery catch up with the core*'. Researchers have noted that the EU's Structural and Investment Funds – which operate on the principle of long-term convergence in living standards and with an emphasis on mutual interest and collective benefit – offer significant conceptual lessons and operational tools for reframing the EU's international cooperation, though little connection has typically been made between these internal and external investments and instruments (Glennie and Hurley, forthcoming).

Fortunately, this is a moment of historic levels of approval for the EU from its citizens, with the highest level of trust in EU institutions recorded in almost 20 years (Fortuna, 2025). The political landscape is equally conducive for the EU to develop ambitious partnerships and an external action agenda for the future. This is a strong foundation for the EU to exert more leadership in this area.

---

38 The Listening to Leaders surveys with leaders in aid-recipient countries reveal a preference to safeguard multilateral venues (as traditional bilaterals cut back their aid) and to prioritise policy coherence, with a stronger focus on economic tools such as trade, investment and remittances (Custer et al., 2025).

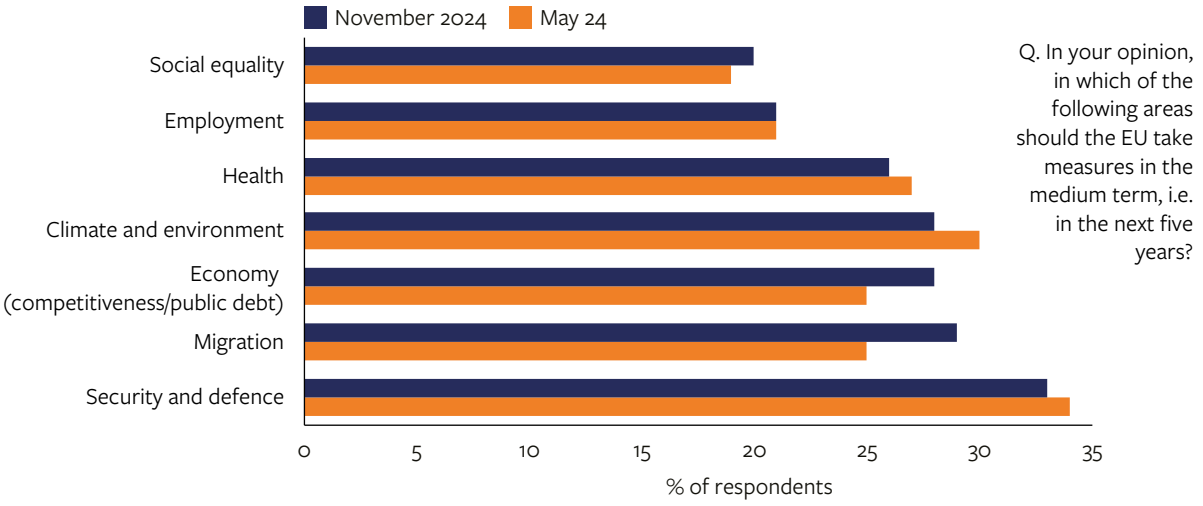
5 The EU's new strategic agenda: narratives, policies and implications

5.1 Introduction

The EU has embraced more transactional narratives around ODA, with this shift directly connected to its new strategic priorities. This section looks at the new agenda in depth, exploring the narratives and policies emerging as a result of these new priorities. It also explores the implications of these new narratives and priorities for ODA and the development community.

The EU's new strategic agenda (2024–2029) was adopted in June 2024 by the European Council. A collective effort led by the President of the European Council, EU leaders agreed that the EU's political priorities fall under three pillars: a free and democratic Europe; a strong and secure Europe; and a prosperous and competitive Europe. With this agreement, EU Member States committed to 'strengthen their competitiveness … tackle the challenges of migration … take the necessary responsibility for our security and defence … and become more influential in the world' (European Council, n.d.: 2). Eurobarometer data illustrates that – at least in headline terms – these priorities largely overlap with citizens' preferences. Figure 8 shows that security and defence currently command most support, followed by migration and the economy/competitiveness (European Commission, 2024e). Citizens also rate climate/environment and health as issues that should be a high priority for EU action.

Figure 8 Public priorities for EU action in the next five years



Note: This is a snapshot of the full data. Issues that received less than 20% in the prioritisation scale – such as democracy, agriculture and digital technologies – are not reported here.

Source: European Commission (2024d)

Delivering aid in line with the EU's own interests is not a new concept. It is already a well-established approach in the area of migration, with the objective of stemming migration particularly embedded into bilateral donors' and the EU's cooperation policies. However, beyond this area stakeholders consulted felt it was not entirely clear how EU aid could be delivered in order to support the EU's new strategic agenda, and what this might mean in practice. There was a general feeling that there is '*little thinking on that*'. Some areas are more intuitive than others; many stakeholders were comfortable making connections between development cooperation and competitiveness, for example. At the same time, some interviewees noted that '*the agendas are quite conflicting*'. For example, looking for commercial returns drives policy and efforts in one direction, whereas looking to stem migration would mean working in countries in crisis. There are also direct contradictions, most notably perhaps between migration and competitiveness. The full implications are explored in this section.

5.2 Aid and migration

5.2.1 Narratives related to migration

The narrative around migration has changed significantly since Europe's so-called 'migration crisis' in 2015. While tackling the root causes of migration through development and humanitarian aid was the broad framing adopted then, the focus now is more on preventing irregular migration and achieving the return of third-country nationals to their origin countries (Kumar et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2025). Most European policy-makers frame migration as a problem to be tackled or a crisis to be addressed, with more positive aspects around migration's well-evidenced contribution to development[39] or the need for migrant workers to address Europe's chronic labour shortages[40] far less prominent. This is reflected in the manifestos of parties in the European Parliament, though some parties from the centre and left focus on the opportunities linked to migration (see Box 6).

Hostility towards immigration is common across Member States. Narratives emphasise crime and security, economic threats, cultural differences and potential abuse of the welfare system as a result of migration, with outright racism and Islamophobia sometimes a feature.[41] There are exceptions – such as Ireland, Portugal and Spain – where mainstream parties have typically sought to maintain more balanced narratives, generally due to a recognition of the important economic contributions migrants are making (Kumar and Faures, 2021; Kumar and Donoghue, 2023; Mazzilli and Lowe, 2023; Kumar, 2024c). Narratives around Ukrainian refugees in Europe are another exception, with the political narrative very much one of solidarity and welcome (boosted by the framework offered by the Temporary Protection Directive), though with increasing signs of compassion fatigue among the public in countries such as Poland (Hargrave et al., 2024). In the main, migration has become a highly politicised and contested policy issue across Europe (Lauwers et al., 2021; Hackenesch et al., 2022).

---

39 See for example Foresti and Hagen-Zanker (2018).

40 Unemployment rates are very low across the EU and vacancy rates have reached historically high levels. Sectors of particular concern include construction, information and communications technology (ICT) and health and long-term care, for which labour shortages have become a persistent feature (ELA and EURES, 2024).

41 For country studies that look at this in Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Greece and Hungary see Holloway et al. (2021); Bailey-Morley and Kumar (2022); Hargrave et al. (2022); Bailey-Morley and Lowe (2023); Gray Meral and Kumar (2025).

Box 6 Migration in the manifestos of the parties in the European Parliament

A significant group (four out of 11 party blocs) mention development only in relation to the root causes of migration. The European People's Party (EPP), which has the largest share (25%) of seats, is explicit that development aid, visa policies, new trade agreements and relevant EU policies, instruments and tools, must be contingent on the cooperation of third countries on the return and readmission of their nationals (Ukraine is excluded). Most party groups, except those on the left/far-left, also emphasise the need to strengthen Europe's external borders and cooperate with other countries for migration management. For the far-right (PfE and ESN), migration is framed as an existential threat to European identity and values. While six out of 11 party groups support legal pathways, support for the concept from more centrist parties is more qualified. Overall, the main distinction is between those on the right (centre- to far-right) that mainly prioritise controlling borders above all else (PfE, EPP, ECR, ESN) and those from the centre and left, who focus on opportunities linked to migration, either (for those on the left) as a sole focus, or (for the centre/centre-left) as a dual priority (See Appendix 1).

5.2.2 Implications for policy

At the EU level, the impact on policy and spending is clear, with the creation of the EU Trust Fund for Africa an early example, followed by the inclusion of migration and border management as a specific heading in the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021–2027 (as discussed in Section 2). Similarly major impacts on policy can be seen in bilateral aid programmes in Member States.[42] However, as noted by one bilateral donor, making aid spending conditional on accepting returns – and discussions around extending such conditionalities into trade policy – have also been seen by some Member States '*as something controversial*', not least because of the substantial risk of negative economic impacts.[43]

There is also concern about the design of policy in this area and the effectiveness of migration-related aid. The 'root causes' framing, central to the original narrative, is seen as unclear and

42 The Netherlands' new development policy frames aid solely around the national interest, defined as relating to migration, security and trade. Sweden's new strategy highlights four new thematic priorities, one of which is migration. Countries with less well-established aid programmes are similar. In the Slovak Republic, for example, investments to counter irregular migration and address the root causes of migration drive SlovakAid interventions in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa (Chmiel et al., 2023).

43 Negative conditionalities around trade entail both legal and financial risks and could cause significant economic harm (particularly to countries most exposed to the threat of withdrawal of preferential access to EU markets, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan), with negative implications for European multinational firms as well (Meredith and Kumar, 2023).

unhelpful (Hagen-Zanker and Carling, 2023).[44] It also clashes significantly with the weight of evidence in this area given that, if anything, economic growth and development are associated with rising emigration.[45] Some aid investments do have short-term impacts, though it is unclear to what extent these are replicable across contexts. For example, a study of World Bank projects finds that foreign aid projects reduce migration aspirations, and asylum-seeker flows, in the short term; however, in the longer term, improvements in individual welfare still result in higher levels of migration to high-income countries (Fuchs et al., 2023). The short-term reduction in migration aspirations is also not replicated in fragile sub-Saharan African contexts (ibid.). Similarly, a randomised control trial in Gambia, looking at the impact of a donor-funded programme providing training and support to participants to start or grow a business, found that, while self-sufficiency improved and migration aspirations reduced in the short term, the effects waned six months after the project ended (Simon et al., 2024). Researchers have also found that, while aid can induce recipient governments to accept the return of their citizens, there is no evidence that it can reduce refugee outflows (or flows to donor countries) in the short term (though there may be lagged long-term effects) (Dreher et al., 2019; Dreher et al., 2024). The credibility of this narrative, therefore, remains in question, as noted by one interviewee: '*The logic for that* [*the root causes approach*] *has been debunked. So there is consensus, but it's a misguided consensus in terms of effectiveness*'. A centre-right commentator reflected:

> *It's a big mistake if we talk about migration. The efforts to think we can change the tide by stepping up development cooperation. This phenomenon is much more complex and we can only partially influence it. It's come to the limits of a purely transactional approach.*

While evidence regarding the effectiveness of migration-related aid interventions is at best mixed, there are grave concerns about the EU's focus on border control and migration management. Human rights violations have been documented at the EU's borders (where pushbacks of migrants are now widespread) as well as at sea and along land routes from the East and Horn of Africa and West Africa to the Mediterranean; there is also mounting evidence of the EU's direct complicity in these violations given its financing role (see Kumar et al., 2024 for a review of evidence in this area).

5.2.3 Contestation and convergence

There has been opposition to narratives and policies that focus heavily on control, deterrence and return. The decision in the European Parliament in 2017 that development assistance is provided in exchange for collaboration on border and migration controls was heavily criticised as a

44 While the phrase itself lacks definition, researchers have found that some hardships that could be classified as 'root causes' do drive migration aspirations, though others do not. Moreover, many factors which influence migration are outside of policymakers' control. There is also a lack of evidence that efforts to address 'root causes' can lead to the kind of large-scale transformation necessary to reshape migration aspirations (Hagen-Zanker and Carling, 2023; Vargas Silva et al., 2023).

45 There is robust evidence that emigration increases as countries grow economically until reaching an income level of roughly $10,000 gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (purchasing power parity (PPP)) (Clemens, 2020). Even with highly successful interventions to improve economic growth and youth employment rates, it would likely take more than a generation of development to reverse the trend of increasing emigration rates (Carling, 2017; Clemens and Postel, 2018).

'perverse use of development funds' (Raunio and Wagner, 2021: 14). There were also concerns that the EU was ignoring its obligations in relation to international protection (ibid.). Several parties in Parliament have emphasised the need to end violent or securitised migration policies in their current (2024) manifestos.

For some stakeholders, the 'preventive' view that underdevelopment leads to migration has enabled advocacy for more 'traditional aid' (Lauwers et al., 2021). This can be contrasted to the 'restrictive' view, which emphasises that (irregular) migration leads to underdevelopment and justifies a focus on restrictive migration and migration-oriented development policies. Lauwers et al. (2022) argue that these are two sides of the same coin, given the first viewpoint is ambiguous on how restrictive migration policy should be and the second allows for a continuation of aid (as long as it is linked to restrictive migration governance). As such, these narratives are not incompatible. This has allowed for compromise between centre-left and centre-right European parties. This was described by one interviewee as '*a Faustian bargain between the development community and those pushing migration control*'; the desire to adopt a narrative that supports traditional development aid has inadvertently legitimised restrictive and harmful policies.

5.2.4 A secondary migration narrative

The EU maintains a secondary narrative around legal pathways for labour immigration, particularly for those deemed 'highly skilled'. The European Commission (2023a) has made clear its concern that labour and skills shortages will undermine the green and digital transition and weaken the EU's competitiveness and public service delivery, and that labour immigration is part of the solution to this problem. However, while the Commission maintains legal pathways as part of its 'offer' to third countries (particularly with 'Talent Partnership' countries),[46] there are limitations in practice, including because Member States have primary competence in relation to labour immigration. However, even in its areas of competence the Commission's operational and investment choices do not significantly prioritise labour pathways, particularly compared to the very substantial funding allocated to border security and migration management (Kumar, 2024a). While this is an important, parallel narrative and one which is consequential for private sector audiences and partner countries, the focus on security takes precedence over labour mobility concerns (von der Leyen, 2024).

5.2.5 Migration narratives and mutually beneficial partnerships

A particular challenge is that narratives in this area diverge significantly between European and partner countries. While the EU emphasises control, security, unwanted migration and the importance of returns, African governments typically emphasise the developmental benefits of remittances and other contributions from the African diaspora, as well as the need for

46 Talent Partnerships aim to expand opportunities for legal migration from non-EU citizens and are designed under a broad, long-term framework of cooperation on migration management (European Commission, 2022a). The first Talent Partnerships were launched with Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh. Negotiations have progressed slowly and it remains unclear to what extent legal pathways will actually be expanded or created under these processes, and crucially whether mobility opportunities will be limited to the highly skilled and short-term seasonal work, another factor which would significantly affect the scope of these initiatives (de Lange et al., 2022; Kumar, 2024a).

strengthened cooperation to promote the free movement of people on the African continent (Kumar et al., 2024). Abimbola (2023) points out that even the narrative that supports labour mobility is one-sided: framed as attractive to African countries where youth employment is a challenge, but with little mention of the EU's need for these workers to fill labour and skills shortages. As one bilateral donor respondent put it: '*We need migrants. Demographic figures and trends tell the whole story … We need strategic partnerships with those countries, established legal migration pathways*'.

Essentially, European narratives on migration are not aligned with Europe's self-interest, or with the interests of African governments, undermining the emerging narrative of 'mutual benefit' in partnerships. Stakeholders noted this as a particularly problematic and thorny area. One stakeholder from an EU Member State commented:

> *Europe is putting too much focus on border control, but not on legal pathways, where is the mutual benefit in that?*

Another stakeholder from a partner country reflected:

> *It is presented by the EU and implementers as supporting* [*my country*]. *But in reality they're not doing it to help … it's very obvious.*

There was a feeling that the EU does not '*understand what it wants to do*' on migration, and is simply seeking to appeal to an electorate that has been '*led astray by populist parties*'.

5.3 Aid and defence

5.3.1 Narratives related to defence

The EU sees defence almost exclusively through the lens of Ukraine and the threat from Russia. Its focus on defence has been increasing since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Sabatino and Lawrenson, 2025). However, this accelerated significantly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which has prompted a strong narrative of solidarity, accompanied by significant funding for defence equipment and other support (ibid.). The European Commission has consistently emphasised Russia's invasion as an unjustified war of aggression and stressed the EU's unwavering solidarity with Ukraine – as well as the core commitment that the EU will provide comprehensive political, financial, military and humanitarian support (European Commission, n.d.c; European Commission, 2024a).[47] Russia's actions – together with increasing unpredictability in US policy – means there is singular clarity around a narrative that 'Europe now stands alone' and must 'take its own defence seriously' (de Vries, 2025: n.p.).

5.3.2 Implications for policy and spending

These developments have generated significant impetus for the EU to increase defence budgets

47 Within the European Parliament the consensus on support for Ukraine is almost unanimous, with the exception of two far-right parties, PfE and the ESN, whose manifestos do not mention Ukraine at all. However, the level of support and focus do differ, with some parties putting more emphasis on aspects related to humanitarian aid or reconstruction.

and accelerate defence investments (Sabatino and Lawrenson, 2025). The region's first-ever defence-industrial strategy was published in March 2024 (European Commission, 2024a). The EU has committed to building a European Defence Union, which will entail upgrading European armed forces, strengthening Europe's technological and industrial base for defence and creating a single market for the defence industry to rapidly scale up defence production (Sabatino, 2025). The narrative on defence has a clear sense of urgency, with the new Commissioner on Defence and Space talking in terms of a 'big bang' approach (ibid.).

Member States are also taking action, most notably Germany, which spent €90 billion on defence last year (and has abandoned its strict fiscal rule in order to increase defence spending)[48] (Nilsson, 2025). Other major spenders in Europe include the UK, France, Italy and Poland, with Poland now the 15th largest defence spender globally (IISS, 2025). While Trump has called for NATO members to raise their defence spending to 5% of GDP, this would take 10 years for European NATO members, based on the 2024 rate of growth, and is likely unfeasible for most countries (McGerty and Dewey, 2025).

There is strong public support for the EU to focus on security and defence (European Commission, 2024b). However, this does not mean this is an easy narrative to sustain, particularly if the message is that rearmament is expensive and financial sacrifices must be made (de Vries, 2025). De Vries (2025) warns that years of cuts affecting public services combined with high defence spending may fuel popular discontent and lead to further gains for populist parties. However, stakeholders interviewed for this research noted that there has been no pushback on raising the defence spending target so far, and that the public believes there is a threat, something that '*does not work with the ODA budget in the same way*'.

5.3.3 The potential for combined aid and defence narratives

A key aspect that is often missing from European narratives on defence is that aid and defence go hand in hand, given conflict risks are higher in poorer countries (Mueller et al., 2024). In light of the economic costs of conflict, there are significant returns to investment in conflict prevention policies. According to the IMF, these are as high as $103 per $1 spent on prevention in countries with recent violence, with lower (but still impressive) returns of between $26 to $75 per $1 spent on prevention in countries that have not suffered recently from violence (ibid.). There is also evidence that peacekeeping operations are effective (and cost-effective).[49] Peacekeeping has been shown to substantially shorten the duration of conflict, de-escalate conflict (and reduce the intensity of violence against civilians), decrease the risk that conflicts spread from one country to another, and increase the durability of peace following conflict (Hegre et al., 2015).

---

48 The European Commission has also proposed exempting defence spending from its fiscal rules (Dubois, 2025).

49 While peacekeeping operations have become more expensive since the late 1990s, this is because there has been both a substantial increase in deployment and because peacekeeping mandates now include robust enforcement mandates to ensure the protection of civilians from mass violence. A more robust mandate translates to a higher cost. Still, UN peacekeeping operations are considered cost-effective, with the average intervention costing $3.2 billion over its lifetime, generally well below the direct economic costs of conflict (estimated at around 10% of a conflict country's GDP) and far less than the full cost once wider costs, including human suffering, are included (Hegre et al., 2015).

The relationship between aid and defence is no secret to the defence community. Krause et al. (2025: n.p.) cite multiple top military leaders, from the US, UK and NATO, succinctly illustrating the common understanding within the military that aid and defence cannot be seen as in competition; development is a key part of a national security strategy, and indeed is 'a lot cheaper than sending soldiers'. This sentiment was echoed by stakeholders from the security community and aid experts interviewed for this research.

5.3.4 A narrative of aid and defence in competition

Regardless of this complementarity, a narrative has emerged in some European contexts that aid and defence spending are in competition (Gulrajani and Pudussery, 2025b). This is most obvious in the UK's recent budget cuts given the government 'articulated such a direct, one-to-one trade-off' between the two areas (ibid: n.p.). What amounts to the biggest aid cut in a generation was made by a Labour government and communicated by a Foreign Office Minister who has formerly been an employee of Oxfam and a senior advisor in DFID (Chakrabortty, 2025). It was also a policy the far-right Reform party had advocated for during the 2024 election campaign (Paxton, 2025). This 'trade-off' narrative is one that Germany has been more careful to avoid even as it ramps up defence spending (Gulrajani and Pudussery, 2025b). It is uncertain what the future holds given that research shows that countries that meet defence spending targets do not commonly meet aid spending targets (Pudussery and Gulrajani, 2025) (see Box 7).

Box 7 Aid and defence spending

There is significant overlap in the membership of the DAC, the EU and NATO, with 20 countries included in all three groups.[50] NATO members have committed to meeting a spending target of 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defence. DAC members have pledged to spend 0.7% of GNI on ODA.

Across the EU, but particularly for the 20 countries that are members of all three groupings, average defence-to-GDP spending has been rising in recent years, from 1.27% of GDP to 1.75% from 2018 to 2023 (the average is 2.32% for all DAC members of NATO in 2023). Defence spending has been increasing both as a percentage of GDP and in absolute terms across the EU; in 2023, EU countries grew their defence budgets by 21%. At the same time, the ODA spend across the EU has been stagnating and remains far below target (see Figure 9).

ODI Global research, looking at the period 2018–2023, has found that typically countries that meet their defence spending target do not commonly meet their aid spending target. Figure 10 shows updated data for 2024, with the same finding visible. Growth scenarios in defence spending are therefore likely to have negative consequences for allocations to ODA.

50 Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Figure 9 Global defence and aid targets of EU, DAC and NATO members

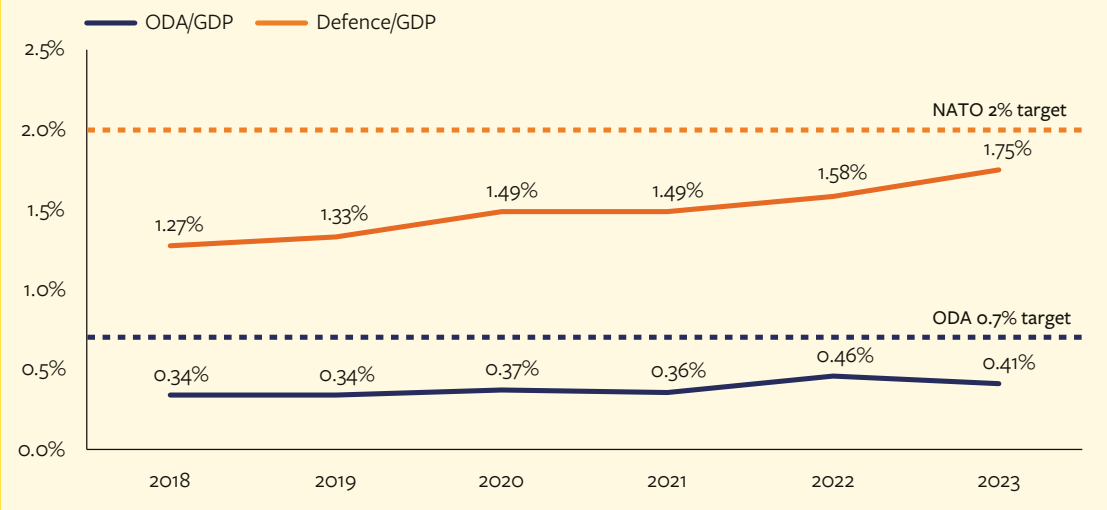
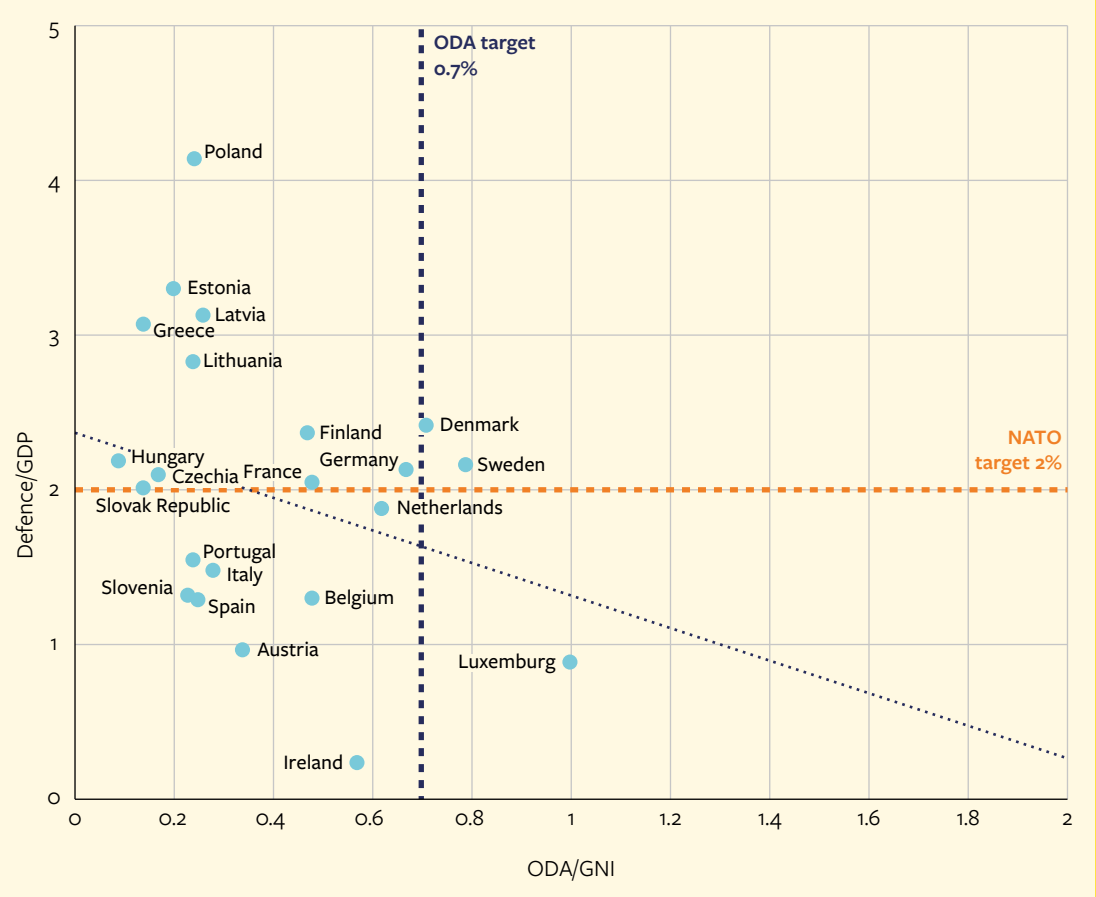


Figure 10 EU-DAC members' defence and aid spending, 2024



Note: The EU's target for ODA/GNI spending for countries that joined the EU in 2004 is 0.33% (Chmiel et al., 2023). Many of the countries that meet the NATO target are in this group.

Source: Pudussery and Gulrajani (2025).

5.3.5 The opportunity to expand definitions of defence spending

Stakeholders interviewed for this research also pointed to the possibility that the defence spending target could lead to some aid spending potentially being reclassified as defence spending. This is not necessarily an unusual proposition: in the UK, when defence spending was low and aid spending protected, it was suggested that aid spending should be redirected to defence, for instance because Royal Navy ships routinely deliver relief assistance (Navy Lookout, 2015; 2017). The expectation that countries may start 'gaming defence spending accounting' has also been raised by researchers, though it would require foreign aid spending to meet the strict thresholds established by NATO's defence accounting systems (Gulrajani and Pudussery, 2025b: n.p.). This is not to say that defence accounting systems could not be revisited, just as ODA modernisation processes have taken place within the DAC; however, a political process would need to be put in place for this.

Aid experts are now asking whether an expanded definition of defence could encompass climate, health and human security aspects and what risks may be involved by doing so (Gulrajani and Pudussery, 2025b). Similar questions were raised by stakeholders consulted for this research. One bilateral donor representative suggested that,

> *The work we do in Sahel there also aspects in it that have to do with security in Europe… There is a pressure for European countries to reach 2% of GDP in defence – nobody questions that … If you look at the threats, it would justify, you could imagine a percentage of this 2% used for international cooperation.*

A stakeholder from the security sector felt there might be a '*push to make it allowable that climate change adaptation be considered as a defence investment*'.

The fact that definitions could be widened may gain political traction. This could be due to straightforward budget difficulties in meeting a challenging spending target, with governments tempted to reclassify capital investments as military expenditure, as has been discussed in Belgium regarding investments in roads and bridges (Dubois, 2025). For some, this may be less to do with creative accounting than logistical imperatives; in Germany, the dilapidated state of the transport infrastructure has been identified as a threat to the NATO supply system for military deliveries to Ukraine (Global Euronews, 2024). Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has called for cyber security, anti-terrorism and efforts to combat climate change to qualify as defence spending (Jopson, 2025).

5.3.6 Other implications for the aid community

Interviewees raised various concerns with any approach that brings aid and defence concepts closer together: '*The risk is that you are securitising your development efforts in order to meet NATO targets*'. The clear advice was '*don't call it aid. If through a security lens we need new labels and vocabulary … a fundamental redesign of what we are talking about*.' Several respondents voiced concerns in particular around the military taking over humanitarian space. However, it was also clear that such an approach is considered neither effective nor cost-effective given '*military responses are orders of magnitude more expensive*'. Compared to humanitarian organisations, the military is '*an extremely blunt*

instrument … good at large-scale commodity-based response' but lacking the '*nuance*' and '*expertise*' to respond to complex humanitarian needs. By the same token, bringing aid and defence closer together is not likely to address the pressing challenges facing the humanitarian sector, including the need to focus more on accountability to affected people (Lough and O'Callaghan, 2021).

5.4 Aid, security and global public goods

5.4.1 Security narratives and a global public goods agenda

Notwithstanding the centrality of Ukraine in European narratives around security, the EU's Strategic Compass – the bloc's action plan for defence and security – notes the need for a 'comprehensive concept of security' and recognises that European security interests also lie in other geographies (such as the Western Balkans, the Sahel, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific) (EEAS, 2022: 6). It also notes that security threats are becoming more complex,[51] and gives a great deal of attention to climate change, environmental degradation and natural disasters as key drivers of insecurity within the EU (ibid.). Similarly, NATO's Strategic Concept maintains a broad definition of security, focusing on resilience, human security and hybrid threats and climate change (NATO, 2022). There was broad agreement among the stakeholders interviewed for this research that the concept of security should ideally accommodate the concept of GPGs, with climate and public health frequently mentioned. One bilateral donor representative commented that '*many countries support this GPG discourse*'; another commentator reflected:

> *I do think the global commons objective is the right one for the EU, especially if you consider the EU as a multilateral. Also it's a way of reflecting its own internal ambitions.*

5.4.2 Narrow vs. broad concepts of security

There has been a discernible shift in the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass to focus more heavily on internal aspects than global challenges (EEAS, 2016; 2022). Some stakeholders remarked that the EU is choosing a narrower security lens, driven by concerns over Ukraine and an excessive focus on migration. However, none felt that this was an appropriate starting point. A more comprehensive conceptual framework for security also resonates with the public: More in Common's survey and focus group work finds that the public understand security to encompass both the national and global context, and specific areas of concern such as energy, water and food security (Rajah et al., 2024).

Some interviewees pointed to specific shortcomings with the EU's narrative – i.e. that a security agenda narrowly interpreted as almost solely related to migration, as appears increasingly prevalent, is clearly too simplistic:

> *If it's about security, it has to be about more than what's coming across the national border. That really simplifies the challenges we are facing in an inter-connected world.*

---

51 The so-called 'instrumentalisation of migrants', and the use of tools such as disinformation and mercenaries, or attacks in the cyber sphere or on the high seas, are just a few examples of threat complexity given in the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (EEAS, 2022).

Such a narrow frame is also seen as unwise, given the choice of a migration-security frame as a favoured narrative aligns directly with the far-right discourse.

Security sector stakeholders, alongside the private sector, have actively sought to shape the debate in some countries:

> *What we see for development cooperation is that it is the defence ministry and the private sector that have been speaking out. And they say … we need development in order to keep this stability in the world.*

A broader concept of security, including investing in development cooperation to ensure '*stability, crisis resilience and prevention, and to reduce the cost of the need of crises intervention*', is something '*that all political parties seem to agree on* [*within the European Parliament*] … *when framed with migration and regional stability*'. Message testing in the Netherlands (see Box 2) has highlighted how narratives linking ODA to security in this context resonate with segments of the public including those favouring the populist right.

5.4.3 Climate and security

The EU's narrative on climate and security reflects the consensus among the military and security community that the climate crisis has serious implications for peace and security, including because it exacerbates underlying grievances and conflicts and because some of the most climate-vulnerable locations are also fragile or conflicted-affected states (Brooks et al., 2022; European Parliament, 2022). The International Military Council on Climate and Security has identified climate-related security risks as including water insecurity, the increased likelihood of conflict and the effects of climate change on military infrastructure and operations, as well as the fact that international cooperation may be undermined by the rise of authoritarianism, protectionism and nationalism (European Parliament, 2022). Notable too is how heavily NATO stresses the security implications of climate change, which is seen as a 'threat multiplier' that can exacerbate conflict, fragility and geopolitical competition, as well as posing direct risks to military forces and operations in more extreme conditions (NATO, 2023).[52]

ODI Global research notes that the increasingly popular climate-security narrative is being used by some to imply that climate change drives conflict and insecurity; however, evidence shows that most often it is not climate change driving conflict, but the opposite: insecurity, conflict and fragility increase vulnerabilities to climate shocks (Brooks et al., 2022; Laville and Gore, 2025). As such, there is a risk that climate-security narratives put too much emphasis on the symptoms of the climate crisis, while neglecting the deeper drivers of climate vulnerability and fragility (Brooks et al., 2022; Vazquez, 2024).

From the perspective of EU policy-makers, the importance of addressing climate as a global issue of concern is already well established, including via the European Green Deal (EGD), which commits the EU to reaching climate neutrality by 2050. The EGD also recognises the global dimensions of climate change and aims to both position the EU as a global leader in tackling it, and make 'climate policy an integral part of EU external action – including in security and defence' (European Parliament, 2022: 3). The EU is perceived as having

52 This has led NATO to focus on adaptations to maintain operational effectiveness.

'a credible claim to be leading in the debate' on climate at global level (Abimbola, 2023: 7), a fact recognised by several interviewees.

Although it appears that EU policy-makers would be receptive to narratives crafted around security, GPGs and climate action, some stakeholders felt that '*concerns around climate are going down*' and things are changing in this area:

> *The positive narrative around the climate aspect and its importance is waning both in political leadership and the public. A couple of years ago climate was high, the Green Deal was a high priority in the EU agenda, but current attention to climate has dropped. I don't know why.*

Another respondent reflected that '*the whole climate change discourse is more about energy transition and the term climate as a whole is getting less and less used*,' noting this tilts attention away the poorest countries.

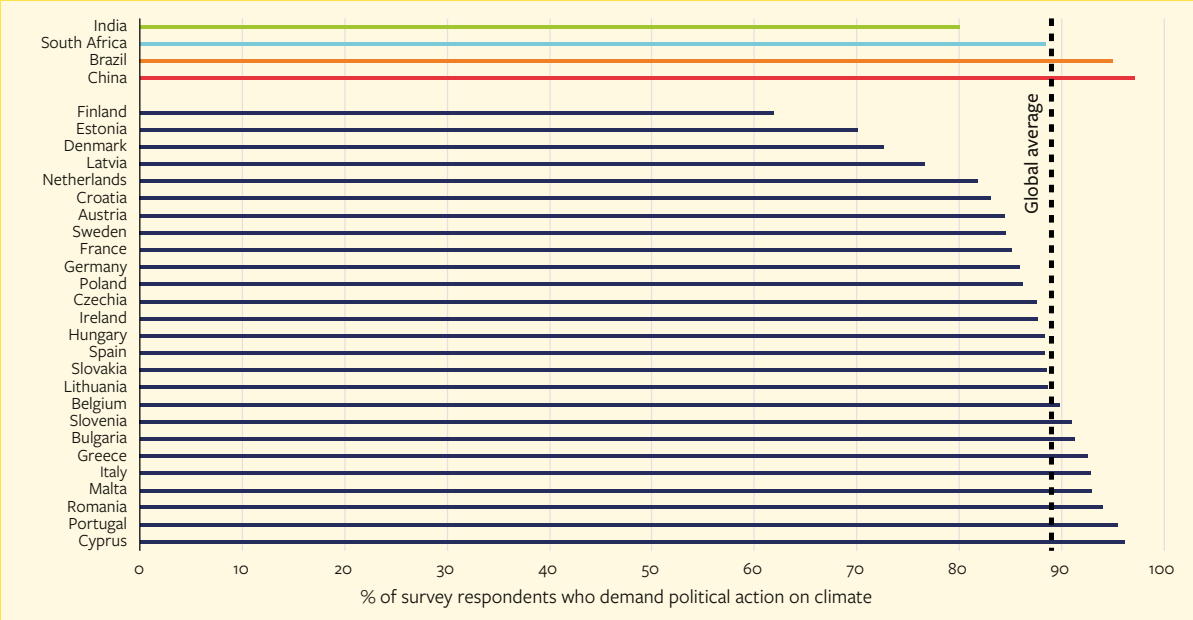
It is worth noting that, while some policy-makers may be less receptive to this narrative, any shift would be far out of step with public opinion. Multiple surveys and studies confirm that public concern related to the climate crisis is extremely high, including within Europe as well as globally, and that there is almost overwhelming public support for climate action (Carrington, 2025) (see Box 8).

Box 8 Public opinion around climate action

A recent survey across 125 countries reveals 'an almost universal global demand' (89%) for intensified political action on climate. Sixty-nine per cent of survey respondents stated they were willing to contribute 1% of their income to fund climate-related measures (Andre et al., 2024), and only 26% are unwilling to contribute anything; support is significantly higher in the least wealthy countries compared to the wealthiest locations, with colder countries showing lower levels of support (as visible across EU Member States) (see Figure 11).

Researchers highlight a perception gap in this area, estimated by Andre et al. (2024) to be 29 percentage points; essentially, people strongly underestimate how many others feel the same way about the urgency of climate action. This pattern holds across all of the 125 countries surveyed, including EU Member States. Similar perception gaps are found in other studies (Carrington, 2025).

Figure 11 The demand for political action on climate change



Note: Luxembourg was not included in the survey. China, Brazil, South Africa and India are included for comparative purposes. Source: Andre et al. (2024)

Carrington (2025) discusses how this misperception also affects politicians, who significantly underestimate the strength of public support for climate measures. National polling typically finds support for climate action high across all political camps (including those who vote for the far right, as evidenced in the UK's election results in 2024 (More in Common, 2024)). Researchers also find that, due to their high threat perception, more conservative audiences strongly favour climate adaptation and resilience investments, such as those addressing flood or drought risks (Rajah et al., 2024). Climate-related ODA passes the public's 'value for money' test more easily than traditional aid (ibid.).

5.4.4 Health and security

There are fears that, in a potentially narrower strategic agenda, public health – usually a key component of the GPG narrative – may be a less visible theme. The EU's Strategic Compass classifies global health crises as security threats, due among other things to their direct impacts on human health and the potential of pandemics to disrupt supply chains and economic security (EEAS, 2022). However, health is mentioned only once in the Compass document. This is surprising

not least given the huge impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on European economies and the EU budget.[53]

Multiple stakeholders interviewed agreed that it is in Europe's interest to have strong partnerships on health '*to avoid the come back [sic] of polio, AIDS – which are threats following the USAID cuts – and Covid-19*'. In addition, respondents felt a narrative focused around global health could gain traction:

> *Covid has changed a lot the public's understanding of global health and how we are all interconnected … From a policy-maker perspective global health definitely has lots of traction still. There are regular outbreaks of new epidemics in … other countries. They regularly remind us of the importance of global health.*

That the security community is highly attuned to health and security dynamics may also mean this agenda remains a priority. As one interviewee explained:

> *There is a military capability piece and there is no question that we want to be able to respond to military attacks. But the other piece is about the stability of our society and that includes energy systems, food systems and medical support. If it breaks down then we cannot provide military security.*

The health-security nexus has also received political attention, as evidenced by the recent call from 11 Health Ministers for pharmaceutical supply chains to be explicitly included in the EU's concept of security (Euronews, 2025). The call was driven by a recognition that Europe depends on Asia for between 60% and 80% of its pharmaceutical supply (and 80–90% of antibiotics), and that this dependency could be turned into a critical vulnerability, given medicine shortages in the EU are already proving difficult (ibid.).

It is also clear that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the EU's understanding of its vulnerabilities. As noted by one interviewee, the pandemic resulted in a significant realisation '*of the need for resilient value chains*', particularly for the pharmaceutical sector, and the EU has made major investments via the Global Gateway in the MAV+ programme, supporting manufacturing and access to vaccines, medicines and health technologies in Africa.[54] The rationale and narrative behind the MAV+ programme goes beyond the security dimensions of public health, to include economic impacts (such as growth and job creation) and the diversification of global value chains, intersecting with the EU's competitiveness agenda (European Commission, n.d.g). There is a clear link between industrialisation and pharmaceutical policies that some experts feel Europe has neglected within its security strategies (Kuiper, 2025). It is also notable that, even with

---

53 Eurozone economies suffered a large contraction in growth in 2020 (6.5%) (Agarwal et al., 2022, citing World Bank data). As noted in Section 2, the EU's financial response to support Member States and rekindle growth post-lockdown has been significant, with around €800 billion made available via the NextGenerationEU recovery fund.

54 This comprehensive Team Europe programme received an initial €1 billion in backing from the EU budget and European development finance institutions (European Commission, 2022b). On the supply side, it provides incentives to de-risk investments into local pharmaceutical and biotech companies, and on the demand side, it helps consolidate demand, facilitates market integration and the use of locally produced goods. It also seeks to improve the enabling environment, supporting MSc and PhD programmes in Biotechnology, developing the supply chain for quality assurance and strengthening the regulatory and supervisory capacity of the newly established African Medicines Agency (AMA) (European Commission, n.d.g; European Commission, 2023b).

the dismantling of USAID and huge reductions in global health programming, the US still looks likely to maintain a small Global Health Security and Diplomacy Bureau. It is very difficult for health security – as a global issue of concern – to slip off the political agenda.

There are also clear commercial benefits for Europe with regard to global health spending. One interviewee pointed out that '*people don't really understand the return on investment for* [*our country*] *... We get more back in terms of what we contribute to the WHO when it comes to providing medicines. And if we're not a big donor then it will be less compelling for the WHO to go for* [*our*] *companies*'.

As pointed out by another interviewee, there are narrative implications that could be exploited:

> *Understanding the narrative of biotech and Europe's ambition to be a biotech superpower and the role Africa plays. And how it can't go in without aid budgets to cushion the process ... These are very useful and interesting areas to explore.*

5.4.5 Water and security

Several interviewees raised the importance of water as a critical part of a security agenda. It is also a thematic focus of strategic importance for some European bilateral donors. One security analyst emphasised that taking a security-led approach to on water programmes would involve a (potentially positive) shift in emphasis to

> *really support approaches that not just improve the technical water-related issues that many countries face, that don't just look at irrigation systems ... but also what's happening right now in terms of local and regional dynamics that's making these issues so volatile.*

The management of water as a global common good is also rising up the international agenda, with the Global Commission on the Economics of Water calling attention to the fact that water is increasingly intertwined with climate change impacts, and with human action now impacting on the hydrological cycle itself (Mazzucato et al., 2023). This is very much a global challenge, not only due to transboundary water flows but also atmospheric moisture pathways and precipitation. The Global Commission forecasts a 40% shortfall in freshwater supply by 2030, with severe shortages likely in some regions (ibid.). There is a significant potential role here for European DFIs (and Team Europe and Global Gateway initiatives) to support the necessary investment in the water sector. One interviewee noted that, in the Netherlands, a focus on food and water tests well with the public – though largely from the perspective of sharing Dutch expertise around the world – resonating with respondents that are both right of centre and more drawn to populist radical right parties. Another interviewee highlighted the impact of '*extreme heat and forest fires*' that have severely '*strained European food systems*' as another area where sharing technical expertise with other countries would be effective, and where narratives around mutual interest and tackling common challenges could gain traction.

5.5 Aid and competitiveness

5.5.1 Narratives related to competitiveness

The EU's focus on competitiveness stems from a concern for productivity growth and workforce depletion: by 2040, the EU's workforce is projected

to shrink by close to 2 million workers each year (European Commission, 2024e). The Draghi report proposes a new industrial strategy with three areas for action: 1) closing the innovation gap with the US and China; 2) developing a joint plan for decarbonisation and competitiveness; and 3) increasing security and reducing dependencies (ibid.). Several aspects stand out. First, Draghi's is a narrative of opportunity – for Europe to take the lead in clean tech,[55] to become more energy secure, and to deliver lower energy prices in Europe. Second, it is clear that Europe is feeling exposed due to its dependence on 'a handful of suppliers for critical raw materials, especially China' at a time when 'demand for these materials is exploding' (ibid.: 7); a similar dependency is identified in digital technologies, particularly chip production. These dependencies are seen as creating opportunities for coercion and potential geopolitical shocks. Core to the narrative is the idea that 'a modern competitiveness agenda must also encompass security' (ibid.: 13).

5.5.2 Implications for policy

The Draghi report has major implications for the EU's internal action, including the need to address challenges due to the fragmentation of the single market and the regulatory burden on business. It has also renewed focus on the EU's own industrial policy, with the new Clean Industrial Deal advancing a 'buy European' rhetoric[56] (Weise, 2025). However, the competitiveness strategy is, in reality, a delicate balancing act between a desire for strategic autonomy and the need for allies and partners in securing Europe's supply chains. The Draghi report recommends that the EU develops its 'resource diplomacy' and invests in critical raw materials (CRM) mining both at home and in third countries, including via the Global Gateway programme.

The EU has numerous CRM partnership agreements[57] and is pursuing new Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships, with the first being negotiated with South Africa. While it remains unclear what aspects might enter into these partnerships, in principle they aim to integrate Global Gateway investments, trade and investment rules, and regulatory cooperation to create resilient, high-value supply chains that benefit both the EU and its partners.

5.5.3 The Global Gateway strategy

The Global Gateway strategy (see Box 9) reflects the wider narrative that competitiveness and economic security go hand in hand, though with far more direct links to the area of development cooperation. It emphasises that the EU wants to 'tackle the most pressing global challenges, from fighting climate change, to improving health systems' (European Commission, n.d.d: n.p.).

As noted by an interviewee, the narrative around the Global Gateway – framing it as *the* solution for the EU to compete for partners in a global

---

55 Europe already has leading companies when it comes to wind turbines and electrolysers (an apparatus that produces hydrogen through a chemical process called electrolysis). For low-carbon fuels (e.g. aviation and maritime transport), the EU currently tops the global rankings (European Commission, 2024f). The EU is also one of the leading producers of heat pumps, a critical net zero technology, and a frontrunner in carbon capture and storage research and development (European Commission and ECORYS, 2025).

56 The Clean Industrial Deal proposes introducing minimum EU content requirements and European preference criteria into EU public procurement to boost demand for EU-made products in strategic sectors (Weise, 2025).

57 To date these are with: Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Greenland, Kazakhstan, Namibia, Norway, Rwanda, Serbia, Ukraine and Zambia.

market – is more strongly welcomed by centre and right-wing parties within the European Parliament than parties on the left, given the formers' more active embrace of a competitiveness agenda within development cooperation. This is particularly the case if aspects such as '*strategic partnerships*', '*countering the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*' and '*ODA as a tool to foster* [*market*] *access*' are framing the discussion. Some civil society stakeholders have welcomed the Global Gateway, seeing opportunities for the development of country-specific solutions to deliver the green transition (European Parliament, 2024). However, there has also been pushback and criticism including because the programme risks diverting funding from development to serve private sector and geopolitical interests and because there may not be enough focus on partner country needs (ibid.).

For some there is regret that the Global Gateway has taken the EU into new, less developmental, areas:

> *The European Consensus on Development … and the Lisbon Treaty obligations are very clear on poverty eradication … that is all lost. We don't hear references to the European Consensus on Development anymore. It's been superseded by Global Gateway.*

From the perspective of EU institutions:

> *Everything is now Global Gateway. It's not just narrative, it is already on the ground. In terms of sector, it has to be fully in line with this new approach. This is very clear. We left public finance management, budget support, all this has been put on the side.*

This significant shift is also interpreted as having '*removed some of the distinctiveness and added value of EU ODA*'.

Box 9 Global Gateway: key areas and approach

There are five key areas for Global Gateway partnerships: digital, climate and energy, transport, health, education and research. The core principles include democratic values, good governance and transparency, and equal partnerships that catalyse private sector investment in areas that are 'green and clean', as well as security-focused (European Commission, n.d.d). To date, the 'climate and energy' theme has been the major focus, with far more projects falling under this category than any other. The EU is seeking to combine opportunities under the Global Gateway with broad political partnerships including discussions around investment, concessional loans and issues such as security and migration (as illustrated by the approach taken with Mauritania and Egypt), hence opening the door to a combined geopolitical and developmental perspective (Bilal and Teevan, 2024).

While initially the Global Gateway focused strongly on the five thematic areas for partnerships, stakeholders noted an attempt to align much more closely with the EU's competitiveness agenda:

> *Now the EU wants to change it more to make it a competitive agenda … through the Global Gateway to increase access to critical raw materials and hydrogen … we already see the pressure coming on trying to use the tools that were supposed to be for development such as the EFSD+ … to promote European private sector interests.*

However, while leveraging private sector investment is critical to the Global Gateway approach, this is also a noted weak spot (Bilal and Teevan, 2024).[58] Several interviewees pointed out that European companies are not engaging enough:

> *They have big budgets … money is not a problem for them but the context is – DRC for example. They [businesses] need governance, progress on taxation, rules on child labour, so you also need to work on those sides. It would be great to have the European private sector say something on the work we do and how it is also in their interest.*

This remains a difficult area in practice. For example, despite a strategic partnership between the EU and Namibia, signed in November 2022, and a Global Gateway investment in CRM, there is no European company presence in Namibia's CRM value chains and the EU has struggled to persuade European companies to participate (Logan, 2024).[59]

5.5.4 Implications for partner countries

From the perspective of potential partner countries, the EU's competitiveness agenda could bring many positives. For example, the EU's CRM agenda offers an opportunity for African countries with deposits of critical minerals including cobalt, manganese, graphite, copper and lithium (UNCTAD, 2024). African countries seek to support their own industrialisation by processing these materials themselves (Abimbola, 2023), breaking free from an extractive model that bypassed domestic value addition and often delivered paltry tax and royalty contributions, as well as causing environmental harm. New strategic partnerships and investments (with high labour and environmental standards, robust production monitoring and well-designed tax policies) delivered as an integral part of the EU's development cooperation can play a key role in supporting these ambitions.

The European Steel and Metal Action Plan opens up the potential for strategic partnerships with third countries through 'investing in partner countries and redefining industrial collaborations to create a more sustainable and resilient steel production ecosystem' (European Commission,

---

58 Bilal and Teevan (2024) have called for more investment in the expertise of EU Delegations to help staff make connections with the private sector.

59 Logan (2024) also notes that the EU has financed geological surveying and a pre-feasibility study for lithium processing and that – given no European companies are present – these activities are likely to mainly benefit other investors (including Chinese firms). Logan concludes that there is a need for 'less traditional development policy' and 'more focus on market economics'.

2025a: 3).[60] These types of partnerships are viewed positively because the shift to low-carbon steelmaking will necessitate a significant supply of green hydrogen and affordable renewable electricity, both of which are lacking in Europe (Karkare and Medinilla, 2024). Certain locations, including Brazil and South Africa, have been identified as critical in helping the world meet the demand for green iron (Bilici et al., 2024),[61] and there is strong potential for the EU to partner with North African countries on green steel production, given their exceptional renewable energy potential, established steel and iron ore production and emerging hydrogen potential (Karkare and Medinilla, 2024).[62] There is also a strong geopolitical case: this would strengthen the EU's Mediterranean links, spur job creation and industrialisation and give North African countries access to 'a greening EU single market' (ibid.). However, this is a complex area; huge technological transformations are required in how iron and steel are being produced, including the type of blast furnaces and energy sources used. Making these sorts of partnerships successful will require political astuteness in negotiating with governments, de-risking policies to facilitate access to finance and joint technology development amongst other aspects (Agora Industry and Wuppertal Institute, 2023; Karkare and Medinilla, 2024).

5.5.5 Opportunities for mutual benefit partnerships

While the mutual benefit opportunities are real, achieving them is not straightforward. Whether these partnerships deliver meaningful transformation will depend on the EU's ability and willingness to balance its economic interests with adequate support for partner countries' own industrialisation aims. Numerous interviewees called attention to the significant difficulty in operationalising the Global Gateway programme and investments to date, as well as concerns around transparency and scrutiny 'to ensure that [these strategic partnerships] are indeed developmental in their goals and cater to the development objectives of the partner countries … In short, the gains on both sides need to be clear' (Abimbola, 2023: 9). The call for transparency is seen as especially relevant to the Global Gateway as the EU

> *… has become really really untransparent. It's so difficult to access data and information … They release a few lines on a Global Gateway project and some indicative amount but we have no idea what is going on.*

One interviewee raised questions about whether partnerships were really achieving the quality of 'mutuality' required, and whether the EU is really '*sitting down with "recipient" countries to actively identify shared interests and negotiating what the offer is on each side*'. Certainly, there are questions over what space there might be

60 While subject to heavy competition, the EU is currently recognised as a leader in relation to green steel and the frontrunner in developing hydrogen-based direct reduced iron (DRI) and scrap-based steelmaking (the preferred new technology for low-emissions steel production) (Choksey et al., 2025).

61 Imports of green iron are important to help Europe avoid expensive subsidies, while reducing the overall costs of European steel production and still maintaining the production of finished steel outputs (including for exports) in Europe (Kakare and Medinilla, 2024).

62 Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Algeria and Mauritania are all candidate countries, with Egypt particularly well placed.

for countries' own industrialisation agendas. For example, the African Union has identified automotives as one of its priority regional value chains, with South Africa a main hub and Morocco producing and exporting vehicles for European markets (Mendez-Parra et al., 2025). However, both countries source few of their components within Africa. Local supplier development is a high priority for many African countries (ibid.), but it is not clear how this might be reflected in new strategic partnerships. This points to the potential limits of a 'mutual interest' narrative. Further, what does *not* get included from an industrialisation perspective is important given Africa's share of industrial minerals production and reserves is not impressive when put into full context globally and given the minerals Africa has in abundance (such as cobalt and manganese) 'tend to be less valuable than those it lacks' (Simons, 2024: n.p.).

5.5.6 Migration and competitiveness: a gap in the narrative

A notable gap in the EU's narratives around competitiveness is migration. The Draghi report recognises that labour and skills shortages will 'act as a drag on the EU's future competitiveness' and notes concerning demographic trends (European Commission, 2024f: 261). A rethink of European skills policies is the main focus of Draghi's proposed solutions, along with efforts to attract high-skilled non-EU nationals via reformed visa options, more streamlined immigration procedures and scholarships to attract students in STEM fields. However, European immigration policies are already heavily focused on attracting highly educated and highly skilled foreign workers, and Member States are improving their policies in this area; rather, it is the lack of legal pathways for mid-skilled workers (especially technical trades) that is *the* glaring gap in European immigration policies (Kumar, 2024a).

A relevant illustration is offered by the battery industry, which the Draghi report cites optimistically as having strong potential for growth. Persistent labour shortages (mainly in the vocationally trained workers that are required) have undermined the development of Europe's battery industry and investments in the European Battery Alliance Academy are insufficient to tackle the problem (McCaffrey and Poitiers, 2024). The high requirement for migrant labour is visible in the growing EV and battery manufacturing industries in Hungary (now the second-largest EV battery producer in Europe after Poland) (IEA, 2024), and is having an impact on immigration policy there (Kumar, 2024b). A more honest narrative that migration is a necessary ingredient for Europe's prosperity and competitiveness is overdue (Kumar, 2024a).

5.6 What risks being overlooked?

Respondents pointed to various perceived losses as the EU moves to align ODA with its strategic agenda. The most frequently mentioned was programmes in areas such as gender equality, rights, LGTBQI+ inclusion and democracy promotion, which were considered unlikely to align with the new priorities. One interviewee, reflecting on ODA-funded programmes related to gender equality, shared their view that '*we are at the end of this agenda. It is very difficult to defend it*'. Less support for NGOs, including for monitoring and advocacy functions, was also noted as a likely loss.

Another concern was the drift away from the EU's character as a values-based donor. As one bilateral donor put it, in trying to '*pretend that we* [*the EU*] *can be like China*' the EU was moving away from its '*fundamentals as a value-based entity*'. At the same time, it is also important to note that the '*exportation of cultural values*' to aid-

recipient countries remains a core critique of the traditional ODA model, particularly from partner countries. Much of the criticism directed towards this perceived loss of added value emanates from within Europe itself, not from recipients of European aid.

More widely, interviewees also raised concerns that the emphasis on the EU's strategic agenda would impact the geographic focus of EU ODA. Pursuing the EU's interests was considered likely to lead to the prioritisation of investments in Ukraine, with more focus also on the EU's neighbourhood and emerging economies (and with inevitably less focus on lower-income countries).

Another significant concern was how investments would be guided between countries depending on which part of the EU's strategic agenda takes precedence, and particularly what this may mean for fragile and conflict-affected states. One stakeholder representing an international humanitarian organisation explained how they felt the EU was '*not interested in conflict-affected settings*', not least due the rise in importance of the Global Gateway strategy. This is a particular worry given the increasing concentration of extreme poverty in fragile and conflict-affected countries, and the vital importance of aid in the delivery of basic government services in these locations (OECD, 2024).[63]

Still, there are opportunities to find complementarities between the new agenda and the rationale for continued aid investments and developmental partnerships. How best to approach this, and which narratives might gain the most traction, is explored in the next section.

---

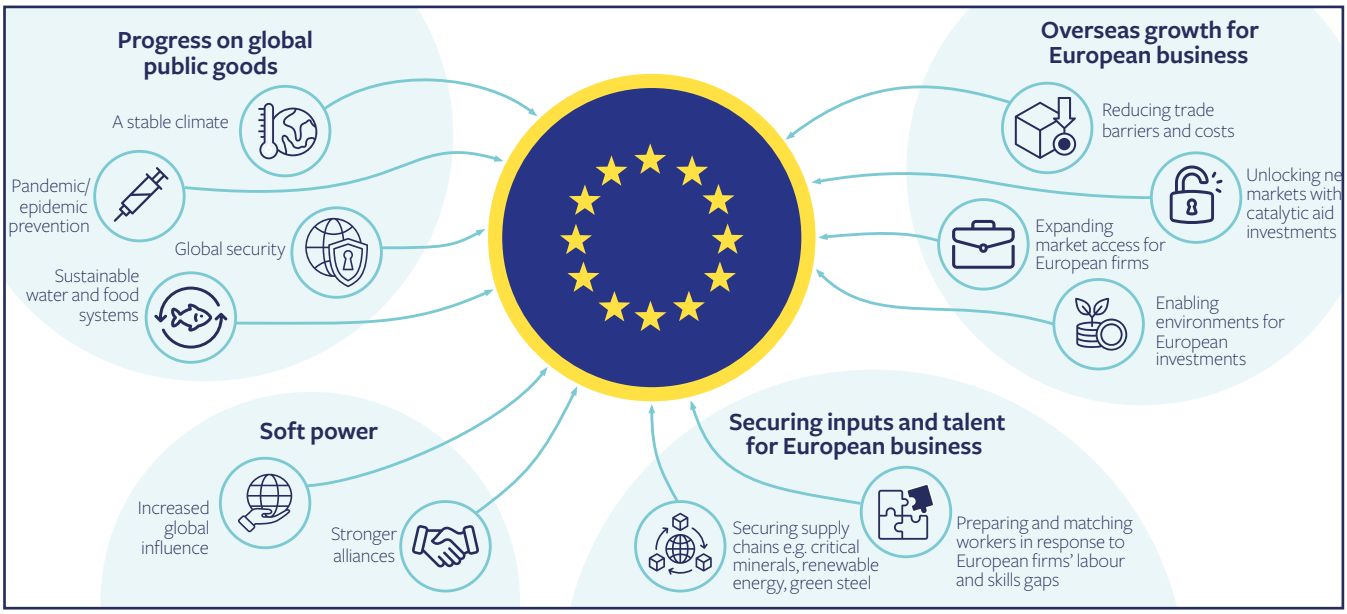
63 40% of global extreme poverty is concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. This is expected to increase to 60% by 2030 (Yusuf et al., 2023).

6 Making a new case for development

In this moment of transition, stakeholders agree we are moving towards a new post-aid paradigm. Business as usual is simply not possible, not least because it is stakeholders from aid-recipient countries who are delivering the most decisive critique of the current system (Gulrajani and Aly, 2024). The challenge is how to claim the new space and define what comes next. This is about more than narratives. Fundamental system reform is required and decisions regarding policy priorities, instruments and financing all remain critical.

There was a clear call from this research consultation for European stakeholders to think beyond the aid system and DAC rules and to take aid out of its '*political silo*'; all external cooperation can and should be viewed through the lens of creating effective partnerships which deliver mutual benefits, without '*the traditional model, from north to south' that 'no longer holds*'. There was optimism from some that this creates more opportunities for partner countries, in line with their own industrialisation and development priorities. This is also an opportunity to remind European audiences that aid investments have significant benefits for European countries as well (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 How aid investments benefit Europe



6.1 Unifying narratives

This section offers pointers on unifying narratives that have the potential to build political consensus, with implications for what is likely to remain as core ODA and the wider developmental investments that could result from the EU's external action.[64] Unifying narratives are explored here in view of the need, discussed in Section 3, for long-term narratives that avoid polarisation and have potential to build a broad coalition of support. Notably, however, there is unlikely to be *one* unifying narrative around ODA that finds support in all contexts across Europe. Multiple (and competing) narratives will emerge. Therefore, this section summarises areas of consensus for consideration, though specific narratives would need to be tailored and tested in different contexts, based on an analysis of the values, beliefs and priorities of key groups of stakeholders. Significant work is needed to develop these narratives further and to identify the most effective messengers in each area.

The focus here is on narratives that would resonate with policy-makers, though public support is also discussed, given the influence of public opinion on policy processes, particularly when issues become more salient. We assess the popularity of narratives based on the framework suggested by Dennison (2021) (conducive context, plausibility, receptive recipients) which has important lessons for communicators seeking to advance narratives to influence policymakers (see Section 3). One important conclusion from this research is the value of investing in proactively exploring narratives around ODA and being open to engage with new narratives that can gain traction in a changing world (while not creating longer-term costs).

1) Narratives that emphasise refocusing and streamlining aid

There was significant consensus across the political spectrum that ODA budgets should have a more streamlined focus on (multidimensional) poverty reduction, and on particular geographies.[65] As noted by Glennerster and Haria (2025), in their proposal for a 'radical simplification' agenda, the importance of tried and tested, cost-effective interventions that can be delivered at a large scale across various locations comes to the fore here.[66] ODA spending has been increasingly poorly aligned with areas of investment that offer high impact in terms of reducing poverty and hunger.[67] This is an opportunity to course correct, and create a less

---

64 These have aspects in common with conclusions from the ongoing 'Donors in a Post-Aid World' dialogue series (see Aly et al., 2025) as well as with the propositions put forward by Ahmed et al. (2025), who suggest a framework that has three main purposes: poverty reduction and economic growth; humanitarian support and crises response; and global public goods.

65 There has been a decline in ODA flowing to the least developed countries since 2020 (OECD, 2024). In addition, recent data shows that nearly 40% of DAC grants were channelled to upper-middle-income countries (Glennerster and Haria, 2025).

66 Glennerster and Haria (2025: n.p.) highlight new malaria vaccines, graduation programmes targeting the ultra-poor and funding through the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) to provide subsidised loans and grants. These are seen as highly cost-effective areas able to 'absorb significant funding while maintaining high returns', and where donors would benefit from substantial economies of scale.

67 The OECD (2024) reports that only 9.5% of DAC members' bilateral ODA went to grants related to poverty reduction in 2022 (a fall from 11.5% in the previous year) (OECD, 2024). Spending on social protection has also fallen, while the limited support given to smallholder agriculture is disappointing given it is 'an engine for dynamic and inclusive growth – and for reducing poverty more quickly' (Watkins et al., 2024: 11).

fragmented and burdensome aid system. The 'division of labour' concept (and much better coordination) are also relevant here.

Conducive context: As noted earlier, a narrative is more widely accepted if it makes sense of a complex, novel or risky issue. As such, a narrative that focuses on streamlining (inevitably reduced) ODA budgets is not necessarily likely to gain traction, particularly as aid (and the detail of how ODA budgets are spent) is a low-salience issue, and as a theme also lacks novelty. Narratives may gain more traction if criticisms of aid (e.g. regarding inefficiency or waste) become more salient.

Plausibility: Given the critiques explored in Section 4, and current fiscal constraints, conceding the need to improve the focus and efficiency of ODA spending is likely to have plausibility with policy-makers. There will be high 'internal coherence' with this approach (i.e. it will be viewed as logical), providing space to constructively focus on streamlining programmes for the greatest impact. There is also a wealth of evidence that development progress is significantly off track, with a 'historic reversal in development underway' (Chrimes et al., 2024: 2), and forecasts that show that poverty is set to increase (Yusuf et al., 2023). Arguments to increase the focus on poverty reduction are therefore likely to have high credibility.

Receptive recipients: It was clear from this research that stakeholders, whether centrist or from the left or right of the political spectrum, want more focus; consensus on the need for action in this area is high. From the perspective of the public, receptiveness to this approach is also likely to be high, given that the public has only ever associated aid with its most 'basic' functions. The more easily both the public and politicians understand what aid is being spent on, the stronger support will be (Glennerster and Haria, 2025).

2) Narratives around Europe's role in providing humanitarian assistance

It is not recognised enough that there is a clear, shared narrative – across most policy-makers and the public – that a robust level of humanitarian assistance will, as one bilateral donor put it, '*always be necessary*'. It was clear that the humanitarian space is not where there is pushback. One interviewee noted that, even with a far stronger transactional discourse around aid and a rightward political shift, their government was considering increasing humanitarian aid. This should be viewed as an achievable goal by aid advocates and one that should be prioritised in light of the stress humanitarian systems are under.[68] At the same time, aid advocates should take into account that it is harmful, from a rights and protection perspective, to advance narratives that humanitarian aid will stop refugees from reaching Europe. In the case of EU ODA, it was also argued that the humanitarian budget should have its own allocation '*separate from the rest*' and '*also have access to reserves*' (which has been the case for many years, and which provides important flexibility to DG ECHO to respond to crises). The very strong consensus in this area should inform the MFF negotiations and the work of aid advocates at national level across Europe.

Conducive context: Narratives around the need for humanitarian assistance gain traction at given moments in time. Traction is typically greater

68 With regard to humanitarian finance trends, the funding shortfall for UN-coordinated plans in 2023 reached a record 60%. The war in Gaza and crisis in Sudan have contributed to extreme levels of stress on the humanitarian system (Watkins et al., 2024).

for some conflicts and humanitarian crises, as shown with the war in Ukraine, when Europe's perception of risk is heightened (Hargrave and Bryant, 2024). The salience of particular conflicts and emergencies in the European public consciousness is highly relevant here.

Plausibility: Plausibility is likely high in this area, as narratives of solidarity with victims of crises are well established and well accepted in political and public discourse, particularly when coming from messengers such as NGO representatives or religious authorities. Rapid changes in the external environment may increase the plausibility of narratives that encourage increases in humanitarian aid.

Receptive recipients: Stakeholders agreed that there are highly receptive recipients on this issue. Humanitarian assistance is supported across the political spectrum, including by populist parties which '*prefer humanitarian aid above all the rest*'. Multiple stakeholders pointed to a strong feeling of solidarity around humanitarian assistance across political contexts '*that nobody really challenges*'. As noted in Section 2, opinion polling shows that there is very high consensus amongst the European public about the need to maintain budgets for humanitarian assistance, with the moral argument remaining strong.

3) Narratives which emphasise common global challenges

Many stakeholders felt the strongest framing for policy-makers, particularly to sustain political support for ODA in the long term, lay in emphasising common global challenges. This relates to global public goods, a key policy rationale for ODA (Aly et al., 2024). Although the academic language of GPGs is disliked, and stakeholders consulted for this research (and participants in ODI Global's 'Donors in a post-aid world' dialogues) suggested referring to concepts such as 'common global challenges', 'shared challenges' and 'shared security', it is seen as a frame that policy-makers can relate to as long as global challenges can be linked to domestic priorities in a tangible way. There was also recognition during the consultation that this narrative often has high traction for smaller countries who tend to 'think global' and are naturally more open to interpreting their national interest in a more globalised way.

This narrative area has potential to create a broad coalition by building the argument that a failure to mobilise public investment to address global challenges will create victims in the Global North as well as South (with openings at the same time for discussions about new shared approaches such as the GPI model). Climate, public health, food and water are all key areas to make this agenda tangible.

Conducive context: There is generally a conducive context for a 'global challenges' narrative within the EU. Global challenges are highly salient, with just over three-quarters (76%) believing that the EU 'needs more means to face current global challenges'; support for more investment in this area is particularly high among young people (European Commission, 2025b). As noted earlier, health and climate are also highly salient issues, and priorities for EU action among the European public. There is also significant risk related to these global challenges,

well-documented in relation to extreme weather events and public health, and issues such as water security are rising up the European agenda.[69]

Plausibility: Plausibility is likely to be high as narratives related to global challenges align with what is going on in the external world. People can already see the effects of climate crises and can understand how we are more globally interconnected, for example as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (including its impact on energy prices). Plausibility is also reinforced by the strong evidence base related to global challenges, which can back claims made in these narratives. There is robust evidence on climate change (e.g. causes, forecast impacts and solutions) and in the health domain (e.g. how new variants of viruses form and how viruses replicate unchecked in unvaccinated populations). In areas such as climate, health, water and food systems, generally credible, trusted scientific messengers increase the plausibility of narratives. This is also an area where the rapidly changing external context matters; extreme weather events, water scarcity in a hotter, drier Europe, food supply chain challenges, or outbreaks of infectious diseases will all increase the credibility of these narratives. Efforts will still be required to make a tangible and plausible direct link to people's lives (e.g. showing that renewable energy investment in North Africa can deliver lower energy prices and help ensure energy security in Europe).

Receptive recipients: The EU has historically been a leading actor in the GPG domain and EU policy-makers remain generally committed in areas such as climate action and public health. As noted in Section 5, while EU policy-makers have typically been highly receptive on these issues, some stakeholders sensed political leadership waning, particularly on climate. However, there are other important, highly receptive recipients, most notably within the military and security communities, who are strongly concerned by these issues. The European public is highly receptive to narratives around global challenges (and a huge majority want climate action). Connecting global challenges narratives to the specific values and priorities of people in Europe remains a key challenge. Stakeholders cautioned particularly that '*success will depend on how convincingly the narrative used is able to connect global challenges with the impacts and benefits to be seen positively by European citizens*', reinforcing the importance of message testing and tailoring to domestic priorities in specific contexts.

A final caveat is required here. There is potential for this kind of framing to be co-opted by the far right, for example as part of wider resistance to 'globalist' agendas (see Appendix 1), or in view of hostility on issues like climate and Covid vaccination as a proxy for wider distrust of governments (von Holstein et al., 2024). For those working to influence policy-makers, careful testing of potential messages with the public in this area would be advisable, including to find local/domestic frames that can make global challenges tangible in terms of the public's day-to-day priorities.

4) Narratives linking development efforts with the competitiveness and economic security agenda

Linking developmental partnerships and aid investments with competitiveness and

69 The European Parliament (2025) reports that in Southern Europe, up to 70% of the population typically face water shortages in the summer months. Some countries face chronic water stress (Cyprus, Malta, Poland, Czechia) and 30% of Europeans are affected by water stress each year.

economic security concepts is also seen as an area for potentially powerful narratives that will have traction with EU policy-makers. Many stakeholders pointed to the fact that development contributions can help build an enabling business environment that is also a prerequisite for the private sector to engage, while also explaining that a lot more needs to be done to engage with European firms and bring private sector voices into these discussions. Sectorally, there are multiple areas of interest, from renewable energy to green steel/iron, critical raw materials and drug manufacture. There are also opportunities to blend narratives in some areas – linking ODA investments with Europe's efforts to become a biotech leader through strategic partnerships that aim to deliver on health- and industrialisation-related goals. However, the EU has failed the litmus test of Covid-19 by refusing to waive intellectual property rights for vaccines; it remains to be seen if new partnerships, especially around green transition goals, can carve a new path, including to ensure effective technology transfer.

Conducive context: These issues are highly salient for European societies and economies (e.g. affordable energy supply, critical inputs for European industries). There is also novelty in the new approaches being sought (mutually beneficial partnerships), but a lack of clarity on what this looks like in practice. There are also significant economic risks given Europe's supply chain dependencies.

Plausibility: A focus on developmental investments that support Europe's economic interests is plausible in the current economic context and aligns neatly with the information available on Europe's need for strategic partnerships to secure, for example, its supply of critical minerals. A wealth of wider external evidence also increases the plausibility of economic security and competitiveness narratives, including evidence regarding the returns of aid for trade and that new and growing markets can be unlocked by ODA investment. Plausibility here also depends on the messenger. Development NGOs, historically associated with the moral argument, are unlikely to be particularly credible making the case for the economic benefits of development for citizens in Europe; the private sector may be more effective messengers in this regard (particularly with populist governments). Opinion polling shows that economic self-interest does not necessarily land well with the public as a rationale for aid. Narratives blending the national economic interest with moral arguments may be more plausible for a public audience.

Receptive recipients: A focus on developmental investments that support Europe's economic interests coincides with policy-makers' existing priorities, and they are likely be highly receptive to these narratives (though aware of the significant operational challenges in this area). The European private sector will also be a receptive recipient and a potential ally to help these narratives gain traction. There should also be potentially receptive recipients to this narrative in partner countries if partnerships can be tailored to their industrialisation strategies and with mutual benefit as a central aspect. Whether this narrative will gain serious traction with partner countries depends on how far partnerships are actually mutually beneficial (a factor which could, for example, be undermined by migration-related conditionalities).

6.2 Allies and messengers

It was clear from the consultation that there are significant opportunities to form new alliances, including with unfamiliar partners, as messengers and part of a wider coalition behind aid. Respondents highlighted in particular

defence ministry and security sector stakeholders as strong allies for messaging in relation to investments in global public goods, whether climate, health, water or food systems. In some contexts this dialogue is already established. Such broader alliances could include NATO, but there are also multiple national and regional think tanks and experts within the security sector who have an informed, nuanced and comprehensive view on security.

There are multiple benefits from such a strategy, including that diversifying the messengers adds credibility to the message and that the logic of aid and development principles are no longer left politically siloed. Increasing the range of actors involved in decision-making processes also helps to reduce polarisation around issues (Hackenesch et al., 2021), making this a useful strategy in a more politically polarised Europe. One security stakeholder emphasised the importance of engaging '*the right security actors*' and building collaboration in a '*trusting and safe and sustainable way*'. Similarly, there is potential to increase engagement with the private sector generally, especially actors interested in the quality of infrastructure for trade and the enabling environment for investment in third countries. From the perspective of some conservative audiences, the church was also considered a key messenger to make a moral argument for aid.

NGOs are not best placed to make transactional arguments for aid themselves, particularly when speaking to the public. For most audiences, a sudden shift to the national interest would take NGOs '*too far from* [*their*] *way of communicating*', raising difficulties in terms of plausibility. Instead, NGOs can build alliances with stakeholders, such as those discussed above, who are better placed to deliver these messages. Narratives blending the national interest with moral arguments may be more plausible for NGOs – and for wider stakeholders trying to make a case to the public – building the case that investment in ODA is not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing as well (Aly et al., 2025). European bilateral donors interested in alliances with each other – and blending nation-centred and solidarity-based narratives – can identify potential allies from ODI Global's upcoming research mapping bilateral donors' narrative positions in this area (Gulrajani and Pudussery, forthcoming).

6.3 The role of evidence

While experts consulted made clear that evidence is not the most important aspect when thinking about narratives that influence policy outcomes, narratives do still have strong factual elements. Their plausibility depends on real-world information and successful storytelling. There is also a wealth of evidence that demonstrates the importance of constructing solution-focused narratives that tell a positive story. Hence, it is important to document successes and fill evidence gaps. Two related points are relevant here:

Document and show the (big) successes

Some stakeholders drew attention to the fact that the major examples of catalytic aid successes are nowhere near high-profile enough. Initiatives with significant commercial success at scale should be documented, popularised and ultimately widely known. Telling a positive story about aid, emphasising elements that align with pre-existing values and priorities, is likely to be an effective narrative strategy. There should be large-scale success stories linked to Global Gateway's and Team Europe's catalytic investments. It is critical that the EU invest in documenting and telling these stories through multiple channels and in a variety of formats, and enables access to information for the development community to

analyse and document successes. This implies significantly more transparency regarding the results of these programmes, making available key data and the business case behind these investments. The EU can also leverage more from its own success, particularly learning from the principles and logic behind its regional development funds and efforts to promote economic convergence and cohesion across the EU's Member States and regions.

Gather evidence to tackle the perceptions gap around climate action

Despite being a global leader on climate, and with a competitiveness strategy built around decarbonisation, stakeholders conveyed a sense that European policy-makers have become *less* committed to comprehensive climate action. Perceptions of what people think about the climate crisis, and whether it has traction with the public as a critical global challenge, are also notably far from reality. European civil society can do more to demonstrate the public's understanding of climate as a global issue (and as a security issue), and to explore their policy preferences. At the same time, it would be useful to delve more into public perceptions around other critical GPGs such as water, food and health, to prepare robust communications strategies around these key global challenges and inform narratives for influencing work in this area.

6.4 More divisive narratives

The current narrative dominating European discussions on ODA – emphasising links between aid investments, migration and deterrence – has not delivered what it promised. It is not based in evidence and, after decades of development spending aimed at tackling the 'root causes of migration', the idea retains little plausibility. Narratives depicting humanitarian aid as a key lever to stem migration, while instinctively plausible (and popular), have also had significant unintended consequences. One organisation exploring future ODA narratives discussed how they had worked with a former senior government official, who had advised them against using such narratives on the basis that '*the facts have to be correct*'. One centre-right analyst termed these narratives '*ridiculous*'.

In addition, migration narratives are clearly crafted to deliver short-term domestic political advantage, and therefore clash directly with a 'mutual benefits' perspective. As noted by several interviewees, the migration-security frame is also dangerous because it risks exacerbating polarisation. Researchers concur that it is the salience accorded to migration that increases electoral support for the far right (Dennison and Geddes, 2019). Therefore, elevating migration-security narratives reinforces far-right framing and maintains high issue salience. There is space for more reflection in this area, including in relation to who benefits from crisis discourses around migration (noted by Thiollet and Wolff (2023: 5) as 'fearmongers and agitators'). UK research and message testing shows that moderation in official communications is best on divisive topics such as migration (Akehurst, 2025).

7 Concluding thoughts

One aspect notably did *not* emerge from our stakeholder consultation – the structural transformation of North–South economic relations to address the root causes of inequality. This is seen as one of the key policy rationales for development cooperation (as identified in ODI Global's 'Donors in a post-aid world' dialogue series) (Aly et al., 2024). It translates to a focus on structural deficiencies including debt, trade and industrialisation policies, technology transfer and global tax rules, areas where ODA has singularly failed to deliver in the past (ibid.). Very few of the stakeholders consulted for this research felt that a narrative focused on structural reform would gain traction, with tackling inequality in particular seen as '*too big*' and '*too intangible*'. This likely reflects the limitations of this research, which mainly targeted institutions and experts in donor countries. Narratives around structural reform and inequality could still be unifying for leaders in partner countries, as well as for citizens in Europe who actively support justice- and inequality-focused agendas.

This does not mean there is no room for the EU to champion any 'big' policy ideas – whether with regard to global wealth taxes,[70] the creation of a purpose-driven global fund for the eradication of poverty[71] or more radical debt solutions. There are also concrete proposals for shifting the balance from private profit to public good in the realm of global health; several prominent economists have proposed methods of collectively buying out patents and trade secrets (using pooled resources from governments) to ensure health technologies are shared (Torreele et al., 2023; Byanyima, 2025). As wealth inequality continues to deepen, and the imbalance between public and private wealth deepens, narratives around these more radical ideas may gain traction.

Apart from the findings around narratives, this stakeholder consultation provided a number of other recommendations for the development community, including policy-makers, funders and aid advocates. These are presented here.

Recommendations

1) Look beyond what is 'DAC-able'

There was significant consensus in the consultation that thinking 'beyond aid' means not limiting the discussion to what ODA can be reported as aid under DAC rules. Other EU policies and funds are relevant; for example, the European Competitiveness Fund that will be created with the next MFF[72] could include an external dimension. This requires thinking about how to mainstream development cooperation principles

---

70 The EU Tax Observatory recommends the creation of a global minimum tax on billionaires set at 2% of their wealth, as well as reforms to increase the rate agreed in the international agreement on minimum corporate taxation (to 25%) and the creation of a Global Asset Registry to better fight tax evasion (Alstadsæter et al., 2025).

71 This was recommended by ODI Global researchers (see Watkins et al., 2024). It would operate according to strict criteria (to avoiding duplication with other funds and focus on high-impact results at pace and scale). A possible focus would be the delivery of cash transfers to people living in extreme poverty. This is in line with the proposal developed by Brookings, given digital technologies and machine learning now allow for effective, low-cost targeting of cash transfers (Kharas and McArthur, 2023).

72 The European Commission has announced that the next MFF will include a Competitiveness Fund as part of the Competitiveness Compass, to support the development of strategic technologies and manufacturing in Europe.

across the EU's policies and programmes to support the development of partnerships outside of traditional ODA budgets. This will require clarity from the EU on its external action plans and resources attached across all relevant areas, and enhanced transparency. Stakeholders also highlighted the potential for some of the spending earmarked for defence to be spent on aid and development-related activities, in line with a more comprehensive concept of security. There is political traction and an opening for discussion in some Member States (and with NATO) including in relation to spending on climate adaptation; the development community should be at the table for these discussions.

2) Prioritise policy coherence

In the context of less ODA, policy coherence[73] is more important than ever. It will also come into much sharper focus in the context of the Global Gateway and new strategic partnerships, which imply far greater scrutiny of the EU's trade and investment rules and regulatory cooperation. This means paying much closer attention to the external impacts of EU regulations, including in new areas such as the Clean Industrial Deal. This is an area where missteps have already occurred, with tensions emerging regarding the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the EU's Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), both of which have been poorly received in a number of countries.[74] As CBAM moves into its full implementation stage, and with a CBAM simplification package announced by the European Commission, improvements are being made; some of these have been welcomed by third-country partners (Kulesza, forthcoming). Commission officials are certainly aware of the potentially substantial external effects of EU regulations, particularly in relation to the climate-trade nexus, and there has been a clear commitment to step up the EU's green diplomacy (von der Leyen, 2024). Greater policy coherence and coordination could enable Europe to better anticipate possible policy challenges and find mutually beneficial solutions. A larger role for DG INTPA (or others such as DG MENA) in this neglected area could be useful.

3) Expand support for NGOs and global movements

Development NGOs (in both the North and South) stand to lose from this new 'beyond aid' paradigm. However, their advocacy role is important, including monitoring and accountability functions (likely now more than previously if cooperation is increasingly designed around commercial logic and the profit motive). If states do abandon their responsibilities in this area, then it is more urgent than ever that private philanthropy fills this gap. Two key areas should be prioritised: providing funding to NGOs to promote transnational solidarity – i.e. global movements that defend rights, promote democracy and seek

---

73 The EU has committed to policy coherence for development, recognising that development cooperation efforts can be undermined by other EU policies. A common practical illustration of the importance of policy coherence is the EU's trade and agricultural subsidy policies, which have negatively impacted African local producers (Mackie, 2020).

74 For some countries these are seen as unwelcome regulations designed in the North. One major area of controversy is that they add to compliance costs for producers, with smaller producers in poorer countries likely most negatively impacted (Keane et al., 2024). Low- and middle-income countries lack the capacity and resources to easily introduce domestic carbon pricing systems and CBAM, as currently designed, does not allow for flexibility in countries' response to it (Kulesza, forthcoming).

to tackle inequalities (as noted in Aly et al., 2025); and providing funding to NGOs in areas that will most likely be neglected as a result of European ODA budget cuts and the pared-back aid system – i.e. gender equality, human rights, LGBTQIA and democracy promotion.

References

Abimbola, O. (2023) *A five-point agenda for how development cooperation can support the EU's strategic autonomy*. FEPS Policy Brief. Brussels: FEPS – Foundation for European Progressive Studies (https://feps-europe.eu/publication/a-five-point-agenda-for-how-development-cooperation-can-support-eus-strategic-autonomy/).

Agarwal, P., Lemma, A., te Velde, D.W. and White, L. (2022) *The economic case for UK investment in the Covid-19 pandemic response in 2022*. ODI Report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-economic-case-for-uk-investment-in-the-covid-19-pandemic-response-in-2022/).

Agora Industry and Wuppertal Institute (2023) '15 insights on the global steel transformation' (www.agora-industry.org/publications/15-insights-on-the-global-steel-transformation).

Ahmed, M., Calleja, R. and Jacquet, P. (eds) (2025) *The future of official development assistance: incremental improvements or radical reform?* Washington DC: CGD – Center for Global Development (www.cgdev.org/publication/future-official-development-assistance-incremental-improvements-or-radical-reform).

Akehurst, S. (2025) *Getting to know Reform curious Labour voters. How might Labour hold together its coalition, or Reform win Labour votes?* London: Persuasion UK (https://cdn.persuasionuk.org/reform_labour_final_report_cc3c7c1dd2.pdf).

Alstadsæter, A., Godar, S., Nicolaides, P. and Gabriel Zucman (2025) *Global tax evasion report*. Paris: EU Tax Observatory (www.taxobservatory.eu/publication/global-tax-evasion-report-2024/).

Aly, H., Gulrajani, N. and Pudussery, J. (2024) *Dialogue #1: Crafting a new rationale for northern donorship. Donors in a post-aid world series*. London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/dialogue-1-crafting-a-new-rationale-for-northern-donorship/).

Aly, H., Gulrajani, N. and Pudussery, J. (2025) *Dialogue #2: Using this moment of disruption to transform development cooperation*. Donors in a post-aid world series. London: ODI Global. (https://odi.org/en/publications/dialogue-2-using-this-moment-of-disruption-to-transform-development-cooperation/).

Anders, M. (2024) 'Does the new UK government know how to talk about global issues?' Development Engagement Lab (https://developmentengagementlab.org/does-the-new-uk-government-know-how-to-talk-about-global-issues/).

Andrabi, T. and Das, J. (2017) 'In Aid We Trust: Hearts and Minds and the Pakistan Earthquake of 2005' *Review of Economics and Statistics* 99(3): 371–386 (https://doi.org/10.1162/REST_a_00638).

Andre, P., Boneva, T., Chopra, F. et al. (2024) 'Globally representative evidence on the actual and perceived support for climate action' *Nature Climate Change* 14: 253–259 (https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-024-01925-3).

Ayele, Y., Mendez-Parra, M. and te Velde, D.W. (2025) *Modelling the impact of EU aid on EU economies*. ODI Report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-economic-impact-of-eu-aid-on-eu-economies/).

Bailey Morley, A. and Kumar, C. (2022) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Denmark country profile*. ODI Country Study. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-denmark-country-profile/).

Bailey-Morley, A. and Lowe, C. (2023) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Greece country profile*. ODI Country Study. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-greece-country-profile/).

Bergmann, J., Hackenesch, C. and Stockemer, D. (2021) 'Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe: what impact do they have on development policy?' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59(1): 37–53 (www.idos-research.de/externe-publikationen/article/populist-radical-right-parties-in-europe-what-impact-do-they-have-on-development-policy/).

Bilal, S and Teevan, C (2024) *Global gateway: where now and where to next?* ECDPM Discussion Paper No. 368. Brussels: ECDPM – European Centre for Development Policy Management (https://ecdpm.org/work/global-gateway-where-now-and-where-next).

Bilici, S., Holtz, G., Jülich, A. et al. (2024) 'Global trade of green iron as a game changer for a near-zero global steel industry? A scenario-based assessment of regionalized impacts' *Energy and Climate Change* 5 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egycc.2024.100161).

Bodenstein, T., Faust, J. and Furness, M. (2017), 'European Union development policy: Collective action in times of global transformation and domestic crisis' *Development Policy Review* 35(4): 441–453 (https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12189).

Boswell, C., Geddes, A. and Scholten, P. (2011) 'The role of narratives in migration policy-making: a research framework' *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13(1): 1–11 (https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00435.x).

Brooks, N., Opitz-Stapleton, S., Daoust, G. et al. (2022) *Rethinking climate-security narratives: integrating systemic disaster risk management in development*. ODI Global Research Report. London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/rethinking-climate-security-narratives-integrating-systemic-disaster-risk-management-in-development/).

Burstein, P. (2003) 'The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda' *Political Research Quarterly* 56(1): 29–40 (https://doi.org/10.2307/3219881).

Burstein, P. (2006) 'Why Estimates of the Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy Are Too High: Empirical and Theoretical Implications' *Social Forces* 84(4): 2,273–89 (www.jstor.org/stable/3844500).

Byanyima, W. (2025) 'Three ways to help the developing world survive the end of aid'. The Guardian, 30 April (www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/apr/30/developing-world-aid-response-hiv-aids-winnie-byanyima).

Cairney, P. (2016) *The Politics of Evidence-Based Policy Making*. London: Palgrave.

Cairney, P. and Oliver, K. (2017) 'Evidence-based policymaking is not like evidence-based medicine, so how far should you go to bridge the divide between evidence and policy?' *Health Research Policy and Systems* 15(35) (https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-017-0192-x).

Carling, J. (2017) 'How does migration arise?' in M. McAuliffe and M. Klein Solomon (eds) *Ideas to Inform International Cooperation on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*. Geneva: IOM – International Organization for Migration (https://publications.iom.int/books/how-does-migration-arise).

Carrington, D. (2025) 'Spiral of silence': climate action is very popular, so why don't people realise it?'. The Guardian, 22 April (www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/22/spiral-of-silence-climate-action-very-popular-why-dont-people-realise).

Carter, P. (2016) *Five ways to deliver aid in the UK national interest*. ODI Briefing. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/five-ways-to-deliver-uk-aid-in-the-national-economic-interest/).

Chadwick, V. (2024a) 'Stumbling giant: Germany cuts aid'. DevPolicy Blog. Australian National University (https://reliefweb.int/report/germany/stumbling-giant-germany-cuts-aid).

Chadwick, V. (2024b) 'The Netherlands is cutting billions from aid. What happens next?' Devex, 31 January (www.devex.com/news/the-netherlands-is-cutting-billions-from-aid-what-happens-next-107691).

Chadwick, V. (2025) 'A look back at European aid's slash-and-burn year'. Devex, 31 January (https://devex.shorthandstories.com/looking-back-at-a-slash-and-burn-year-for-european-aid/).

Chafe, W. (1990) 'Some Things that Narrative Tells Us about the Mind' in B.K. Britton and A.D. Pellegrini (eds) Narrative Thoughts and Narrative Language. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Chakrabortty, K. (2025) 'Anatomy of a fall: what the rise and fall of the UK aid budget tells us about making change happen'. LSE Blog, 12 March (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/activism-influence-change/2025/03/12/anatomy-of-a-fall-what-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-uk-aid-budget-tells-us-about-making-change-happen/).

Chen, Y., Faure, R. and Gulrajani, N. (2023) *Crafting development power: evolving European approaches in an age of polycrisis.* ODI Report. London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/crafting-development-power-evolving-european-approaches-in-an-age-of-polycrisis/).

Chmiel, O., Kulesa, A., Horký-Hlucháň, O. et al. (2023) *V4 Development Cooperation Trialogue: Reinforcing Synergies, Sharing Good Practices. A Guide to participation in EU development funding*. Warsaw: CASE – Center for Social and Economic Research (https://case-research.eu/publications/v4-development-cooperation-trialogue-reinforcing-synergies-sharing-good-practices/).

Choksey, Y., Lehne, J. and Ruiz Bautista, C. (2025) *The State of the European Steel Transition. Brussels: E3G and Beyond Fossil Fuels* (www.e3g.org/publications/the-state-of-the-european-steel-transition/).

Chrimes, T., Gootjes, B., Kose, M.A. and Wheeler, C. (2024) *The Great Reversal: Prospects, Risks, and Policies in International Development Association (IDA) Countries*. Washington DC: World Bank (www.worldbank.org/en/research/publication/prospects-risks-and-policies-in-IDA-countries).

Clemens, M.A. (2020) *The Emigration Life Cycle: How Development Shapes Emigration from Poor Countries*. Working Paper 540. Washington DC: CGD (www.cgdev.org/publication/emigration-life-cycle-how-development-shapes-emigration-poor-countries).

Clemens, M. and Postel, H.M. (2018) *Can development assistance deter emigration?* CGI Brief. Washington DC: CGD (www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/can-development-assistance-deter-emigration.pdf).

Crawfurd, L. (2025) 'Don't Give Up on Aid Just Yet'. Washington DC: CGD (www.cgdev.org/blog/dont-give-aid-just-yet).

Cullerton, K., Patay, D., Waller, M. et al. (2022) 'Competing public narratives in nutrition policy: insights into the ideational barriers of public support for regulatory nutrition measures' *Health Research Policy and Systems* 20(86) (https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-022-00891-6).

Custer, S., Horigoshi, A., Boer, B. and Marshall, K. (2025) *Listening to leaders 2025: development cooperation over a decade of disruption*. AIDDATA (https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/ltl-2025/full-report.min.html).

Dasandi, N., Graham, H., Hudson, D. et al. (2022) 'Positive, global, and health or environment framing bolsters public support for climate policies' *Communications Earth & Environment* 3: 239 (https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-022-00571-x).

de Lange, T., Guild, E., Brandl, U. et al. (2022) *The EU Legal Migration Package. Towards a rights-based approach to attracting skills and talent to the EU*. Brussels: European Parliament, Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2022)739031).

de Vries, C. (2025) 'Security in Europe will mean sacrifices for citizens'. Politico, 2 April (www.politico.eu/article/europe-sacrifices-citizens-ukraine-far-right-russia-populist/).

Dennison, J. (2021) 'Narratives: a review of concepts, determinants, effects, and uses in migration research' *Comparative Migration Studies* 9(50) (https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00259-9).

Dennison, J. and Geddes, A. (2019) 'A Rising Tide? The Salience of Immigration and the Rise of Anti-Immigration Political Parties in Western Europe' *Political Quarterly* 90(1): 107–116 (https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12620).

DEL – Development Engagement Labs (n.d.) 'DEL Dashboards'. Dataset (https://developmentengagementlab.org/insights/dashboards/).

Di Ciommo, M., Veron, P. and Ashraf, N. (2024) The EU and China in the Global South: Perspectives from African countries. Brussels: ECDPM (https://ecdpm.org/work/eu-china-global-south-perspectives-african-countries).

Donor Tracker (2024) 'France announces US$808 million reduction in 2024 ODA budget'. SEEK Development Donor Tracker (https://donortracker.org/policy_updates?policy=france-announces-us-742-million-reduction-in-2024-oda-budget-2024).

Dreher, A., Fuchs, A. and Langlotz, S. (2019) 'The effects of foreign aid on refugee flows' *European Economic Review* 112: 127–147 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2018.12.001).

Dreher, A., Lang, V. and Reinsberg, B. (2024) 'Aid effectiveness and donor motives' *World Development 176* (www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X23003194).

Dubois, L. (2025) 'Belgium scrambles to reach Nato defence spending goal'. Financial Times, 16 April (www.ft.com/content/7d9f8bed-6315-4826-afbb-4d868a0209d3).

EASO – European Asylum Support Office (2021) EASO Consolidated Annual Activity Report 2020. Valleta: EASO (https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/consolidated-annual-activity-report-2020).

EEAS – European External Action Service (2016) *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. Brussels: EEAS (www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/shared-vision-common-action-stronger-europe_en).

EEAS (2022) *A strategic compass for security and defence. For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security*. Brussels: EEAS (www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en).

ELA – European Labour Authority and EURES – European Employment Services (2024) *EURES Report on Labour Shortages and Surpluses 2023*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union (www.ela.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-05/EURES-Shortages_Report-V8.pdf).

EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum (2022) *Consolidated Annual Activity Report 2021*. Valletta: EEUA (https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-06/CAAR_2021_adopted_by_MB_22062022.pdf)

EUAA (2023) *Consolidated Annual Activity Report 2021*. Valletta: EUAA (https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/consolidated-annual-activity-report-2022).

EUAA (2024) 2023 *Consolidated Annual Activity Report*. Valletta: EUAA (https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/2023-consolidated-annual-activity-report).

Euronews (2025) 'Euroviews: Europe's dangerous medicine dependency is the Achilles heel of its defence strategy'. Euronews, 9 March (www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/09/europes-dangerous-medicine-dependency-is-the-achilles-heel-of-its-defence-strategy).

European Commission (n.d.a) 'EU budget today'. Webpage. European Commission (https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/motion/today_en).

European Commission (n.d.b) 'European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus'. Webpage. European Commission, Directorate General for International Partnerships (https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/funding-instruments/european-fund-sustainable-development-plus_en).

European Commission (n.d.c) 'EU solidarity with Ukraine'. Webpage. European Commission, Directorate General for Communication (https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-solidarity-ukraine_en).

European Commission (n.d.d) 'Global Gateway'. Webpage. European Commission, Directorate General for Communications (https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en).

European Commission (n.d.e) 'Global Gateway overview'. Webpage. European Commission, Directorate-General for International Partnerships (https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/global-gateway-overview_en).

European Commission (n.d.f) 'Note on Global Gateway 360-degree approach'. Webpage. Capacity4dev (https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/library/note-global-gateway-360-degree-approach_en).

European Commission (n.d.g) 'Team Europe Initiative on manufacturing and access to vaccines, medicines and health technologies in Africa'. Webpage. European Commission, Directorate-

General for International Partnerships (https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/team-europe-initiatives/team-europe-initiative-manufacturing-and-access-vaccines-medicines-and-health-technologies-africa_en).

European Commission (n.d.h) 'EU spending and revenue 2021–2027: EU spending and revenue – Data 2000 – 2023' (https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/long-term-eu-budget/2021-2027/spending-and-revenue_en#:~:text=Interactive%20chart%20showing%20the%20EU%20spending%20and%20revenue,and%20revenue%20under%20the%202021-2027%20Multiannual%20Financial%20Framework).

European Commission (2022a) *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Attracting skills and talent to the EU*. Brussels: European Commission (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/872397/COM_2022_657_1_EN_ACT_part1_v7.pdf).

European Commission (2022b) 'Team Europe invests over 20 million to boost African Vaccine Manufacturing'. News Announcement, 28 November. European Commission, Directorate-General for International Partnerships (https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/team-europe-invests-over-20-million-boost-african-vaccine-manufacturing-2022-11-28_en).

European Commission (2023a) 'Commission proposes new measures on skills and talent to help address critical labour shortages'. Press release, 15 November. European Commission (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5740).

European Commission (2023b) 'Global Gateway: EU increases support to vaccine production in Rwanda as first mRNA facility opens'. News announcement, 18 December. European Commission, Directorate-General for International Partnerships (https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-eu-increases-support-vaccine-production-rwanda-first-mrna-facility-opens-2023-12-18_en).

European Commission (2023c) Special Eurobarometer 537 EU citizens and development cooperation. Brussels: European Commission (https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2952).

European Commission (2024a) 'First-ever European defence industrial strategy to enhance Europe's readiness and security'. News Article, 5 March. European Commission, Directorate General for Communication (https://commission.europa.eu/news/first-ever-european-defence-industrial-strategy-enhance-europes-readiness-and-security-2024-03-05_en).

European Commission (2024b) Special Eurobarometer 542 EU Humanitarian Aid. Brussels: European Commission (https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2976).

European Commission (2024c) 'Spring 2024 Economic Forecast: Gradual expansion amid high geopolitical risks' (https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-forecast-and-surveys/economic-forecasts/spring-2024-economic-forecast-gradual-expansion-amid-high-geopolitical-risks_en).

European Commission (2024d) *Standard Eurobarometer 102 – Autumn Survey*. Brussels: European Commission (https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215).

European Commission (2024e) *The Draghi report: A competitiveness strategy for Europe* (Part A). Brussels: European Commission (https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en#paragraph_47059).

European Commission (2024f) *The Draghi report: In-depth analysis and recommendations* (Part B). Brussels: European Commission (https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en#paragraph_47059).

European Commission (2025a) *Communication from the Commission the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*. A European Steel and Metals Action Plan. Brussels: European Commission (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0125).

European Commission (2025b) E*uropean Parliament Eurobarometer Winter Survey*. Brussels: European Commission (https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3492).

European Commission and ECORYS (2025) *The net-zero manufacturing industry landscape across Member States – Final report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union (https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2833/2249632).

European Council (n.d.) Strategic Agenda 2024–2029. Brussels: European Council (www.consilium.europa.eu/media/yxrc05pz/sn02167en24_web.pdf).

European Council (2024) European Council conclusions on the multiannual financial framework and Ukraine, 1 February 2024. European Council: Brussels (www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/02/01/european-council-conclusions-1-february-2024).

European Court of Auditors (2019) *Consolidated Annual Activity Report 2019*. Luxembourg: European Court of Auditors (https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/consolidated-annual-activity-report-2019).

European Court of Auditors (2023) *Programming the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe Comprehensive programmes with deficiencies in the methods for allocating funds and impact monitoring*. Special Report. Luxembourg: European Court of Auditors (www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2023-14/SR-2023-14_EN.pdf).

EU Emergency Trust Fund (2020) *2019 Annual Report*. Brussels: European Commission (https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/news/2019-annual-report-eu-emergency-trust-fund-africa-available-2020-03-26_en).

EU Emergency Trust Fund (2021) *2020 Annual Report*. Brussels: European Commission (https://south.euneighbours.eu/publication/eu-emergency-trust-fund-africa-2020-annual-report/).

European Parliament (2021) *Migration and border management*. Heading 4 of the 2021-2027 MFF. EPRS – European Parliamentary Research Briefing. Brussels: EPRS (www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2021)690544).

European Parliament (2022) *Climate change considerations for EU security and defence policy*. EPRS Briefing. Brussels: EPRS (www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729467/EPRS_BRI(2022)729467_EN.pdf).

European Parliament (2023) Opinion of the Committee on Budgets for the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Development on the implementation of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe. 2023/2029 (INI). Brussels: European Parliament (www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/BUDG/AD/2023/08-30/1283206EN.pdf).

European Parliament (2024) *Global Gateway 2030 Future of Europe's global infrastructure bid*. EPRS Briefing. Brussels: EPRS (www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2024/757826/EPRS_IDA(2024)757826_EN.pdf).

European Parliament (2025) 'Europe's waters: key challenges and EU solutions'. Webpage. Topics, European Parliament (www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20250428STO28142/europe-s-waters-key-challenges-and-eu-solutions).

Eurostat (2025) 'Asylum applications – annual statistics'. Webpage. Eurostat (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_applications_-_annual_statistics).

Faure, R. (2014) *The radical right in the European Parliament: impact on development policy*. ODI Working Paper: London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-radical-right-in-the-european-parliament-impact-on-development-policy/).

Faye, M. and Niehaus, P. (2012) 'Political Aid Cycles' *American Economic Review* 102(7): 3,516–3,530 (www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.102.7.3516).

Foresti, M. and Hagen-Zanker, J. (2018) *Migration and development: how human mobility can help advance the Sustainable Development Goals*. ODI Briefing Note. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/migration-and-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development).

Fortuna, G. (2025) 'EU basks in all-time high citizen approval rate amid tense geopolitics'. Euronews, 26 March (www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/26/eu-basks-in-all-time-high-citizen-approval-rate-amid-tense-geopolitics).

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Latinobarómetro and Nueva Sociedad (2021) 'Latin America – European Union: views, agendas and expectations'. Dataset (https://data.nuso.org/en/about-the-survey).

Frontex (2020) *Annual Accounts 2019*. Warsaw: Frontex (https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019_final_accounts-1.pdf).

Frontex (2021) *FINAL Annual Accounts 2020*. Warsaw: Frontex (https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/Final_accounts/FRONTEX_-_Annual_accounts_2020_-_Final.pdf/).

Frontex (2022) *FINAL Annual Accounts 2021*. Warsaw: Frontex (https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/frontex-annual-accounts-2021-final.pdf).

Frontex (2023) *FINAL Annual Accounts 2022*. Warsaw: Frontex (https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/wp-content/uploads/frontex-annual-accounts-2022-final-signed-ts.pdf).

Frontex (2024) *FINAL Annual Accounts 2023*. Warsaw: Frontex (https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/document/annual-accounts-2023/).

Fuchs, A., Groeger, A., Heidland, T. and Wellner, L. (2023) *The Effect of Foreign Aid on Migration: Global Micro-Evidence from World Bank Projects*. Keil Working Papers 2257. Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy (www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/the-effect-of-foreign-aid-on-migration-global-micro-evidence-from-world-bank-projects-32087/).

Garton Ash, T., Krastev, I. and Leonard, M. (2025) *Alone in a Trumpian world: The EU and global public opinion after the US elections*. ECFR Policy Brief. Paris: ECFR (https://ecfr.eu/publication/alone-in-a-trumpian-world-the-eu-and-global-public-opinion-after-the-us-elections/).

Gathara, P. (2025) 'Why some in the Global South are not mourning the demise of USAID' Al Jazeera, 3 March (www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/3/3/why-some-in-the-global-south-are-not-mourning-the-demise-of-usaid).

Gavas, M. (2013) *The European Union and global public goods: challenges and opportunities*. ODI Research Report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-european-union-and-global-public-goods-challenges-and-opportunities/).

Gavas, M. and Granito, L. (2025) 'Should a Simplified, Flexible and Interest-Driven Budget Define the Future of EU Development Cooperation?' Blog/Webpage. CGD (www.cgdev.org/blog/should-simplified-flexible-and-interest-driven-budget-define-future-eu-development-cooperation).

Gavas, M., Maxwell, S., Faure, R, et al. (2014) *Our collective interest: why Europe's problems need global solutions and global problems need European action*. Brussels: European Think Tanks Group (ETTG) (https://odi.org/en/publications/our-collective-interest-why-europes-problems-need-global-solutions-and-global-problems-need-european-action/).

Gavas M. and Pérez, A. (2022) The future of the European Financial Architecture for Development. Brussels: European Parliament (www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/Future%20of%20European%20Parliament.pdf).

Gavas, M. and Pleeck, S. (2021) 'The EU's Global Gateway is not a groundbreaking plan for domination in global infrastructure'. Blog/Webpage. CGD (www.cgdev.org/blog/eus-global-gateway-not-groundbreaking-plan-domination-global-infrastructure).

Gilovich, T. (1991) *How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life*. New York: The Free Press.

Glennerster, R. and Haria, S. (2025) 'Radical simplification: a practical way to get more out of limited foreign assistance budgets'. Blog/Webpage. CGD (www.cgdev.org/blog/radical-simplification-practical-way-get-more-out-limited-foreign-assistance-budgets).

Glennie, J. (2020) *The Future of Aid: Global Public Investment*. London: Routledge (https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429356384).

Glennie, J. and Hurley, G. (forthcoming) *What can the EU Funds teach us about global cooperation? Seven lessons for global public investment*.

Global Euronews (2024) 'German experts: the state of Germany's railways is a threat to NATO and Ukraine'. Global Euronews, 7 July (https://globaleuronews.com/2024/07/07/german-experts-the-state-of-germanys-railways-is-a-threat-to-nato-and-ukraine/).

GPIN – Global Public Investment Network (n.d.) *Better money, more money. Unlocking global public investment* (https://globalpublicinvestment.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/GPI-Network-Advocacy-Call-September-2024.pdf).

Gray Meral, A. and Kumar, C. (2025) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Hungary country profile*. ODI Report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-hungary-country-profile/).

Gulrajani, N. (2022) *Development narratives in a post-aid era. Reflections on implications for the global effectiveness agenda*. UNU-WIDER Working Paper 2022/149. Helsinki: UNU-WIDER (https://odi.org/en/publications/development-narratives-in-a-post-aid-era-reflections-on-implications-for-the-global-effectiveness-agenda/).

Gulrajani, N. (2025) 'Donors In a Post-Aid World: January 2025 update'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/donors-in-a-post-aid-world-january-2025-update/).

Gulrajani, N. and Aly, H. (2024) 'Should a Northern donor exist in the 21st century? Introducing a new dialogue series'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/should-a-northern-donor-exist-in-the-21st-century-introducing-a-new-dialogue-series).

Gulrajani, N. and Calleja, R. (2019) The Principled Aid Index. Understanding donor motivations. Policy Briefing. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-principled-aid-index-understanding-donor-motivations/).

Gulrajani, N. and Pudussery, J. (2025a). 'With the knives out on development spending, have we reached "peak aid"?' The Guardian, 23 January (www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/23/global-development-economics-donor-spending-refugee-oecd-world-bank-peak-aid).

Gulrajani, N. and Pudussery, J. (2025b) 'Perils and pitfalls of trading off foreign aid and defence expenditure'. Expert comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/perils-and-pitfalls-of-trading-off-foreign-aid-and-defence-expenditure/).

Gulrajani, N. and Pudussery, J. (forthcoming) *Measuring development narratives: the search for donor like-mindedness*. London: ODI Global.

Gulrajani, N. and Silcock, E. (2023) 'Principled Aid Index 2023: In a weaponised world, smart development power is not dead'. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/principled-aid-index-2023-in-a-weaponised-world-smart-development-power-is-not-dead/).

G20 South Africa (n.d.) 'South Africa's 2025 G20 Presidency: First Virtual Development Working Group (DWG) Meeting'. Webpage. G20 South Africa (https://g20.org/track-news/south-africas-2025-g20-presidency-first-virtual-development-working-group-dwg-meeting/).

Hackenesch, C., Bergmann, J. and Orbie, J. (2021) 'Development Policy under Fire? The Politicization of European External Relations' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59(1): 3–19 (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13145).

Hackenesch, C., Högl, M., Öhler, H. and Burni, A. (2022) 'Populist Radical Right Parties' Impact on European Foreign Aid Spending' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 60(5): 1,391–1,415 (https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13308).

Hagen-Zanker, J. and Carling, J. (2023) What are the 'root causes' of migration? MIGNEX Policy Brief. Oslo: PRIO – Peace Research Institute Oslo (www.mignex.org/d066a).

Hargrave, K. and Bryant, J. (2024) *Narratives and the Ukraine response: implications for humanitarian action and principles*. ODI Research Report. London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/narratives-and-the-ukraine-response-implications-for-humanitarian-action-and-principles/).

Hargrave, K., with Homel K. and Dražanová, L. (2022) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Poland country profile*. ODI Country Study. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-poland-country-profile/).

Hargrave, K., Bryant, J., Jarosz, S. et al. (2024) *Narratives and the Ukraine response: implications for humanitarian action and principles*. HPG working paper. London: ODI Global (www.odi.org/en/publications/narratives-and-the-ukraine-response-implications-forhumanitarian-action-and-principles).

Hefele, P. with Crooks, S. (2024) *The Future of European Development Cooperation: A Centre–Right Perspective*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (www.martenscentre.eu/publication/the-future-of-european-development-cooperation-a-centre-right-perspective/).

Hegre, H., Hultman, L. and Mokleiv Nygård, H. (2015) *Peacekeeping works. An assessment of the effectiveness of UN Peacekeeping Operations*. Oslo: PRIO (www.prio.org/publications/7613).

Hirschel-Burns, T. (2025) 'Foreign Aid Is Surprisingly Popular'. Together But Apart, 12 February (https://timhirschelburns.substack.com/p/foreign-aid-is-surprisingly-popular).

Holland, D., and te Velde, D.W. (2012) *The effects of EU aid on receiving and sending countries. A modelling approach*. NIESR and ODI Report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/the-effects-of-eu-aid-on-receiving-and-sending-countries/).

Holloway, K. with Faures, D. and Leach, A. (2021) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants Sweden country profile – second edition*. ODI Country Study. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-sweden-country-profile/).

Huang, L., Davidoff-Gore, S. and Fratzke, S. (2025) *Can Innovation Help Blunt the Impact of Foreign Aid Cuts on Migration Management Programs?* Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute (www.migrationpolicy.org/news/foreign-aid-cuts-migration-management).

IEA – International Energy Agency (2024) *Global EV Outlook 2024*. Paris: IEA (www.iea.org/reports/global-ev-outlook-2024).

IISS – International Institute for Security Studies (2025) 'Defence Spending and Procurement Trends' in IISS (ed) *The Military Balance*. London: IISS (www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/2025/defence-spending-and-procurement-trends/).

Jones, M.D. and MacBeth, M.K. (2010) 'A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong?' *The Policy Studies Journal* 38(2): 329–353 (https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2010.00364.x).

Jopson, B. (2025) 'Spain's Pedro Sánchez calls for cyber and climate to count as defence spending'. Financial Times, 13 March (www.ft.com/content/7f18888b-fa02-444c-807d-da79d38bc18a).

Karkare, P. and Medinilla, A. (2024) *The geography of green iron and steel: New opportunities for Europe and North Africa*. EDCPM Discussion Paper No. 382. Brussels: ECDPM (https://ecdpm.org/work/geography-green-iron-and-steel-new-opportunities-europe-and-north-africa).

Keane, J., Agarwal, P., Mendez-Parra, M. and Debowicz, D. (2024) *Avoiding a 'green squeeze': supporting Least Developed Countries navigate new greening trade measures*. ODI Global working paper. London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/avoiding-a-green-squeeze-supporting-least-developed-countries-navigate-new-greening-trade-measures/).

Kenny, C. and Sandefur, J. (2025) 'New estimates of the USAID cuts'. Blog/Webpage. CGD (www.cgdev.org/blog/new-estimates-usaid-cuts).

Kharas, H. and McArthur, J.W. (2023) *Updating institutional technologies: A purpose-driven fund to end extreme poverty*. Brookings Institute Working Paper 183. Washington DC: Brookings (www.brookings.edu/articles/institutional-technologies-purpose-driven-fund-extreme-poverty/).

Kinsbergen, S. and Rana, Z. (2025) *Improving or Reimagining? Mapping key narratives on the future of development cooperation*. External research report. Nijmegen: Radboud University.

Krause, J., Iveson, M., with Picci, L. and Haro Ruiz, M. (2025) 'Conflict prevention is 100 times less costly than crisis response'. Blog/Webpage. ONE Campaign (https://data.one.org/analysis/conflict-prevention-less-costly).

Kreidler, C., Hövelmann, S. and Spencer, A. (2023) *Germany's rise as a humanitarian donor: the interplay of narratives, new foreign policy ambition and domestic interests*. HPG working paper. London: ODI (www.odi.org/en/publications/germanys-rise-as-a-humanitarian-donor-the-interplay-of-narratives-new-foreign-policy-ambition-and-domestic-interests).

Kuiper, E. (2025) 'Why health should be at the heart of building a more secure and competitive Europe'. Blog/Webpage. European Policy Centre (www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Why-health-should-be-at-the-heart-of-building-a-more-secure-and-compet~636744).

Kulesza, M. (forthcoming) *EU CBAM in 2025 – Reform and implementation: CBAM simplification, third countries' policy responses and international impacts*. ODI Europe Briefing Paper.

Kumar, C. (2024a) *Expanding legal pathways for labour immigration: a stocktake of the European Commission's efforts*. ODI Europe Report. Brussels: ODI Europe (https://odi.org/en/publications/expanding-legal-pathways-for-labour-immigration-a-stocktake-of-the-european-commissions-efforts/).

Kumar, C. (2024b) 'Learning lessons the hard way: Hungary, immigration and competitiveness'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/learning-lessons-the-hard-way-hungary-immigration-and-competitiveness/).

Kumar, C. (2024c) 'Letter: Spain shows Europe the way on low-skilled immigration'. Financial Times, 1 November (www.ft.com/content/85573b15-df81-49b1-9e39-abf84c6b5695).

Kumar, C. and Donoghue, D. (2023) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Ireland country profile*. ODI Country Study. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-ireland-country-profile/).

Kumar, C. and Faures, D. (2021) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants Spain country profile*. ODI Country Study. London: ODI (www.odi.org/publications/ public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-spain-country-study).

Kumar, C., Hagen-Zanker, J., Gray Meral, A. et al. (2024) *The EU-Africa migration agenda – realising a new partnership*. ETTG – European Think Tanks Group Policy Briefing. Brussels: ETTG (https://ettg.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Migrations-ETTG-Brief-September-2024.pdf).

Lauwers, N., Orbie, J. and Delputte, S. (2021) 'The Politicization of the Migration–Development Nexus: Parliamentary Discourse on the European Union Trust Fund on Migration' Journal of Common Market Studies 59(1): 72–90 (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13140).

Laville, C. and Gore, A. (2025) 'We must embrace complexity to tackle climate change, conflict and environmental degradation'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/embrace-complexity-climate-conflict-environment/).

Leininger, J. and Martin-Shields, C. (2025) *The 2025 German Federal Election. Who cares about aid? Voters do!* German Institute of Development and Sustainability. Bonn: IDOS – German Institute of Development and Sustainability (www.idos-research.de/en/the-current-column/article/who-cares-about-aid-voters-do/).

Le Monde (2023) 'Sweden lowers its targets for development aid'. *Le Monde*, 17 March (www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/03/17/sweden-lowers-its-targets-for-development-aid_6019762_4.html).

Lockwood, M. (2018) 'Right-Wing Populism and the Climate Change Agenda: Exploring the Linkages' *Environmental Politics* 27(4): 712–32 (https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2018.1458411).

Lodge, M. and Taber, C.S. (2005) 'The automaticity of affect for political leaders, groups, and issues: An experimental test of the hot cognition hypothesis' *Political Psychology* 26(3): 455–482 (https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2005.00426.x).

Logan, S. (2024) *Material world: How Europe can compete with China in the race for Africa's critical minerals*. ECFR Policy Brief. Paris: ECFR (https://ecfr.eu/publication/material-world-how-europe-can-compete-with-china-in-the-race-for-africas-critical-minerals/).

Lopes, C. (2024) *The Self Deception Trap. Exploring the Economic Dimensions of Charity Dependency within Africa-Europe relations*. Switzerland: Palgrave McMillan.

Lough, O. and O'Callaghan, S. (2021) 'Five years on from the World Humanitarian Summit: lots of talk, no revolution'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/five-years-on-from-the-world-humanitarian-summit-lots-of-talk-no-revolution/).

Lundsgaarde, E. and Engberg-Pedersen, L. (2019) *Has the Paris Declaration disappeared?* DIIS – Danish Institute for International Studies Policy Brief. Copenhagen: DIIS www.diis.dk/en/research/has-the-paris-declaration-disappeared).

Mackie, J. (2020) 'Promoting policy coherence: Lessons learned in EU development cooperation'. ECDPM Policy Brief (https://ecdpm.org/application/files/9916/5546/8618/Promoting-Policy-Coherence-Lessons-Learned-EU-Development-Cooperation-CASCADES-Briefing-Note-ECDPM-September-2020.pdf).

Martínez-Zarzoso, I., Nowak-Lehmann, F. and Rehwald, K. (2016) *Is Aid for Trade Effective? A Panel Quantile Regression Approach*. CEGE – Center for European Governance and Economic Development Research Discussion Paper. Göttingen: University of Göttingen (http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2459475).

Mazzilli, C. and Lowe, C. (2023) *Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Portugal country profile*. ODI Country Study. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-portugal-country-profile/).

Mazzucato, M. and Glennie, J. (2024) 'How Global Public Investment Should Work'. Project Syndicate, 19 November (www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/global-public-investment-model-for-climate-biodiversity-water-crises-by-mariana-mazzucato-and-jonathan-glennie-2024-11).

Mazzucato, M., Okonjo-Iweala, N., Rockström, J. and Shanmugaratnam, T. (2023) T*urning the Tide. A call to collective action*. Paris: Global Commission on the Economics of Water (https://watercommission.org/publication/turning-the-tide-a-call-to-collective-action/).

McCaffrey, C. and Poitiers, N. (2024) *Making industrial policy work: a case study on the European Battery Alliance Academy. Bruegel Working Paper*. Brussels: Bruegel (www.bruegel.org/working-paper/making-industrial-policy-work-case-study-european-battery-alliance-academy).

McGerty, F. and Dewey, K. (2025) 'Global defence spending soars to new high'. Blog/Webpage. IISS (www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2025/02/global-defence-spending-soars-to-new-high/).

Mendez-Parra, M., Agarwal, P., Luke, D. et al. (2025) *Impact of geopolitical dynamics on global trade: the case of the African automotives sector*. ODI Global report. London: ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/publications/impact-of-geopolitical-dynamics-on-global-trade-the-case-of-the-african-automotives-sector/).

Meredith, D. and Kumar, C. (2023) 'Migration management and external policy in Europe are increasingly connected – and that's problematic'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/migration-management-and-external-policy-in-europe-are-increasingly-connected-and-thats-problematic/).

Merrick, R. (2023). 'EU to shift billions from development work to "migration management"'. Devex, 19 December (www.devex.com/news/eu-to-shift-billions-from-development-work-to-migration-management-106826).

More in Common (2024) 'Climate and energy in the General Election'. Blog/Webpage. More in Common (www.moreincommon.org.uk/latest-insights/climate-and-energy-at-the-general-election/).

Mueller, H., Rauh, C., Seimon, B. and Espinoza, R. (2024) *The urgency of conflict preventions – a macroeconomic perspective*. IMF – International Monetary Fund Working Paper. Washington DC: IMF (www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2024/12/17/The-Urgency-of-Conflict-Prevention-A-Macroeconomic-Perspective-559143).

Muggah, R. and Salmon, J. (2025) '5 futures for aid in a divided world'. Blog/Webpage. World Economic Forum (www.weforum.org/stories/2025/04/5-futures-for-global-aid/).

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (2022) 'Strategic Concepts'. Webpage. NATO (www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_56626.htm).

NATO (2023) *NATO Climate Change and Security Impact Assessment. Second Edition. The Secretary General's repor*t. Brussels: NATO (www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230711-climate-security-impact.pdf).

Navy Lookout (2015) 'The Royal Navy – prime force for delivery of emergency aid and disaster relief'. Navy Lookout, 6 April (www.navylookout.com/the-royal-navy-prime-force-for-delivery-of-emergency-aid-and-disaster-relief/).

Navy Lookout (2017) 'Why a portion of UK overseas aid money should be given to the armed forces'. Navy Lookout, 27 April (www.navylookout.com/why-a-portion-uk-overseas-aid-money-should-be-given-to-the-armed-forces/).

Nilsson, P. (2025) 'From trains to tanks: Germany's rearmament marks industrial shift'. Financial Times, 23 April (www.ft.com/content/0f3ba2cc-110b-4ca6-b5de-77288e84541f).

OCHA (n.d) Financial Tracking Service: Humanitarian Aid Contributions. Geneva: OCHA (https://fts.unocha.org/).

OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018) *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: European Union 2018*. Paris: OECD Publishing (https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264309494-en).

OECD (2023a) *Development Co-operation and the provision of Global Public Goods*. OECD Working Paper. Paris: OECD (https://doi.org/10.1787/aff8cba9-en).

OECD (2023b) *Development Co-operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System*. Paris: OECD (https://doi.org/10.1787/f6edc3c2-en).

OECD (2024) *Development Co-operation Report 2024: Tackling Poverty and Inequalities through the Green Transition*. Paris: OECD (https://doi.org/10.1787/357b63f7-en).

OECD (2025) *Preliminary official development assistance levels in 2024*. Detailed Summary Note. Paris: OECD (https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2025)6/en/pdf).

Oh, S. (2025) 'DEL Dashboard – Germany January 2025'. Webpage (https://developmentengagementlab.org/insights/dashboards/).

Opalo, K. (2025a) 'How reflexive catastrophizing inhibits policy imagination in African states'. The Africanist Perspective, 14 March (www.africanistperspective.com/p/how-reflexive-catastrophizing-inhibits?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web).

Opalo, K. (2025b) 'Why ending aid dependency is an opportunity for African countries'. Semafor, 24 February (www.semafor.com/article/02/24/2025/why-ending-aid-dependency-is-an-opportunity-for-africa).

Oxfam Novib (2024) A new approach for influencing the aid budget: ODA campaign. Presentation (unpublished).

Particip, Ecorys, ECDPM and Mancala Consultores (2024) *Evaluation of the European External Action – Instruments evaluation: European Union's External Financing Instruments (2014–2020 and 2021–2027)*. Brussels: European Commission (https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/610eff32-1ef8-11ef-a251-01aa75ed71a1/language-en).

Paxton, B. (2025) 'Cutting international aid to pay for defence is Starmer's first spending review trade-off'. Blog/Webpage. Institute for Government (www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/cutting-aid-defence-starmer).

Pudussery, J. and Gulrajani, N. (2025) 'Aid and defence: a data story of two global targets'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/aid-and-defence-a-data-story-of-two-global-targets/).

Puglierin, J., Varvelli, A. and Zerka, P. (2025) *Transatlantic twilight: European public opinion and the long shadow of Trump*. ECFR Policy Brief. Paris: ECFR (https://ecfr.eu/publication/transatlantic-twilight-european-public-opinion-and-the-long-shadow-of-trump/).

Rajah, A. and Burns, C., with Clarke, J. and Wang, S. (2024) *Green and Global Britain. Navigating public opinion on climate foreign policy. More in Common and Engaging Climate Presentation.* London: More in Comon (www.moreincommon.org.uk/our-work/research/green-and-global-britain/).

Raunio, T. and Wagner, W. (2021) 'Contestation over Development Policy in the European Parliament' *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59(1): 20–36 (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13138).

Sabatino. E. (2025) 'Awaiting the "big bang" in European defence'. Blog/Webpage. IISS (www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2025/02/awaiting-the-big-bang-in-european-defence/).

Sabatino, E. and Lawrenson, T. (2025) 'Russia a catalyst for EU defence'. Blog/Webpage. IISS (www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2025/03/russia-a-catalyst-for-eu-defence/).

Sandefur, J. and Kenny, C. (2025) 'USAID cuts: new estimates at the country level'. Blog/Webpage. CGD (www.cgdev.org/blog/usaid-cuts-new-estimates-country-level).

Severino, J.M. and Ray, O. (2009) *The End of ODA: Death and Rebirth of a Global Public Policy*. CGD Working Paper 167. Washington DC: CGD (www.cgdev.org/publication/end-oda-death-and-rebirth-global-public-policy-working-paper-167).

Sarbin, T.R. (1986) 'The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology' in T.R. Sarbin (ed) *Narrative Psychology*. New York: Praeger.

Shanahan, E.A., Jones, M.D. and McBeth, M.K. (2017) 'How to conduct a Narrative Policy Framework study' *Social Science Journal* 55(3): 332–345 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2017.12.002).

Shenhav, S.R. (2006) 'Political narratives and political reality' *International Political Science Review* 27(3): 245–262 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512106064474).

Siebold, S., Wacket, M. and Hansen, H. (2025). 'Exclusive: German defence minister seeks annual budget hike to over 60 billion euros, sources say'. Reuters, 7 May (www.reuters.com/en/german-defence-minister-seeks-budget-hike-over-60-bln-euros-source-says-2025-05-07/).

Simon, M., Schwartz, C. and Hudson, D. (2024) 'Can foreign aid reduce the desire to emigrate? Evidence from a randomized controlled trial' *American Journal of Political Science*: 1–14 (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajps.12927).

Simons, B. (2024) 'The "strategic mirage" of Africa's green minerals wealth'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/the-strategic-mirage-of-africas-green-minerals-wealth/).

Simons, B. (2025) 'Why the crisis in global aid is bigger than Trump'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/why-the-crisis-in-global-aid-is-bigger-than-trump/).

Südhoff, R. (2024) 'Neither player nor payer?'. Blog/Webpage. Centre for Humanitarian Action (www.chaberlin.org/en/blog/neither-player-nor-payer/).

Swedlund, H.J. (2017) 'Is China eroding the bargaining power of traditional donors in Africa?' *International Affairs* 93(2): 389–408 (https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiw059).

Thiollet, H. and Wolff, S. (2023) UK-France Channel Crossing Forum: Migration & Crime Summary of Policy Relevant Outputs. BRIDGES Policy Brief. Barcelona: BRIDGES (www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/uk-france-channel-crossing-forum-migration-crime-summary-of-policy-relevant-outputs/).

Torreele, E., Kazatchkine, M., Lui, J. et al. (2023) 'Stopping epidemics when and where they occur' *The Lancet* 401(10374): 324–328 (www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(23)00015-6/fulltext).

UNCTAD – United Nations Trade and Development (2024) 'Critical minerals: Africa holds key to sustainable energy future'. UNCTAD News, 5 June (https://unctad.org/news/critical-minerals-africa-holds-key-sustainable-energy-future).

Usman, Z. (2025) 'The end of the global aid industry'. Foreign Affairs, 5 May (www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/end-global-aid-industry#).

Vargas-Silva, C., Hagen-Zanker J., Carling J. et al. (2023) *Tackling the root causes of migration*. MIGNEX Background Paper. Oslo: PRIO (www.mignex.org/d065).

Vazquez, M. (2024) 'We need to look beyond climate disasters if we are to help the world's most vulnerable people'. Expert Comment. ODI Global (https://odi.org/en/insights/we-need-to-look-beyond-climate-disasters/).

von der Leyen, U. (2024) E*urope's Choice: Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029*. Brussels: European Commission (https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf).

von Holstein, E. (2025) Shaping ODA Narratives for 2025. A Competitiveness Perspective. Presentation (unpublished).

von Holstein, E., Nowak, A., Napiórkowski, M. and Perrot, S. (2024) *The Power of Narratives – A Strategic Approach to Combatting Disinformation in Europe – Key Findings from the First European Narrative Observatory*. Brussels: Re-Imagine Europa (https://nodes.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/NODES_WhitePaper_The-Power-of-Narratives.pdf).

Watkins, K., Nwajiaku-Dahou, K. and Kovach, H. (2024) *Financing the fight against poverty and hunger – mobilising resources for a sustainable development goal reset*. ODI Report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/financing-the-fight-against-poverty-and-hunger-mobilising-resources-for-a-sustainable-development-goal-reset/).

Weise, Z. (2025) 'EU pushes "buy European" quotas in major plan to revive industry'. Politico, 18 February (www.politico.eu/article/eu-europe-major-plan-industry-clean-industrial-deal-climate-targets-donald-trump/).

Weisner, Z. and Pope, S. (2023) *From development to deterrence? Migration spending under the EU Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)*. Oxford: Oxfam GB (https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/from-development-to-deterrence-migration-spending-under-the-eu-neighbourhood-de-621536/).

Wellner, L., Dreher, A., Fuchs, A. et al. (2022) *Can Aid Buy Foreign Public Support? Evidence from Chinese Development*. CESifo Working Paper 9646. Munich: CESifo GmbH – Munich Society for the Promotion of Economic Research (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4070236).

Wu, Q. and Bote, D. (2025) 'Can foreign aid help sub-Saharan African countries with economic growth?' *Theoretical Economics Letters* 15(1): 83–109 (www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=140340).

Yusuf, A.A., Anna, Z., Komarulzaman, A. and Sumner, A. (2023) *Will economic growth be sufficient to end global poverty? New projections of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*. UNU-WIDER Working Paper 2023/123. Helsinki: UNU-WIDER (www.wider.unu.edu/publication/will-economic-growth-be-sufficient-end-global-poverty).

Appendix 1 Overview of positions of European political parties on external action

2024 European Elections Manifestos

The below table summarises key components of the different European political parties' positions on external action. This analysis was predominantly carried out through review of the parties' manifestos for the 2024 European Elections. There were, however, some exceptions. Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) and the European Left Alliance for the People and the Planet (ELA) were both registered as political parties shortly following the 2024 election. ELA published a manifesto after their registration, which was analysed for this research, while in the case of ESN the document reviewed was the ESN Statutes (published in July 2025). While Patriots for Europe (PfE) existed prior to the 2024 election, the manifesto reviewed for this analysis was also written following the 2024 election.

Party name (and seat share in 2025)	Geopolitics	Partnerships and Trade	Development policy	Climate	Migration	Human rights and gender
European People's Party (EPP) (25%)	Long-term partnerships with key countries/ regions to protect European interests against global threats (Russia, China, Iran).	Proposal for new pact with Africa – trade, migration, energy and raw materials. Continued support to Ukraine, including humanitarian aid. Other strategic focus: China, Taiwan, Russia, Belarus, Latin America, the Mediterranean and Middle East.	Mentioned only linked to migration control. All development aid contingent on third countries' cooperation with EU migration management.	Europe positioned as a leader on climate, with policies focused on actions within Europe. Green Deal framed as integral for European competitveness.	Emphasis on sovereignty over borders and migration control, with proposals for stronger external borders and asylum reform centring "humanity and order".	Human rights linked to asylum and EU candidate countries. Focus on women's equality and ending violence against women.

Party of European Socialists (PES) (19%)	Vision for a strong Europe that plays a role in a rules-based multilateral order, promoting sustainable development, human rights, feminist foreign policy and peace. Promoting peace and security in the Middle East.	Ambitious and fair EU trade, promoting human rights, social, labour and environmental standards. Focus on partnerships with Africa (including climate, green energy, migration and democracy), Mediterranean and Latin America. Continued support to Ukraine, including humanitarian aid.	Development aid key to trade and Europe's place in the world. Sustainable development as a goal for trade and diplomacy.	Climate justice linked to social justice, implementing a "Green deal with a red heart" Within Europe focus on green jobs, sustainable agriculture, environment and renewable energy. Trade policy linked to agricultural standards.	Well-managed migration framed as a strength. Dual focus on strengthening external borders and cooperation with countries of origin, alongside safety and rights, legal pathways.	Human rights as a goal in Europe (including migration and asylum policy) and to be promoted around the world. A 'feminist Europe' as a priority and cross-cutting theme, including in foreign policy.
Patriots for Europe (PfE) (10%)	Threat of 'globalist forces' and 'unelected bureaucrats', though focused on the EU.	No mention.	No mention.	No mention.	Focus on stopping illegal migration, protecting borders and maintaining cultural identity.	No mention of human rights or gender, though focus on 'real freedoms, fundamental rights and human dignity'.
European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR) (10%)	Highlights the need for global partnerships for security and defence, trade, growth, energy and migration – in the context of threats from Iran, Russia and China.	Partnerships with the 'Global West' (including UK), Indo-Pacific, North and South America. Stands with Ukraine, including by increasing aid.	No mention.	Global approach to combatting climate change. Opposition to the Green Deal and "over-ideological green climate policy".	Proposes a 'comprehensive strategy for border security' focused on strengthening borders, externalisation, asylum reform and upholding European values.	Human rights mentioned only linked to Chinese violations. Focus on persecuted Christians and religious freedom. No mention of gender.
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) (7%)	Strengthening the EU's influence on the global stage. Focus on threat from China.	Focus on working with 'like-minded' countries. Trade and investment with US, Australia, Mercosur, Africa and the Indo-Pacific – based on international commitments (including climate, human rights). Specific focus on trade/ political relations with Africa, based on equal partnership. Unity with Ukraine and focus on post-war reconstruction.	Mentioned only linked to asylum policy – focus on 'effective' aid programmes that prioritise democracy promotion, job creation and climate change mitigation.	Climate policy focused on meeting existing goals within the EU and achieving strategic autonomy.	Global focus related only to root causes of migration. Focus on normalising migration, opportunities for Europe and protecting human rights. Proposals for legal pathways, asylum reform, third country agreements, search and rescue.	Human rights central, to be promoted within Europe and the world. Gender as a cross-cutting theme.

European Green Party (6%)	Multilateralism and global cooperation based on universal values and principles – including human rights, international humanitarian law and climate commitments. No cooperation with authoritarian regimes. Highlights global threats to peace and security, including in the Middle East, Caucasus, Sahel and Central Africa.	Equal trade contingent on human rights and climate commitments. Solidarity with Ukraine, including climate-resilient reconstruction.	Strong focus on development policy, with explicit mention of increasing ODA to 0.7% across Europe. Focus on decolonising relations with the global south and locally led sustainable initiatives.	Extensive focus on climate action. Call for the EU to invest in the global green transition on par with investment within the EU. Proposal for a "global green deal", with climate integral to trade deals and the Global Gateway. Focuses on resource justice and climate finance (including loss and damage fund).	Rejects tying aid to migration control.	Extensive focus on human rights: central to vision for Europe and its relations with the world. Commitment to "smash patriarchy", with gender a cross-cutting theme (including a feminist foreign policy).
Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) (3%)	Criticism of 'globalist agendas', including rejection of the Global Compact for Migration.	No mention.	No mention.	Proposal to repeal the Green Deal, focusing on scientific innovation and market-based solutions.	Migration as an 'existential threat', focusing on border control.	No mention of gender or human rights but talks about 'wokeist ideologies'.
European Left Alliance for the People and the Planet (ELA) (3%)	Focus on diplomacy, human rights and international law for peace (in Gaza, Ukraine).	Trade policy focused on environmental and social standards, fair trade.	Not mentioned, but proposal to dismantle "EU policies" that entrench poverty in the global south (linked to root causes of migration).	Focus on a "just green transition" within the EU – reaching targets in a "socially just" way.	Focus on solidarity and the right to asylum – with proposals to end border violence, detention, externalisation.	Human rights mentioned linked to EU policy (particularly on asylum) and global support for occupied territories (Ukraine/Gaza). Feminism as "the motor of political change", with particular focus on abortion rights.

Party of the European Left (PEL) (2%)	Condemns Russia and Israel but also highlights wars elsewhere (Yemen, Syria, Sudan, Western Sahara and against the Kurdish people). Focus on multilateral democratisation, particularly the UN but also of the World Bank and the IMF. Calls for the respect of international law and diplomatic solutions to conflict, rather than militarisation.	Proposal to reshape trade and financial partnerships with the Global South to break "domination" and replace with co-development, public goods, social and environmental development. Latin America focus and call for humanitarian aid for Gaza. Emphasises global cooperation to address pandemics.	Sustainable development as the end goal of debt restructuring and linked to drivers of migration. Highlights the need to promote peace, sustainability and sustainable development.	Green Deal tied to capitalist system. Call for "radical environmental change" and social justice. Focus on just green transition within Europe, including green jobs. Connection between war and environmental crisis. Calls for the issuing of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) allocated according to the needs of each country for the ecological transition and the response to social crises.	Call for a break from Fortress Europe and respect for international law - ending externalisation, detention, and supporting safe and legal routes, protection and assistance.	Human rights referenced relating to feminism, specific contexts (Armenia, Western Sahara), EU enlargement, migration and asylum. Prioritises gender equality, exploring 'left feminism' and cross-cutting commitments, particularly on work.
European Democratic Party (EDP) (1%)	Aiming to strengthen EU's global influence by speaking with one voice. Global dialogue for human rights, democracy, strategic autonomy and to support European SMEs. Focus on peace in 'Ukraine, Israel and the world'. Multilateral reform.	Cooperation with partners with common values, particularly the US, UK and Canada. Emphasis on new partnership with Africa "as a friend and partner", focused on migration and "shared growth and prosperity".	Development and humanitarian funding linked to migration policy and root causes, including economic development and job creation.	Climate proposals, supporting the Green Deal, focus on the EU and outermost regions. Role of local authorities and communities. Aim for the EU to be a world leader.	Focus on a 'unified approach' that is 'humane and fair' – including returns, integration, cooperation. Calls for establishing common rules for economic and climate migration, including 'European quotas' for economic migration.	Human rights as key part of European identity, to be protected across Europe and around the world. 'Fighting for gender equality' (within Europe) as a priority area.
European Free Alliance (EFA) (1%)	Vision for a "self-confident" EU that can stand up against power blocs e.g. US, China and BRICS. Focuses on role for EU diplomacy on Ukraine and 'as much solidarity with Ukraine as we can'.	Highlights 'humanitarian disaster' in the Caucasus, and calls for greater EU role to support Palestine Kurdistan and Western Sahara.	No mention.	Supports Green Deal but criticises a 'top-down' approach, calling for more flexibility for regions and municipalities.	Proposal for a common European migration response based on humanitarian principles, international law and development of legal pathways.	Focus on supporting "human rights for everyone" around the world and in the EU. Most concrete proposals on LGBT rights. Focus on women's representation in decision-making.

ODI Europe

ODI Europe brings research, ideas and dialogue with the wider world into the European policy debate. We address critical priorities while staying attuned to European policies and processes. We nurture global research excellence across our thematic priorities to inspire policy changes for a fairer and more sustainable world. We are based in Brussels and are part of the ODI Global network.

ODI Europe
35 Square de Meeûs
1000 Brussels
Belgium

EU transparency register:
051479091677-17

odieurope@odi.org

Website: odi.org
LinkedIn: ODI Global and ODI Europe
BlueSky: @odi.global
Threads: @odi.global
Instagram: @odi.global