

# Division Over Defence: What the Türkiye–SAFE Debate Teaches Europe

*By Alex Niculescu — Researcher in International Relations at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)*

The question of whether Türkiye should join the European SAFE program (the *Security Action for Europe*, a common defence-procurement initiative worth €150 billion) has divided the EU into two camps: the overwhelming majority supporting the extension of the program to Türkiye, and a handful of countries — the Republic of Cyprus and Greece — backed by France, opposing it. On one side, we find a realistic position from the majority, recognizing the importance of Türkiye as NATO's second-largest army and a leader in drone and other emerging technologies; on the other, the defence of narrow national interests before the interests of the European community.

This issue has revealed a great number of contradictions that the EU leadership should take into account in order to build a more solid Europe for the future. Türkiye will likely join the SAFE program — a choice of reason in a world growing more conflictual, where Europe's strategic autonomy is at stake. Yet the debate has once again torn the Union apart against its own common interest, much like the dispute over the Schengen membership of Bulgaria and Romania, which deprived both economies of billions in revenue and slowed cross-border mobility, including military transport across the EU's eastern flank. The SAFE debate follows a similar pattern of internal division and short-sighted obstruction. **Here are four lessons Brussels can no longer afford to ignore.**

## Decision-Making Paralysis Weakens the Union

Decision-making in the EU is notoriously difficult, and when important decisions must be made, paralysis often prevails due to uncompromising actors within the Union and powerful member states using their influence to defend smaller allies, as seen with France's support for Greece and Cyprus. Isn't it surprising that a partially occupied island state can paralyze an entire community of 27 because of a conflict it has failed to resolve, putting at stake the security of the whole continent? Decision-making should be more fluid, and vetoes should not matter when the issues become existential. The EU needs to reform its processes so that vital security and defence matters cannot be blocked by one or two states acting on narrow political motives. Only then can the EU become a stronger and more significant actor on the global stage.

## Integration Without Conflict Resolution Imports Instability

The EU should make conflict resolution a priority, perhaps even a prerequisite, for the integration of new member states. Tolerating internal division contradicts the idea of building a “Union”, particularly one in need of effective and efficient decision-making. The entrance of a member with a conflict is, in fact, an importation of that conflict into the EU — transforming a national issue into a European one.

The Cyprus conflict perfectly illustrates this problem. While NATO avoided integrating countries with open or frozen conflicts such as Georgia and Ukraine, the EU relied on the assumption that Cyprus, even though involved in a frozen conflict, was stable. Greece, of course, exerted considerable pressure for this to happen. But the consequences have been visible over time — not only when the island rejected a UN plan for federalization (the Annan Plan) in 2004, but also now, as it seeks to put sticks in the wheels of the Union (i.e., obstruct progress) during a time of security crisis, when cooperation with the Turkish neighbor is vital to ensure continental stability.

As with other EU candidates that have frozen or open conflicts, gradual cooperation should have been encouraged, but full integration was, and can be again, a mistake. Even though the imported conflict may not carry immediate security risks, it can generate political risks that could themselves evolve into new security threats in the future. As discussed, importing a country with an internal conflict may cause direct or indirect effects on the entire European community. That is why, once again, stronger decision-making within the EU is needed, as well as a willingness to solve conflicts in accordance with EU values — namely international law. This requires a common position among member states, which often disagree, as the Libyan issue clearly demonstrated between France and Italy, with Paris backing General Haftar in the east while Rome supported the UN-recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli.

## Europe’s Security Must Extend Beyond the EU’s Borders

A common foreign and security policy should be built not only within the EU but on a wider European scale. This is possible through multiple institutions that already exist, such as the **European Political Community** and the **Council of Europe**, as well as other EU-linked programs that include non-EU members. These tools exist, but are underused.

The security crisis the EU is facing requires cooperation with key European neighbors that cannot be ignored, such as Türkiye and the United Kingdom. A concrete example of this broader cooperation — although still slow and poorly coordinated — was the recognition of

Palestine by multiple EU members and the United Kingdom in September 2025, with Türkiye strongly supporting Palestinian statehood and the implementation of a two-state solution. At the same time, the EU condemned the situation in Gaza, even though some member states, such as Denmark, Italy, and Germany, have not yet recognized Palestine. It remains unclear whether this common stance had a direct impact on the situation, but the mobilization of European citizens in a shared media space pushed the EU and its partners to act together. The EU officially condemned the violence; the UK, France, and others recognized Palestine; and Türkiye — earlier — suspended all trade with Israel in May 2024. (Ankara halted all trade, and diplomatic relations were sharply downgraded.) These moves may have contributed to shaping the diplomatic environment that eventually led to the current ceasefire, demonstrating that coordinated European pressure, however fragmented, can still influence outcomes.

### The EU Shouldn't Let Foreign Actors Influence Its Fate: A Common Counter-Intelligence Capacity Is Essential

Finally, the EU should strengthen its common counter-intelligence capacity to prevent member states from being infiltrated or influenced by foreign, non-European actors capable of playing them against one another. Cyprus's position does not make it particularly vulnerable to Russia, so the issue of the SAFE program is not a major threat in that regard. Even though the island has been divided, stability has reigned since 1974. Nevertheless, another important regional actor and neighbor, Israel, a close partner of Cyprus, has a strong interest in excluding Türkiye from the SAFE program.

The EU should not allow its decisions to be influenced by external powers if it wants to remain credible on the world stage. Moreover, concerns have emerged in recent years about Austria, notably following the *Egisto Ott espionage case*, in which a former intelligence officer was accused of spying for Russia, a scandal that exposed serious vulnerabilities in European intelligence coordination and had consequences for the functioning of the entire Union.

### **Conclusion**

If the European Union wishes to remain credible on the international stage and consolidate its power in the interest of all member states, it must take these lessons seriously. Its legitimacy is increasingly contested both from within and from outside. The EU must affirm its autonomy in a world that is becoming ever more divided by uncertainty, conflict, and contempt for shared norms.