



**VI EDITION
2025-2026**

European Defence Challenge 6th edition
"From STEM to Strategy: Empowering Young Minds to
Shape Europe's Aerospace & Defence Future"

10 page proposal



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The European Defence Challenge was established under the ASSETS+ project (2020-2023)

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Expand the description to 10 pages (5000-6000 words) which should be a development of the previously submitted proposal.

A fresh view is valued. Please, defend your proposal by including not only technological, but also socio-economic, political, ethical and environmental aspects.

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A new approach to the concept of strategic culture

Strategic culture can be defined as the **distinctive national character of countries** rooted in language, history, religion, customs, leading them to **fight wars differently**. For many people, it wouldn't make sense to mobilize such a concept to talk about European defense.

"It's too early"

"RealPolitik is everything nowadays"

"Defense is a matter for national policy"

"Our interests don't align"

These are all sentences that are commonly accepted and even used to argue against a common European defense policy in all Member State's public debate. Let us say that **we strongly disagree with this old-school way of approaching defense and security issues**.

As globalization and interdependencies have heavily affected our societies, the need to elaborate a common policy on security topics is vital at times where uncertainty is omnipresent. Multilateralism is melting down, geopolitical rivalries are growing stronger, even on our own continent and despite the fact that we see wars multiplying on every part of the globe, showing the **clear imbalance between simply declarative values and real attachment to peace**. In order to create a sense of belonging and unity across our continent, we must not treat this issue solely under political lenses.

We must understand that European societies and individuals also play an instrumental role in the shaping and the enforcement of our defense policies.

Hence the need for a new approach to an ancestral concept of strategic thinking : **let's elaborate strategic culture at a micro-European level**. Because strategic culture is not some unchanging reality ; on the contrary, **it is a constantly moving and evolving concept**. Features leading countries to fight wars in specific manners also follow the direction of history and cannot escape the realities that result from it.

The most undeniable reality of our continent since the last major geopolitical challenge we faced is **the process of europeanization**. We bonded together, we undertook the way of unity and embraced shared values that define our action on the international scene. Because a successful defense policy is one that receives **full support and active participation from each citizen**, we must find ways to bolster **democratic accountability and societal resilience** in order to achieve an efficient and actually disruptive European defense.

Therefore, we argue that the future of European defense lies in the shaping of a shared European strategic culture, embracing the defining values of our continent and encouraging participation of all young Europeans.

Orbital Europe is the answer we found adequate, amongst other necessary steps, to achieve such an ambition for our continent.

Orbital Europe : a project designed to connect with European youth

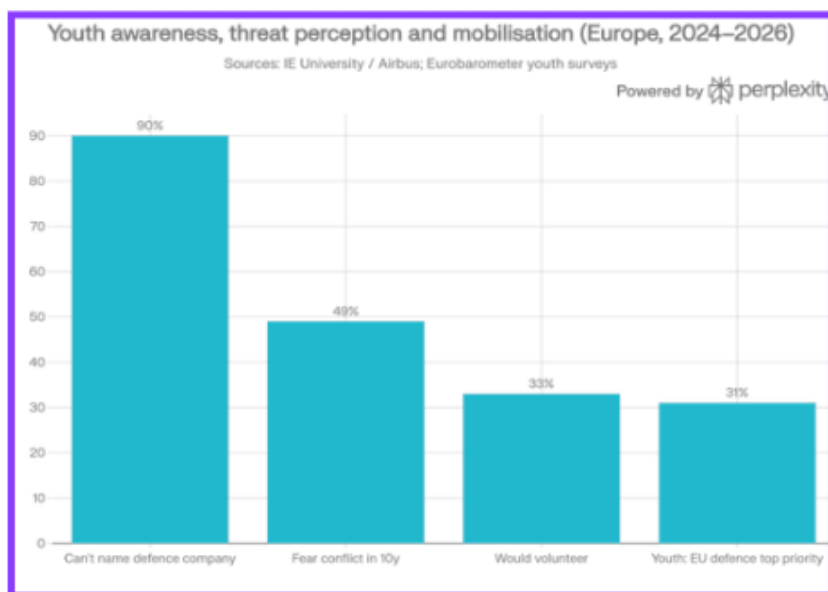
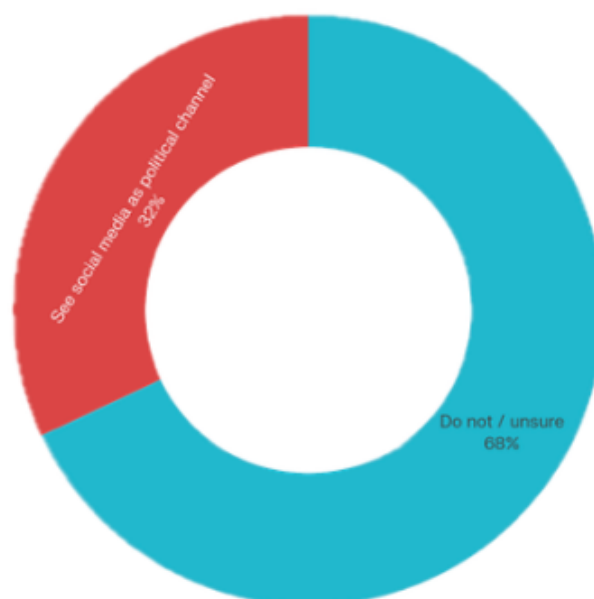
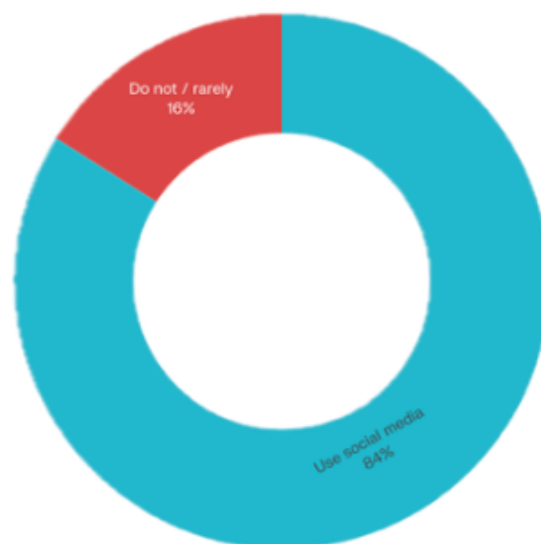
We believe that in European youth lies the most important potential of participation to the shaping of a European strategic culture, as it represents the **less included group in European political spheres**, yet the one from which **tomorrow's leaders and decision-makers will rise**.

As showed by these two polls, **84% of young Europeans use social media daily**, and **32% see social media as a political channel**. This shows the relevance of an integrative approach that passes through **digital platforms**, which is why we made the choice of an application.

The aim of Orbital Europe is to be as close as possible to youth habits to create a sense of familiarity in the learning of European defense issues

At the same time, young people are concerned with security issues, as **49% fear the possibility of a conflict in the next 10 years** and **31% of them consider defense EU's top priority**.

These numbers are even more striking in European countries where an imminent threat is perceived, like in Poland for example.



Yet, numbers show **the ambivalence** of such concerns, as many young Europeans remain **unaware** of continental defense issues. Today, **90%** of young people in Europe **can't name one defense company**.

Even when aware of defense issue, we see a **16 point gap** between the fear of a conflict occurring soon and the will to volunteer, which shows **that more can be done**.

Tackling cognitive security

Yes, number of European initiatives already exist to tackle defense education and awareness of societal resilience necessity, such as **academic programs targeting students in international relations and strategic studies, awareness campaigns, the NATO Youth delegates program...** But those efforts are **isolated**, they target specific audiences that are almost always already benefiting from **strong education and qualifications in these fields**.

There is a clear need for a **coherent Pan-European learning pathway** that includes all individuals, no matter their knowledge of defense issues, and with **no national lenses**, focusing much more on a **comparative European perspective rather than specific national narratives and concerns**.

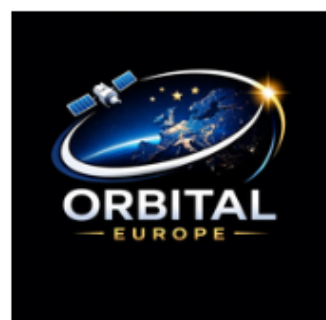
This lack of knowledge has **dramatic strategic consequences**, way beyond the simple aspects of youth disengagement and civic ignorance. In fact, in an environment of **intensifying hybrid threat** in which we evolve - Russian disinformation campaigns, foreign influence operations by countries such as China or Azerbaijan, polarized public spheres - the battle for **cognitive resilience** has become even more central because it threatens our very own capacity to **think commonly and organize ourselves as democratic societies**. In this context, **young people are extensively exposed** to manipulation and deliberate misinformation aimed at **undermining the civilian support** to European defense policy.

The EU's 'Democratic Shield' initiative explicitly recognizes this threat, treating **societal resilience and public trust as strategic assets**. However, as currently designed, the Democratic Shield operates primarily through **regulatory and institutional mechanisms** - the Digital Services Act, media monitoring, platform accountability - without a clear educational dimension targeting youth audiences. Building genuine resilience against cognitive attacks requires **not just regulation but formation**: citizens who possess the **analytical vocabulary and critical frameworks** to identify and resist cognitive attacks.



This step is crucial in the shaping of a strong capacity of societal resilience.

At times where young Europeans spend approximately 5 hours per day on social media, Orbital Europe aims at reclaiming the toxic codes of digital algorithms and reshape them into knowledge and competencies on defense issues.



Reconnecting STEM knowledge with strategic and political awareness

Furthermore, Orbital Europe aims at a broader impact than simply focusing on the general issues of European defense. Thanks to the specificities of the application, we contribute to a better interconnectiveness between the different key actors of the European defense architecture. More specifically, we target **STEM actors as an essential pillar of our strategy**. Indeed, Europe's aerospace and defense sectors are among the most technologically sophisticated in the world, employing hundreds of thousands of engineers, scientists, and technicians. Yet the dominant framing of STEM careers in these sectors - focused on technical excellence, innovation, and commercial opportunity - **systematically obscures the strategic, political, and ethical dimensions of the work being performed**.

A cybersecurity researcher developing defensive protocols is contributing to national resilience.

A satellite engineer designing observation systems for the Galileo programme is making choices that affect European sovereignty and strategic independence.

On the contrary, we must understand the **political use** of those fields and better integrate them into a **broader strategic reflexion** where the **technical expertise translates more directly into concrete propositions**. But in order to achieve this ambition, we need to create a concrete learning pathway where these qualified workers can understand their work in the broader political and institutional framework to which they participate.

Orbital Europe explicitly **bridges this gap** by offering **STEM-trained students** a framework to understand the **strategic significance of their technical expertise**. And on the other hand, **social sciences students** will also benefit from the same entry point to understand the **more complex and technical technologies** that allow for **the implementation of their decisions and policies**.

Orbital Europe : concept and pedagogical architecture

Orbital Europe is built on a simple principle of **step-by-step learning pathway** : the goal is not to produce experts in policy analysis or engineers on technical defense issues. The goal is to allow young Europeans, regardless of their academic background, to **grasp and engage with the strategic decisions** that shape their continent's security, and contribute to a common European strategic culture.

In order to anchor this principle into our project, we established **three priorities** in its design :

- **Accessibility** : all basic content must be designed for a **general and non-educated audience**, making the choice of **illustrative argumentation and concrete examples**, while also avoiding scientific and political **jargon**.
- **Graduality** : the app offers gradual steps to pass before entering into a complex in-depth analysis on strategic issues, letting the users **follow their own pace starting with basic knowledge**.
- **Thematic division** : the app's architecture is thought around different modules that explore the key themes of European defense policy, allowing the users to **navigate according to their interests and backgrounds**, while also ensuring that each one **functions with the same foundation**.

Architecture

To ensure a **common basis** to engage with before any further analysis of European strategic issues, the application is structured around a **compulsory module of foundation**, from which each user can design its **own learning experience afterwards** thanks to series of **optional thematic modules**.

The **Compulsory Foundation Module - Understand and Engage with European Defense** - is mandatory for all users after downloading the application and establishes the **conceptual framework** that situates the rest of the accessible knowledge. It covers the following key aspects of European Defense :

<i>Why a European Defense ?</i>	<i>Which actors and what role ? (EU, NATO, Member State...)</i>	<i>What is the concept of strategic autonomy and what practical implications ?</i>
<i>Current debates (budget pressure, capability gaps, societal resilience interoperability issues...)</i>	<i>An overview of the geography, the historical and current threats faced by the EU and the strengths and weaknesses of each country</i>	

Thematic modules will allow users to explore **specific dimensions** of European Defense including :

- **Aerospatial and air defense**
- **Cyber and cognitive security**
- **Naval defense**
- **European industrial defense complex**
- **Rule of law, ethics and operations**
- **Energy, climate and security**
- **Health security, civilian participation and democratic resilience**

Pedagogical formats

Short Learning Capsules : The main learning format of the app, matching the **usual consumption habits of young Europeans on classic social media**. The content is made to last up to 5 min, delivering one key concept or piece of knowledge written in a direct language and paired with a visual support (map, graphic...).

Quizzes and checks : Each capsule is paired with a short quiz to test the learning abilities of the user and propose instant clarifications to wrong answers.

Simulations of threat-based simulations : an immersive scenario aimed at testing the understanding of European defense decision-making. For example, a cyber-incident or an infrastructure destruction causes a chain of reaction that calls for immediate political decisions. What are the institutional responses available in such cases ? Multiple choices will be proposed to the users to help learning progressively the real possibilities to these fictive scenarios. Afterwards, concrete examples of answers and detailed description will be provided.

The EU Defense Map : an interactive visual tool highlighting the strenghts and weaknesses of each European country while also explaining "who does what" across the complex institutional architecture of European Defense, focusing on institutional scales and the nature of each actor.

Moderated Discussion Forums : a space for users to engage in strategic debates supported by evidence-check processes, organized by themes and thought in the long-term to support consultative mechanisms that will be channeled towards relevant EU institutions.

Funding architecture of Orbital Europe

Our Model

Orbital Europe draws inspiration from two French civic tech applications, Adeno and POL. Adeno was developed as a free, open-source application, relying on volunteer effort and academic partnerships rather than institutional funding, a model that proved effective for short-term deployment but fragile at scale.



Orbital Europe learns from this: its funding architecture is diversified from the outset, combining EU programme grants, national co-financing, university partnerships, and industry contributions, so that no single source holds decisive influence over the platform.

EU Programme Funding



Erasmus+

The most direct pathway is **Erasmus+ Key Action 2**, whose 2026 call (€5.2 billion total budget) funds cross-border cooperation projects building “civic skills and youth resilience to disinformation”. A consortium of five to seven European universities piloting the application would fit this instrument, with grants typically reaching €300,000–€500,000. The **Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL)** covers cybersecurity and digital literacy, directly applicable to Orbital Europe's cyber module and broader mission. **The European Defence Fund's 2026 Work Programme** (€1 billion) explicitly includes outreach and awareness actions outside competitive R&D calls, a relevant pathway given the platform's purpose.

Finally, successor instruments to ASSETs+, the Erasmus+ project that founded the EDC itself, represent a natural institutional home, with a proven consortium architecture already in place.

National co-financing

Several EU Member States have established national mechanisms directly applicable to Orbital Europe. In France, the Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN) funds civic resilience projects, the Direction Générale des Relations Internationales et de la Stratégie (DGRIS) finances educational outreach in the field of defence culture. Both are realistic bilateral partners for a French-led project with European ambition.



Equivalent mechanisms exist across Member States: Germany's Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung funds digital civic education tools, Poland's Ministry of National Defence supports national resilience education. National innovation agencies such as Bpifrance also offer relevant instruments.



Defence Industry Partnerships

Europe's major aerospace and defence industry players, **Airbus, Thales, Leonardo, Rheinmetall, Safran**, maintain active CSR and educational outreach programmes

Contributions structured as content sponsorship, not editorial influence, at €50,000–€200,000 per partner per year, with a strict publicly reported firewall preserving the platform's credibility.

Phase	Timeline	Budget	Primary sources
Prototype	2026–2027	€800k–€1.2M	Erasmus+ KA2, SGDSN/DGRIS, academic in-kind
Scaling	2027–2029	€300k–€450k/year	DIGITAL, national co-financing, university subscriptions
Consolidation	2029–2030	€400k–€500k/year	EDF outreach, industry partnerships, subscriptions

Impact and roadmap

Orbital Europe's impact operates at three levels :

- 1) At the individual level, it builds strategic literacy, the knowledge and critical frameworks that allow young Europeans to engage meaningfully with defences debates
- 2) At the community level, it creates shared reference points across borders, contributing to a genuinely European strategic culture rather than a collection of national perspectives
- 3) At the institutional level, a better-informed youth public strengthens the democratic legitimacy of European defence policy, making it more resilient to manipulation and more accountable to citizens.

deployment roadmap

First, our Prototype (2026–2027). The development of the foundation module and two thematic modules. Pilot launch with five European universities across four countries. Our target is around 10,000 active users, 10 institutional partners, and a content available in 6 languages (French, German, Italian, Spanish, Polish, English)

Phase 2 = Scaling (2027–2029). Full module suite (seven thematic modules). Expansion to 25+ university partners across 10 Member States. Launch of moderated discussion forums and EU Defence Map. Target: 100,000 active users, 50 institutional partners.

Finally, the consolidation (2029–2030). Full EU coverage, all 24 official languages, partnerships in all 27 Member States. Launch of consultative mechanisms: structured channels for youth recommendations to EU institutions. Target: 500,000 active users, first formal youth recommendation transmitted to EU institutional partners.

Governance, Content Partners and Data Sources

Editorial independence as a design principle

Orbital Europe is constituted as an **AISBL (Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif) under Belgian law**, the standard legal framework for pan-European civil society organisations recognised by EU institutions. Its governance has an objective of separating four functions. The **Board of Directors**, the **Editorial Board** (composed exclusively of academic experts and think tank researchers), the **Youth Advisory Board** (rotating membership from the user community, one seat on the Board of Directors), and a **Funder Consultative Forum** (non-voting). An annual transparency report is publicly accessible and submitted to EU institutional partners.

Content is validated by four anchor institutions: EUISS (the EU's own security think tank), Egmont Institute, SWP (direct interface with EU and NATO institutions), and ECFR. Additional partners like SIPRI, IISS, IFRI, PISM, FIIA cover quantitative data, capability analysis, and geographic breadth. Every content unit carries a visible source tag with a direct link. Primary sources include EDA Defence Data Reports, Eurobarometer surveys, SIPRI databases or the IISS Military Balances. **Content is reviewed every six months, all changes logged publicly.**

Risk managements

We identified **three risks that require active mitigation**. First, the **"Credibility risk"**: if perceived as an EU communication tool, the platform fails. Mitigation is editorial independence, no funder on the editorial board, transparent governance, genuine representation of debates. Then, we have to highlight the **"Engagement risk"**: defence content competes with entertainment on the same devices. Mitigation is continuous UX investment, content refresh tied to current events, and community features creating social incentives. Finally, the **"Manipulation risk"**. Discussion forums may be targeted by coordinated influence operations. Mitigation is robust moderation, collaboration with EEAS East StratCom Task Force and EDMO, and transparent communication with users about detected attempts.

Environmental considerations

Orbital Europe's digital format is itself an environmental choice: replacing physical events and travel-heavy conferences with an accessible mobile platform reduces the carbon footprint of defence education outreach. On the infrastructure side, the platform will be hosted exclusively on EU-based cloud servers powered by renewable energy. This will be in line with the EU's Green Deal digital commitments. The content is also designed for efficient delivery, minimising bandwidth consumption per user. At scale, the marginal environmental cost per additional user is negligible. Beyond its own footprint, Orbital Europe integrates the defence-climate nexus as explicit content. The energy security module covers the strategic implications of climate change and the environmental cost of military operations and procurement. This reflects the EU's own commitment to mainstreaming climate across all policy areas, including defence, and ensures users understand that ecological and security challenges are inseparable.

In 2026, Europe is rearming faster than at any point since the Cold War. Defence budgets are rising, new institutions are being built, the Strategic Compass gives the EU a clearer military ambition than it has ever had. Yet the citizens who will fund this effort, elect the governments that direct it, and live with its consequences remain largely outside the conversation. It is not by choice, but by design. The language of European defence is still primarily addressed to institutions, not to people.

Orbital Europe is a direct response to this gap. It is not a communication tool for European defence policy. It is an education tool for European citizens, one that takes the strategic complexity of our moment seriously enough to translate it. By connecting STEM knowledge to strategic understanding, individual learning to collective participation, it builds the one thing that no defence budget can buy: a citizenry that understands what is being decided in its name.

The result is not just an informed generation. It is a more resilient one, more capable of democratic oversight, and more likely to engage than to abstain. In an environment of hybrid threats and deliberate disinformation, this is not a secondary objective. It is itself a dimension of European security.

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