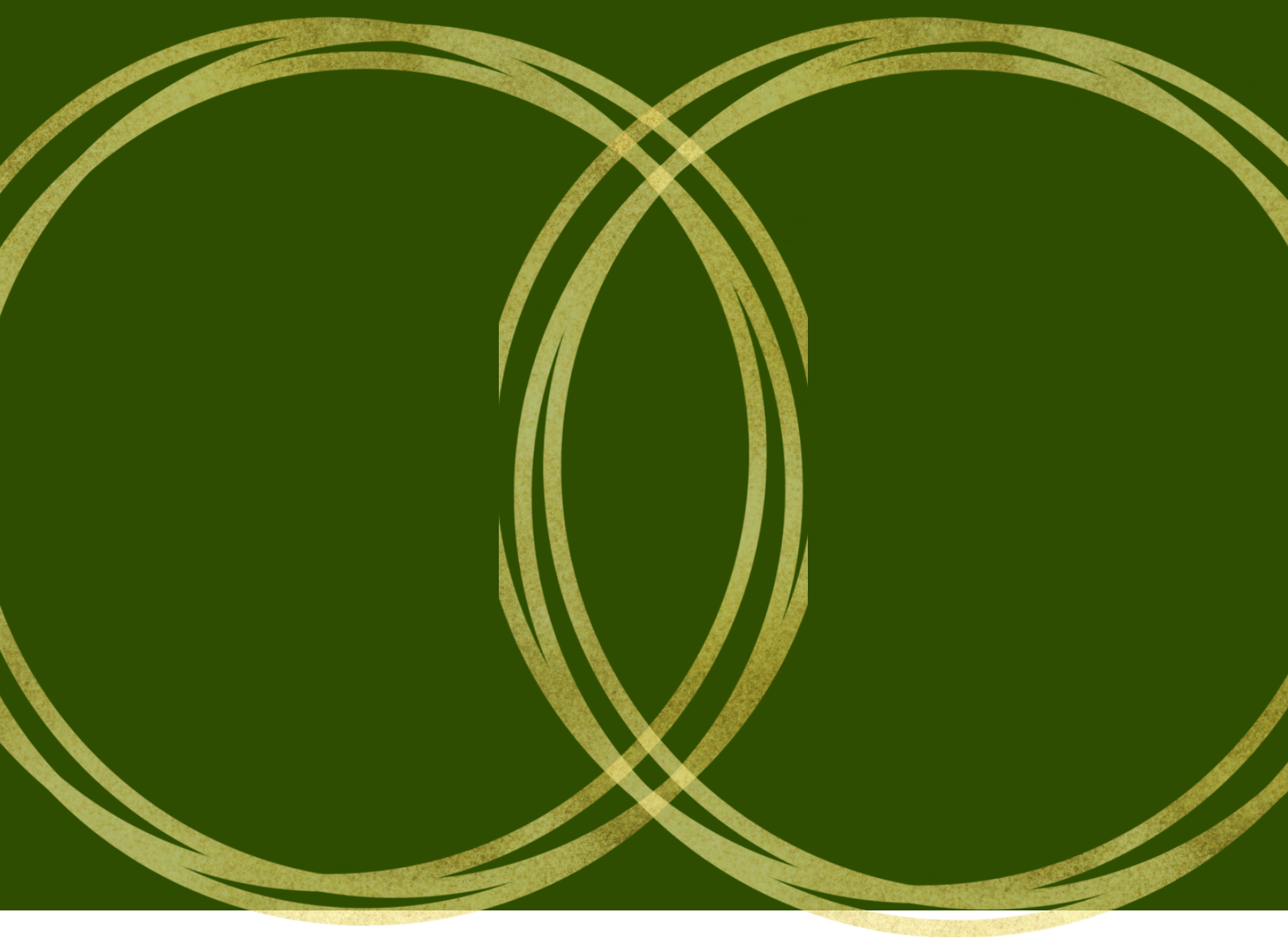




**Adult Learning and  
Education as a key  
solution for the  
security challenges  
ahead**

*EAEA's Background Paper on  
Peace and Security*



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# Introduction: The context of security and defense related to education

The European Union faces a shifting geopolitical landscape, in which the United States is seeking closer ties with the aggressor in the war against Ukraine, contemplating the withdrawal of support to Kyiv, threatening to curtail security guarantees for Europe, showing disregard for established international norms, and significantly reducing funding in the education sector. At the same time, internal security challenges are mounting. Power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of right-wing populist governments, raising concerns about democratic backsliding, weakening institutions, eroding fundamental rights. These trends pose a serious question: how can European societies transcend such pressure? How can they foster free thinking, independent collaboration, and civic engagement?

Strengthening security and defence is an understandable priority from the EU and its Member States, given the actual geopolitical circumstances. And this commitment was reinforced during the *Munich Security Conference*, held from 14 to 16 February 2025, by President Ursula von der Leyen asserted an increase in defence and security spending from 2% of GDP (amounting to €320 billion) to over 3%.

In this regard, *The ReArm Europe Plan*, which came out in March, also known as Readiness 2030, outlines various financial tools to help Member States increase their defence spending. It proposes a temporary easing of budget rules under the *Stability and Growth Pact*, which normally limits how much governments can borrow and spend, allowing countries greater flexibility to invest in defence. A new scheme would provide €150 billion in loans to support these investments, while Member States would also have the option to redirect some EU development funds towards defence.

Finally, *The White Paper on European Defence* adds increased military assistance to Ukraine, deeper integration between European and Ukrainian defence industries, and aims to boost European readiness for worst-case scenarios by improving military mobility, stockpiling, and securing external borders — particularly with Russia and Belarus — while also strengthening global partnerships with like-minded nations. [1]

But it is not just the European Union getting ready with reforms and plans, Member States are themselves being proactive in the race of preparedness and readiness.

During the first two months of 2025, 115,000 Lithuanians enrolled in civil resilience courses organised by the Lithuanian Ministry of Defence. [2] The Latvian authorities provided guidance on how citizens should respond in the event of armed conflict. [3]

1. [Commission unveils the White Paper for European Defence and the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030](#)

2. [Civil resistance courses gain popularity in Lithuania amid growing uncertainty](#)

3. [Rokasgrāmata "Kā rīkoties kara gadījumā" \[Handbook "How to act in case of war"\]](#)

4. [Do you know how to prepare for different situations and act during them?](#)

5. [USTAWA z dnia 5 grudnia 2024 r. o ochronie ludności i obronie cywilnej \[ACT of 5 December 2024 on the protection of the population and civil defence\]](#)

Next to the Latvian example, Finland, has inaugurated the launch of its new government website offering practical emergency guidance to help citizens prepare for incidents, crises, and military conflict. [4] And last but not least, Poland introduced a new Civil Protection Act, aimed at raising public awareness and delivering practical trainings on civil protection and civil defence that will be also delivered in schools. [5]

The Polish efforts are accompanied by a growing defence cooperation among EU Member States and exemplified by the Joint Polish-Swedish statement on enhanced collaboration in civil defence, issued on 19 February 2025. [6]

As we can comprehend, Member States are already moving towards a more military approach to changes in security policy. The *Union of Skills* [7], one of the core initiatives of the new Commission is also leaving the doubt whether the non-formal education sector will take the toll and risk being underfunded both by the National and European administration. In light of this, there is significant concern that the public sector does not perceive the immediate impact of education on improving security.

The background paper does not want to fully reject the narrative of peace and defence, but aims at highlighting that education must be seen not only as an integral component of security, but also as an essential tool for building resilience, promoting well-being, fostering civic engagement, and ensuring democratic stability. And to reach this, it requires cooperation between the formal and non-formal actors, with the same recognition and value to provide the best education to the learners. By showcasing good practices, it illustrates how education reinforces shared European values and democratic citizenship, while contributing to long-term security.

Security and education represent two fundamental pillars of a stable and prosperous society. The concept of security extends beyond protection from military aggression or safeguarding national interests in foreign policy. It also includes ensuring the conditions for peace, stability, and the well-being of individuals and communities, while guaranteeing that their rights and dignity are fully respected. [8]

*The European Union's Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy* underscores its commitment to strengthening societal resilience through enhanced efforts in education, cultural engagement, and youth development. [9] The European Association for the Education of Adults, in its *Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century*, emphasises adult learning and education (ALE) as a key solution to many of Europe's security challenges — including armed conflicts, the rise of authoritarianism, geopolitical tensions, environmental crises, and emergencies both within Europe and globally. [10]

6. [Joint Polish-Swedish statement on strengthened cooperation concerning civil defence](#)

7. [Union of skills: Investing in people for a competitive European Union](#)

8. [UNDP, Human Development Report, 1994, p.22](#)

9. [Union of skills: Investing in people for a competitive European Union](#)

10. [The Power and Joy of Learning, EAEA Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century.](#)

# The role of ALE in enhancing security

## Conflict Resolution

According to the Global Peace Index, 56 conflicts are currently ongoing, with 92 countries engaged in conflicts beyond their own borders. [11] The Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy identifies as a priority to foster human security through an integrated approach to conflicts and crises, investing in prevention, resolution and stabilisation. [12]

In this context, ALE is essential in promoting peace, active citizenship, reconciliation, and social cohesion. It addresses the educational needs of displaced populations, minorities, and communities and supports them in rehabilitating after conflict. [13] In post-conflict areas, adult education plays a vital role in rebuilding democracy, restoring trust in governance, and fostering participation in local decision-making — helping to ensure that peace is sustained over time. [14] ALE develops the skills and critical thinking necessary for peacebuilding, problem-solving, and meaningful civic dialogue.

Under the category *Adult Education Projects that Promote Peace and Conflict Resolution* of the EAEA Grundtvig Award, the project “Vygonoshchi Fortress” was recognised for its innovative approach. [15] The project focused on restoring two old guard posts, recognised as national historical and cultural heritage sites, in order to keep alive the memory of World War I. It brought together local communities through activities such as setting up a museum exhibition, collecting personal stories, and encouraging reflection on lessons from the past. By exploring the experiences of survivors and their descendants, the initiative raised awareness of the war's consequences inspiring discussion on its relevance to modern European society.

“Vygonoshchi Fortress” gained widespread public and media attention. During its implementation, it was featured in six television reports, four radio broadcasts, and six online and newspaper articles. Furthermore, 15 out of the 64 participants at the final seminar stated they would continue promoting the history of World War I, helping to ensure its lessons are passed on to future generations. The award ceremony took place on 13 November 2014 at Sarajevo City Hall, Bosnia and Herzegovina — a location deeply embedded in European history, conflict, and peace efforts. The project's success highlights how education can preserve historical memory, foster dialogue, and strengthen communities in times of growing social and political tension.

11. [Global Peace Index 2024](#)

12. [Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy](#)

13. [UNESCO, Sixth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education \(GrALE 6\), Concept note, 2024](#)

14. [Schweighöfer, B., Citizenship education and ALE. Edited by U. Gartenschlaeger and A.Thöne. Bonn: DVV International \(International Perspectives in Adult Education\)](#)

Another example of peace education is the Youth4Disarmament initiative, launched in 2019 by the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA). Aimed at eliminating war as an instrument of foreign policy and protecting future generations from conflict, the initiative recognises the vital role of youth in driving change. Youth4Disarmament connects young people from diverse backgrounds with international security experts, enabling them to learn about disarmament, global security challenges, and the work of the United Nations. By placing youth engagement at the heart of its educational efforts, UNODA supports the UN Secretary-General's recommendations to improve youth access to technical expertise and capacity-building opportunities. Through disarmament education, the initiative empowers young people to contribute to sustainable peace — not only as national citizens but as global citizens committed to a safer, more peaceful world.

## Disinformation

86% of Europeans agree that the rapid spread of disinformation is a major problem for democracy. [17] The digital space has become a battleground in which authoritarian state actors manipulate public opinion and sow division to weaken democratic societies. The European External Action Service identifies Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) as a growing security and foreign policy threat to the European Union, with particular attention to the activities of Russia and China. [18]

False narratives, manipulated content, and misleading information — increasingly amplified by artificial intelligence — spread rapidly via social media, influencing public perception, fuelling polarisation, and undermining trust in democratic institutions. This erodes social cohesion and security by generating instability and increasing vulnerability to external influence. Disinformation related to medical topics, such as vaccines and pandemics, endangers lives and undermines effective public health responses. Fake news campaigns targeting governments, media, and civil society organisations further erode public trust in factual reporting, undermining the crucial role of NGOs in supporting the population and creating a bridge of trust between the public sector and the civil society. Older adults are particularly susceptible to such manipulation, often due to limited media literacy or low digital skills. [19]

Adult learning and education is key to countering the spread of disinformation. It enhances individuals' capacity to critically assess information, distinguish fact from fiction, and engage responsibly in democratic life. By understanding cognitive biases, propaganda techniques, and the manipulation of digital content, learners are empowered to make informed decisions and resist disinformation.

15. EAEA, *Grundtvig Award: REMEMBERING WORLD WAR I FOR THE FUTURE adult education promoting peace and cohesion in Europe, 2014*, p. 41.

16. [The Youth4Disarmament Initiative and its mandate](#)

17. [Protecting our democracy, upholding our values](#)

18. [Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference \(FIMI\)](#)

19. [Digital skills in 2023: impact of education and age](#)

EAEA welcomes the commitment of the Union of Skills in providing basic and digital skills to adults that will fight these threats, but non-formal education should be considered more in the constructing of an ad hoc strategy that can tackle disinformation and attacks to our democracy.

*The Action Plan Against Disinformation*, a joint communication from the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, highlights the importance of building societal resilience. It stresses that long-term, coordinated efforts are needed to support education, media literacy, academic research, and civil society engagement. [20] One of the key pillars of this plan is the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) — a hub that brings together fact-checkers, academics, media organisations, and media literacy experts to collaborate and provide support to policy-makers. [21]

As a member of the EDMO, Wojownicy Klawiatury stands out as an innovative project initiative actively engaged in the fight against disinformation. This fact-checking initiative operates both online and offline, actively countering manipulated content and false narratives. [22] Through its website and social media channels, the project connects individuals committed to opposing disinformation and encourages public reactions to fake news - highlighting that nearly 80% of internet users do not verify the information they consume, and silence often contributes to the spread of falsehoods.

As part of its mission, Wojownicy Klawiatury established the Digital Academy for Combating Disinformation 2025, offering educational workshops and training sessions. [23] These range from basic open-access modules to advanced, specialised courses tailored for journalists and researchers. The Academy educates students, professionals, and civil society actors on how disinformation operates and provides practical tools for identifying and responding to it.

Participants learn not only how to detect false or misleading content, but also how to use verification tools - for example, to determine the exact location and time a photo or video was taken. This initiative exemplifies how structured non-formal education can empower individuals and communities to critically engage with digital content and play an active role in maintaining information integrity.

20. [European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, \(2018\), Action plan against disinformation \(JOIN\(2018\) 36 final\), European Union.](#)

21. [European Digital Media Observatory \(EDMO\).](#)

22. [o projekcie](#)

23. [Dezinformacja – weź ją na radar! Cyfrowa Akademia Walki z Dezinformacją 2025](#)



# Work Resilience and Green Transition

Automation, artificial intelligence, and digitalisation are increasingly replacing traditional job roles, while new positions are emerging in green technologies and the digital economy. The Future of Jobs Report predicts that by 2027, nearly a quarter (23%) of jobs will undergo significant transformation, highlighting the need for workers to adapt to evolving market demands. To meet these challenges, it is crucial to invest in adult education, develop digital skills, and promote flexible learning formats, enabling workers to adjust to new professional realities. [24] But regardless of these provisions, Europe still finds itself behind the US and China when it comes to digital skills with a high rate of brain drain and a low rate of innovative technologies, forcing thousands of young brilliant minds to move outside Europe. [25]

According to Mario Draghi's report on The Future of European Competitiveness, the European Union should ensure that all workers have the right to education and retraining, enabling them to transition into new roles as their companies adopt emerging technologies, or to access quality employment in new sectors. The report emphasises that, in order to remain competitive on a global scale, Europe must not only foster innovation but also place a stronger emphasis on education and lifelong learning. [26]

ALE plays a crucial role in retraining workers, particularly those in carbon-intensive industries, helping them transition into more sustainable sectors. From renewable energy to eco-friendly agriculture, ALE promotes innovation and green entrepreneurship, equipping individuals with the skills needed to actively engage in the green economy. [27]

As a vital component of non-formal education, ALE assists workers - especially those from marginalized backgrounds and individuals who faced economic or social barriers to formal education - in adjusting to economic shifts and managing an unpredictable labour market. It enhances opportunities for upskilling, reskilling, and flexible learning routes, ensuring equal access to lifelong education.

Upskilling and reskilling are key elements also for retaining workers in Europe by opening doors, giving opportunities and motivating learners to do what they want to do here, without being forced to move outside the Union to achieve their dreams. To achieve this, non-formal education should be considered as the right tool to support employers in this transition.

24. [Future of Jobs Report, World Economic Forum, 2023.](#)

25. [The future of European competitiveness: Report by Mario Draghi](#)

26. *Ibidem.*

27. [OECD Skills Outlook 2023: skills for a resilient, green and digital transition](#)

The importance of adult education, even in conditions of security threats, is exemplified by the efforts of Ukrainian civil society and the government. A member of the EAEA, the Ukrainian Adult Education Association (UAEA), as one of the initiators of the draft law "On Adult Education", has demonstrated how a strong and engaged civil society can drive policy change, ensuring that education remains a priority even in times of crisis. In January 2023, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the draft law in its first reading, marking a significant step towards improving lifelong learning opportunities. The law aims to enhance employment opportunities, support personal and professional development, involve employers in workplace training, and ensure fair competition and accessibility in adult education. By protecting the rights of learners, employers, and educators, this initiative contributes not only to individual empowerment but also to the broader goal of peacebuilding and national resilience. [28]

## Climate Change

77% of EU citizens view climate change as a serious issue at the moment. [29] Higher temperatures, more extreme weather, and damage to the environment are putting many communities in danger. We are all dealing with important issues like losing plants and animals, wasting food, dirty air, plastic waste, and soil damage. The scale of the climate crisis can feel overwhelming and it underscores the critical need to integrate sustainability into education and training and to invest in sustainable solutions at the individual, community, and institutional levels. According to the Climate Change Synthesis Report, improving education – including helping people understand climate issues, offering training, and sharing useful information in communities – can help people better understand the risks and encourage quicker changes in behaviour and planning. [30]

A UNESCO report shows that adult learning and education play an important role in tackling climate change by giving people and communities the knowledge and skills to take meaningful action and become more resilient to environmental challenges. [31]

The EAEA's Manifesto highlights that Adult Learning and Education helps to achieve all 17 Sustainable Development Goals by supporting change, including in the area of the environment. ALE offers knowledge, spaces to share ideas, and encourages creativity to help people find new ways of living, working, and thinking that support the green transition and sustainable future. This can mean hands-on solutions to everyday issues – like recycling, reusing materials, growing food in cities, or preserving bees – but also creating chances for people to discuss, listen, and engage in wider discussions. This helps everyone understand each other's role and look more deeply into the cause of the problems we face. [32]

28. [LEGISLATION IN THE FIELD OF ADULT EDUCATION](#)

29. [Eurobarometer: Majority of Europeans consider that the green transition should go faster](#)

30. [IPCC, Climate Change Synthesis Report, 2023](#)

31. [UNESCO, Sixth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education \(GrALE 6\), Concept note, 2024](#)

32. [The Power and Joy of Learning, EAEA Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st Century](#)

The SMALEI project (Sustainability Matrix for Adult Learning and Education Institutions) is an excellent example of how adult learning and education and non-formal education can be effectively applied to address climate change. This initiative supports educational institutions in assessing and strengthening their commitment to sustainable development by offering practical tools and guidance for implementing environmentally responsible practices.

Over the course of its three-year implementation, the project has developed a range of practical educational tools that support ALE providers in embedding sustainability principles into their everyday work. The key outputs include the SMALEI Matrix, a Workbook, a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course), and a Digital Academy. [33]

These resources serve as a roadmap for institutions, helping them to systematically implement green practices across five core areas: institutional sustainability, learner engagement, public awareness and community action, partnership building for sustainable development, and strengthening green competencies among educators and staff. [34]

SMALEI promotes the development of competences related to environmental protection, encourages the active involvement of learners and educators in climate-related actions, and strengthens the role of non-formal education as an effective tool for building ecological awareness and community engagement. The project demonstrates how education can drive the transformation of ALE institutions towards more sustainable and socially responsible models of operation.

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33. [Welcome to the resource page, where you can find all of the outputs of SMALEI](#)

34. [Sustainability Matrix for Adult Education Institutions - About](#)

# Conclusions

In an era defined by climate emergencies, escalating geopolitical instabilities, threats to democracy both within Europe and beyond, and rapid technological change, the continent faces an increasingly complex security landscape. While enhancing military capabilities is a necessary response, it is becoming clearer that a comprehensive and forward-looking approach to security must also prioritise education — through a joint approach to formal and non-formal education.

ALE stands out as a crucial driver of long-term resilience, democratic stability and civic empowerment and engagement. It equips individuals and communities to navigate uncertainty, think critically, counter disinformation, adapt to green and digital transitions, and participate actively in public life. Non-formal adult education can provide flexible, inclusive, and accessible learning pathways, especially for those most at risk of exclusion.

The good practices highlighted throughout this paper clearly demonstrate that adult education is a frontline defence for democracy, peace and social cohesion. To ensure Europe is truly prepared for future security challenges, it is essential that ALE is given the recognition, funding, and strategic role it deserves within the security and development framework set out by the Commission. By valuing adult education not only as a social good but a strategic pillar of security policy, the EU and its Member States can reinforce shared values, promote inclusive prosperity, and build a more resilient, democratic, and peaceful future.

# Key points

A few key points can be considered as a summary of the background paper, as general take-aways of the importance of ALE also when it comes to security and defence:

- Raise public awareness of the long-term benefits of non-formal education in strengthening security and resilience. This includes clearly communicating how lifelong learning contributes to a safer and more stable society. Making these connections visible can help sustain public and political support for educational initiatives focused on prevention.
- Support adult learning and education as a strategic response to Europe's evolving security challenges.
- Increasing the budget allocated to education as part of the European strategy of defence.
- Promote non-formal adult education as an effective tool for prevention, particularly in addressing radicalisation, disinformation, and social polarisation. ALE empowers individuals and communities to respond constructively to emerging threats.
- Contribute to the sustainable transformation of ALE institutions by equipping educators with the competences needed to teach for sustainable development. This includes fostering cross-sectoral partnerships to advance environmental awareness, climate action, and joint responses to ecological challenges.



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