EU Institutional Weaknesses and Need for Coordination in Underwater Critical Infrastructure Security

KEY POINTS

1. **The fact that everyone in Europe is so dependent on underwater cables creates a major security vulnerability for all of us.** When these cables are damaged, the internet can be disrupted, electricity can go out, and daily commerce can be disrupted.

2. **The European Union is trying to do something, which is good, but things aren't very coordinated on the ground.** Countries and the companies managing this need to find a clear answer to the question of "what will we do if there is a problem?" and speed up communication and cooperation.

3. **If EU countries work together and develop a common plan, we can reduce this vulnerability.** Everyone adhering to the same rules, cooperation between neighboring countries, and having repair teams on standby will prevent major problems in the future.

Summary

This study examines the question: *"How can the EU increase cooperation between countries to protect critical underwater pipelines and cables from sabotage or accidents?"*

The main hypothesis is that it is positive that the EU is developing new strategies on cable security; however, for real protection, countries must work together, share information quickly, and increase technical repair capacity.

The solution requires establishing common operational standards at the EU level and increasing interregional cable security cooperation. In addition, regular cross-border exercises should be conducted to prepare for crises, and rapid access to repair resources in case of a malfunction should be ensured.

Target audience: European Commission, Council of the European Union, European Parliament and EU Member States.

Keywords: European security; critical infrastructure; submarine cables

1. Underwater Infrastructure

The functioning of modern Europe largely depends on communication cables and power lines running under the sea. According to European Commission data, almost 99% of global internet traffic is transmitted through these underwater cables. These networks, which both establish digital connections between countries and link energy markets, have become the invisible but most vital arteries of today's European society. However, their critical role also makes them a huge security vulnerability. Both maritime accidents and deliberately orchestrated sabotage pose serious threats to these systems. Moreover, the fact that these lines pass through international waters and across the borders of different countries makes the job even more difficult. In the event of any damage, finding the source of the problem, managing joint intervention between countries, and restoring the system to working order creates a very complex process involving many different institutions and private companies.

The Council of the European Union also considers attacks on this underwater infrastructure, cyber threats, and maritime risks as a direct security crisis (Council of the European Union, n.d.). As a result, protecting these lines is not just a technical engineering problem; it is directly related to the continent's economic balance, energy supply, and geopolitical cooperation. The crucial question today is not so much how to prevent this damage, but how European states will come together and show a common response in the event of a potential crisis.

2. Measures Taken by the EU and Problems Experienced in Implementation

The European Union has recently begun to take quite concrete steps against these threats. Indeed, the European Commission and the Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented the "EU Cable Security Action Plan" to the public in February 2025. This plan is based on four fundamental pillars: prevention, detection, intervention/repair, and deterrence (European Commission & HRVP, 2025).

In addition, the Commission published a comprehensive report in October 2025 examining how secure and resilient submarine cable infrastructures are. Subsequently, in February 2026, the "Cable Security Toolkit" was announced. In line with this, a budget of €347 million was allocated to support critical submarine cable projects; €20 million of this allocation was directly dedicated to increasing emergency repair capabilities (European Commission, 2025, 2026).

These steps are undoubtedly very valuable developments. However, the acceptance of a common plan on paper across the EU does not mean that member states have the same operational capacity or mechanisms operating at the same speed in the field. Each country has its own coast guard teams, military institutions, telecommunications companies, and actors in the energy sector with different authorities, responsibilities, and data sharing networks. As highlighted in the study by Liebetrau and Bueger (2024), this intense political interest in protecting critical maritime infrastructure urgently needs to be translated into practical and functional coordination mechanisms. This is particularly vital in transboundary crises or when specially equipped repair vessels and technical equipment need to be rapidly deployed to the region.

In short, the main gap that this policy brief aims to highlight is not that the EU has no policy on this issue; rather, it is the risks involved in translating existing policies into action and

ensuring inter-institutional coordination. Unless regular joint exercises are conducted, clear communication channels are established, and access to emergency resources is facilitated, this disparity in preparedness levels among member states will severely slow the speed of a joint response in the event of a crisis.

3. Policy Recommendations

Establishing common minimum operational standards. The European Commission, working with member states, needs to establish basic rules for reporting cable failures, sharing data, and taking rapid action in times of crisis. These rules should clarify which institutions will be involved in the event of an incident, which data will be transmitted, and how the division of labor will be carried out. Of course, the confidentiality of critical security information must be strictly observed throughout this process.

Increasing regional cooperation on cable security. It is important for countries sharing the same maritime borders to strengthen their joint efforts in the field of regional cable security. For this, direct communication channels should be established between official institutions, companies, and EU bodies. In addition, regular joint exercises should be organized between countries to be prepared for different crisis situations, such as scenarios where both internet and electricity grids are simultaneously disrupted.

Improving emergency repair capabilities and infrastructure capacity. The EU and member states need to seriously review whether they have enough repair vessels, necessary equipment, and expert personnel at their disposal in the event of a major crisis. When allocating the EU budget, priority should be given to critically important lines, rapid response preparations, and alternative routes that will avoid reliance on a single cable. Finally, state institutions and private sector firms should have binding agreements in advance regarding the use of repair equipment and resources in emergency situations.

Conclusion

The security of underwater infrastructure is vital for both Europe's digital independence and energy supply. While the EU has taken significant steps in this area with the 2025 Action Plan and new funding, these decisions on paper must translate into action on the ground. This requires genuine cooperation among member states, not just lip service. To make the process more efficient, common operational standards should be established, regional exercises should be intensified, and most importantly, emergency repair capacity should be increased in the event of damage. Only when these practical steps are taken can the EU's current commitments transform into a realistic and deterrent security strategy.

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