

Embracing Geopolitical Europe

February 2022 marked the end of the world as we knew it for the last couple of decades. Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shaken the established status quo in many corners of the globe, most of all in Europe. The invasion took many by surprise, yet for those like myself who grew up in a country in Russia's shadow, the war was a logical consequence of Russia's imperialist ambitions met by weakness from the West. Because of our experience and collective memory of Russian occupation, we knew that when the "conflict" – which was also a punishment of Ukrainians for choosing Europe over Russia – started in 2014, it was only a matter of time until it would turn into a full-scale war.

In December 2021, Russia presented its revisionist demands, claiming spheres of influence over former colonies, and insisting on the withdrawal of NATO from its border. It was clear that the West – in contrast to the EU's wish to stay out of geopolitics – was now entangled in geopolitical struggle and a zero-sum game with Russia as their interests – sovereignty and democracy versus spheres of influence and autocracy – became mutually exclusive. Consequently, the West did not agree on dividing Europe into spheres of influence, i.e., unilaterally negotiating sovereignty of Eastern European nations and submitting to Russia's revisionist demands undermining the rules-based order. Thus, for us, these demands were a declaration of war on Ukraine and to a larger extent on the West. As such, if Russia does not lose this war, it will only continue and spill over into its neighbours. Recently, several high-ranking officials of European countries have warned that sooner or later, Russia could attack NATO.

Indeed, Russia's aggression towards Ukraine came as no surprise. But what truly proved astounding, however, was Europe's cohesive, well-coordinated, and determined response to the invasion, together with the United States and other allies. This was a sharp contrast to 2014 – the real beginning of the war of aggression by Russia with the annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in the Donbas region – when EU leaders merely responded with "concern" and "condemnation". It is true that the West imposed sanctions on Russia as well as starting to support Ukraine through different measures and programmes mainly in political, governance, economic, and humanitarian spheres, and even with limited military training. However, this was far from enough. We can argue that back then, the EU largely disengaged from the conflict and full responsibility was delegated to "big players" to solve the issue while most European countries continued their business as usual with Russia; just to mention the infamous Nord-Stream 2 – with further increasing energy dependency – is enough.

In contrast, the full-scale invasion was met with a different response. We saw unprecedented mobilisation of democracies to support Ukraine. Throughout this critical period, the phrase "for the first time ever" has appeared ever more frequently; weapon deliveries, financial support, sanctions, and so on and so forth. Meanwhile, European leaders started to focus on their own military that had been neglected and in decline for the past decades. With this illegal invasion, the dream of perpetual peace came to an end, whilst exposing the policy failure – despite repeated warnings by Central and Eastern European countries – of appeasing Russia and its revisionist dictator. It is evident, or we would hope so, that Europeans have adapted their paradigm. Nothing can illustrate this transformation better than a statement from the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, who proclaimed "the awakening of geopolitical Europe."

How should we respond to this as the Greens?

Often, when security is discussed in the political mainstream, the focus is military, borders, police, and so on while energy, technology, social cohesion, the rule of law, and human rights are overlooked. Yet when the Greens, on the other hand, speak about security, the emphasis is on exactly these issues. We know that there can be no security policy without a holistic approach: taking into account where our energy comes from, how clean and sustainable our environment is, how protected our rights are, etc. At the same time, we fall in the opposite trap that we leave out the crucial component of security –

hard power. Admittedly, it might not be the most comfortable and natural position to talk about the military, but once again, the times have changed, and we must change with them. As the former Green Foreign Minister of Germany, Joschka Fischer, said in a recent interview while calling for a necessary ramping up of weapons “I would never have dreamed in my life that I would say such a sentence at the age of 75. But the world has changed. Holding onto one’s own opinion when external conditions change is not a badge of wisdom.”

The world is becoming more and more like a jungle, reminiscent of past times. Revisionist powers are deliberately eroding the international rules-based order, resulting in increased conflicts in every corner of the globe. The ambitions of Russia over Eastern Europe, China over Taiwan and South-East Asia, and Iran in the Middle East, along with their global aspirations, are incompatible with peace and stability. Despite the more complex character of international politics and debates over multipolarity, at its core, it is apparent that on one side, there are democracies while on the other there are autocracies. Therefore, democracies have a responsibility to stand together and defend the rules-based order, while autocracies must be deterred and contained. Certainly, there is a room for diplomacy and multilateral engagements, especially with China – particularly in areas like the climate crisis, where joint efforts are critical and inevitable. Still, *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. This is the lesson from Ukraine. And we need to learn it.

On that account, I believe that the Greens must be advocates for a stronger, geopolitical European Union that is projecting power outwards; actively promoting and defending democratic values, freedom, human rights, the inclusion of the underprivileged, and climate and environmental protection in every corner of the globe.

Let us now focus on a few key pillars for a geopolitical Union, as also outlined by HRVP. First and foremost, there is rearmament. In the span of the last couple of decades, Europe has seen significant decreases in defence expenditure, leading to a heavy security reliance on the US and its nuclear umbrella. In the 1960s, European countries’ military spending was 4% of GDP, while it dropped to only 1.5% in the 2020s. February 2022 marked a turning point and promised a reversal of the trend – a *Zeitenwende* as Germany’s Chancellor noted while committing to mobilise €100bn for its armed forces. As there is no security without hard power, Europe must be ready to act on its own. This is not a call for a so-called “strategic autonomy”. To the contrary, we must deepen the transatlantic alliance, while simultaneously upgrading Europe’s capabilities to be prepared for the worst case scenarios. We also know that we cannot fully depend on the US as we are anxiously awaiting results of the presidential elections later this year, where we might see a comeback of Donald Trump who, among many other well-known problems, recently made headlines after revelations that he said “the US would never come to help” if Europe was attacked and that “NATO is dead”.

The second point is enlargement. Neglecting the neighbourhood including the South Caucasus and the Western Balkans and leaving them susceptible to the influence of autocratic actors, is not an option. As we mentioned above, the EU is involved in a geopolitical contest for the region and any concession represents a security threat that will undermine peace and stability as well as power projection of the EU. Europe must be actively engaged, promoting the rule of law, human rights, and democracy while supporting pro-European forces on the ground as well as economically through development programmes and trade. Moreover, it should use its leverage, in close coordination with the US, and impede democratic backsliding – especially noteworthy in Serbia and Georgia – taking action rather than mere condemnation to deter revisionist forces, such as Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from destabilising the region. The EU’s has been damaged due to an inadequate and limited response – despite diplomatic efforts and humanitarian assistance – to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where it was sidelined as the world witnessed the ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population in the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

As Azerbaijan now openly threatens Armenia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the EU’s credibility will once again be tested. Similarly, accession, as has traditionally happened, cannot be protracted over decades only to result in disappointment, fuel anti-EU sentiment, and possibly contribute to rise

of anti-democratic, populist forces. Just as granting candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia was primarily a geopolitical decision, the accession process should remain the same.

Third, Europe cannot be isolationist and must engage in geopolitics to counter the growing influence of China as well as Russia. The EU has capabilities to help nations in the Global South overcome economic difficulties, aid in Green transition, provide humanitarian assistance, and support civil society. This includes upgrading and investing in strategic initiatives such as the Global Gateway. At the same time, we must be loud to condemn and put pressure on authoritarian regimes, not shying away from different options including sanctions. As Estonia's Foreign Minister put it: "We need to recognise that the countries that most seriously violate international commitments to other countries are also more likely to have already violated their own domestic commitments to their citizenry. The promotion of human rights and basic freedoms needs to become a natural part of global security policy". At the same, we can acknowledge that this is most likely the hardest task to fulfil for two primary reasons.

First, the EU struggles with common foreign policy due to ineffective decision-making and significant differences between member states. Nothing illustrates this better than inconsistent positions regarding the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza – again damaging the EU's credibility. Second, Europe's colonial past puts global engagement in an awkward position, especially from a progressive point of view. Here, I would argue that, yes, Europe should come to terms with the darker side of its history. Nevertheless, it needs to thwart autocrats from exploiting anti-colonial language to disregard democracy and human rights – such as Azerbaijan's dictator who is utilising it to further consolidate power and deepen an authoritarian regime.

Finally, without a doubt, there are many more aspects that need to be addressed in order for Europe to assert itself as a geopolitical Union. From decreasing energy dependency and accelerating the transition to renewable sources to boosting technological innovation and ensuring social cohesion. And of course, this will not be possible without comprehensive reform of the EU, including most importantly more effective coordination and decision-making on foreign and security policy, eliminating the veto powers of individual member states, and establishing a qualified majority.

This decade will be decisive for the future of our planet. With the climate breakdown on the horizon, the rise of the far-right in Europe, Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, China's persistent threats to Taiwan and the risk of turmoil and hostilities in the Middle East – the list is long. The stakes are too high and it is not the time for Europe to back down. One of the greatest tests- among many other challenges- for geopolitical Europe will be Ukraine. Hence, it is pivotal to ensure the defeat of Russia's imperialist ambitions and there is no better way to do that than providing Ukraine with all necessary weaponry alongside with sustained financial, political, and diplomatic support. Recent years have seen significant paradigm shifts, including for European Greens. So, let us continue that way, adjust to the new reality and embrace the geopolitical Union while fighting for a fairer, better, greener future.

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