

A Green Military Deal for Europe to Save the World

I can say that, although I already had some faint interest, my journey in politics truly began in 2014 as I sat glued to the TV and YouTube: watching hours upon hours of Euromaidan footage, awe-struck and inspired by the bravery of ordinary people who wanted a better future for themselves and their families so badly that they would stand unarmed and vulnerable against the deadly black-clad Berkut forces. The ebb and flow of this transformative political movement was suddenly interrupted by the unthinkable, however – the first Russian invasion of Ukraine with masses of soldiers pouring into its cities, and tanks speeding down Ukrainian roads. It was an emotional rollercoaster for my naive teen self that helped me to truly grasp the harsh realities of the world. The international community sat still and watched it happen, wagged its finger and ... did nothing. Absolutely nothing. I came to terms with the fact that my country, Latvia, and Europe as a whole will never be safe with a neighbour like Russia.

The 24th of February 2022 was a wake-up call for many who had failed to pay attention. Before that, leaders from Eastern Europe and the Baltics were often dismissed by their Western counterparts as russophobic, paranoid and hysterical. “They simply can’t get over their traumatic Soviet past,” many thought. “Russia is now a different country in a different era, one defined by mutually beneficial political and economic ties, just trying to get by while retaining their national pride,” they often added. It was the so-called “rational West” that could bring Russia to the negotiating table and keep the peace, even at the cost of some concessions to a former superpower, such as forgiving its unlawful annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea. After all, why would Russia go all the way in and risk losing its place in an international system that has benefitted it so much?

The answer was always obvious to those who have experienced Russia in their national history and their daily lives. Russia is not a partner that seeks mutual benefit. A spirit of aggressive chauvinism and a sense of superiority and limitless entitlement permeates its entire culture from top to bottom. It is a revisionist power that seeks to be at the top of the hierarchy, to define relationships on its own terms and to always one-up the other side. That should not surprise anyone. In the blissful moments before 2008, 2014 and even as late as 2022 for most, many people, enjoying decades of relative global peace, felt that war was a phenomenon of the distant past. However, those decades of relative peace came after the West’s overwhelming victory in the Cold War and were sustained by American hegemony (and, let’s be honest, a degree of imperialism), not by universal agreement among world leaders to live in eternal peace. If anything, there was universal disagreement, as evidenced for example by the Russian dictator’s 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, lamenting the United States’ dominance of global affairs.¹

It was therefore only logical that years of demonstrable Western weakness – including the election of Donald Trump, the growing desire (including in the Green movement) to abolish the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the rise of pro-Russia forces across Europe and in the United States, and the inability to punish Russia for its first invasion of Ukraine – had emboldened Russia to directly challenge the rules-based international order that Putin had so often complained about. Especially after his 2007 speech, which some now view as foreshadowing Russia’s imperial aggression. Russia has always considered itself to be the loser of the Cold War, and the war criminal Putin has been quite open about this, calling the fall of the USSR “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”.² This sentiment is shared by much of the Russian population, according to annual polling by the Levada Center. And yet, Europe was not ready to acknowledge the inevitable clash of worlds. It even failed to protect its own side – a rapidly reforming democratic state yearning for European integration – and wasted its effort on being good to Russia, which has now used much of this pointless goodwill, including the benefits of economic cooperation and military development, to rain swarms of drones and missiles on Ukraine.

Sadly, our idealistic Green movement was also taken for a ride. Recognising the harms caused by American hegemony and the colonial past and neo-colonial present of many NATO and European Union members, and drawing from its anti-war roots, many in the Green (Youth) movement embraced pacifism and were still calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament and the abolition of NATO as recently as 2022, despite having witnessed the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. Although the wake-up call of 24th February 2022 was effective for many, it has still not been universal. Ukraine and its closest allies have had to fight for years to gain access to the equipment, vehicles and technology considered essential for a modern military (main battle tanks, air defence systems, aircraft and cruise missiles, for example), and has still only received much of it in limited quantities insufficient for it to defend itself. Some Green movements have spearheaded calls to fully arm Ukraine in its defence against a genocidal invader, while some have stubbornly stuck to their pacifist roots, failing to understand a key problem with their belief – that anyone with an army can take away their values and their entire world.

It would be naive to claim that we are in a place and time where our Green values are safe and protected. That we can just put down our arms, scrap our military industry and declare global peace. Everything in the world points in the other direction. Russia has launched a brutal war on a scale not seen on the European continent since World War II, specifically to stop Ukraine's drift towards European integration, while Azerbaijan casually committed ethnic cleansing against Armenians at mind-boggling speed, with little to no international resistance. While the Middle East is seeing decades-long violent tragedies in Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, China is ramping up its military aggression against Taiwan in preparation for a possible invasion. Countries around the world are backtracking on democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and authoritarian regimes are growing like mushrooms after the rain. Even in the European Union, which we had thought was a community of shared democratic values, several countries are openly lobbying in the interests of Putin's authoritarian regime and Hungary is also gradually dismantling the last remaining pieces of its democracy. None of these issues will be resolved with an indecisive European Union that refuses to shape global politics or to prepare for challenges that it may no longer be possible to resolve by diplomacy alone.

This does not mean that the European Union should seek confrontation, but that it should pursue self-defence and deterrence by rapidly developing and mobilising its political, economic and military capacity to show the murderous dictators in Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, Pyongyang (the alliance currently involved in the massacre against Ukraine) and elsewhere that European values are not just empty words in beautifully written manifestos but a stable and powerful system capable of protecting itself and its partners. Learning from America's mistakes in trying to run the rules-based international order, Europe can put progressive, feminist, Green values at the centre of its global diplomacy in order to become a genuine force for good, and, if push comes to shove, stand ready to arm and defend victims and fight aggressors without hesitation. It is the knowledge that actions have consequences that deters aggressors in the first place; a lack of consequences, as in the aforementioned Western weakness on Russia, only creates an incentive to keep testing the waters until we arrive at the final destination – an all-out war.

The way we (hopefully) try to resolve these failures of the international system will define the direction of human progress over the course of the coming centuries: whether big countries can change borders through force, whether small countries can take care of themselves without submitting to the whims of bigger countries, whether treaties – on everything from the rules of war to trade – have any meaning whatsoever, and whether change is welcomed, rather than being put down by brutal and genocidal dictators. For us, as Greens in Europe, it is only if the European Union becomes a proactive global political, economic and military power that will have a chance to safeguard our values, not just here at home – in my Latvia, in Ukraine, or anywhere else in Europe – but across the world as well. The climate crisis will transform more than just Europe, so we have a role to play in caring for all of humanity on the treacherous journey ahead.

By Ričards Alans Mieziņis