

Europe in the age of uncertainty

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As long as we have different narratives concerning the real meaning of Russia's war in Ukraine, the European Union will not be able to act as a coherent and **pro-active geopolitical player**. The EU should attempt to find a common language to talk about the war and its implications. Only then will we be able to uphold security across the continent, both for ourselves and our partners.

The recent meeting of the UN General Assembly proved to be a focal point for all the uncertainties the world is currently facing: the ineffectiveness of multilateralism; impunity for aggression and violations of international law; and increasing problems related to climate change and sustainable development goals. In short, the international rules-based order as perceived in the West is under threat with major uncertainties as a consequence.

In this context, the EU and its member states have also been struggling when trying to develop a coherent strategy for a more geopolitical European Union. Although the president of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, portrayed her first commission in 2019 as a "geopolitical commission", with the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell stating that Europe had to "learn the language of power", challenges to the EU have increased ever since. This is especially true regarding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Israel's military actions in Gaza after October 7th 2023 (and now in Lebanon). And although the EU has displayed more unity in countering the Russian aggression, its policies on the Middle East show that it is still far from a unitary geopo-

litical player in its own right. The results of the elections in the US will only add to the uncertainties about the EU's geopolitical future.

In a recent report the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) pointed to a fragmentation of the global order along three axes: "power centres, arenas where power is exercised, and world views". In my own analysis, I underline especially the importance of the fragmentation of world views and argue in favour of developing a more coherent European narrative. I also believe that it is necessary to find a common language in dealing with uncertainties about Europe's future.

Fragmenting world order

Russia's aggression in Ukraine presents the EU with its biggest security challenge in decades along all three axes of fragmentation mentioned above. At the same time, it also presents the EU with great uncertainties. Could the EU really

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develop into a geopolitical player in its own right, able and willing to defend itself and its partners in its neighbourhood? In spite of all the talk about *Zeitenwende*, we can only identify some limited (albeit probably unexpected) progress within the EU, including in defence cooperation. In general, we can identify a decreasing interest in the war in Ukraine (especially in western and southern Europe) and even some backsliding in individual member states' support for Ukraine. One

can only conclude then that European military and financial support will prove to be insufficient if the EU is confronted with a second Trump administration. Europe's struggle to find its own sovereign place between power centres is fraught with great uncertainties about its future.

Secondly, uncertainties not only relate to hard security matters in dealing with the war in Ukraine, but also to other arenas where power is exercised, such as broader geo-economics, hybrid influence and cyber. Fragmentation in these areas presents Europe with broader, more global challenges. In this context, the question arises as to how far Europe is able and willing to make its own decisions and develop its own European sovereignty. This is especially true when it is also facing difficult choices between dealing with China as a partner, competitor and systemic rival, or joining the US in its still mostly geo-economic battles with Beijing.

But equally as important as the two other axes of fragmentation is the fact that the EU also has to deal with different world views and narratives. These concern not only other major powers (including the US) but also countries in the Global South

and even the EU's own member states, political parties and movements. Different ideas about Europe, its values and its future have a fundamental impact on how Europe can deal with uncertainties to find its own place in a fragmenting world order.

Uncertainties on the outcome of the war

The biggest uncertainty facing the EU is related to the war in Ukraine. Support for Ukraine so far has been sufficient enough that the country cannot lose but also not actually win against Russian aggression. Fear of escalation and a full-scale war between Russia and NATO has prevented especially the US and Germany from providing long-range weapons that would enable Kyiv to strike at all those points from which Russian aggression is launched against it. For years now there has been much talk about Russian “red lines”, which often are more an element of western imagination than reality. For example, Ukraine itself has proven this by striking targets inside Russia and even taking the war to Russia by its incursion into Kursk Oblast. Western support for Ukraine's peace plan and Zelenskyy's recent plan for victory also fall far short of what is needed to bring this war to an end.

In the meantime, some people in the West still seem to believe that economic sanctions could in the long run force Russia back to the negotiating table. However, discussions about sanctions have shown that their effectiveness remains insufficient when no serious work is undertaken to close all the loopholes. If we are serious when stating that we are also at war, why are so many western companies still active in Russia and why have we not moved decisively in the direction of a more total boycott on trade with Russia?

It is clear that Vladimir Putin is playing the long game and is waiting for western support for Ukraine to erode further. The outcome of elections and the rise of populist parties in the US and Europe contribute to further uncertainties, especially when we encounter more governments with far-right parties or supported by such parties. At present, this concerns mainly Hungary and Slovakia but the rise of *Alternative Für*

Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) in Germany and *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) in France could also fundamentally change the political spectrum in Europe, with crucial elections coming up in the next few years. A victory by far-right parties could undermine support for Ukraine, although examples of Italy and the Netherlands have shown that this is not necessarily the case. However, elections do form a major element of uncertainty and could encourage Putin to just

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bide his time. After all, inside Russia repression and propaganda have prevented any serious opposition to the war or to the regime as such. At the same time, the economy has remained relatively stable in the short to medium term.

The EU seems to be confronted with a continuation of the war and probably a stalemate on the battlefield, which could go on possibly for years with all the related uncertainties. These issues both add to insecurity and impact economic growth prospects. They have also already impacted other areas, like logistic chains, migration and cyber. The EU's efforts to reach out to other states, especially in the Global South, to increase support for Ukraine's efforts to end the war have failed. This is partly because of applying double standards when dealing with violations of international law (especially in the case of Israel's military actions in Gaza and elsewhere). This also adds to uncertainties not only about the possibility of a more effective geopolitical EU, but also about the future of an international rules-based order as such.

How do we talk about the war in Europe?

Immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 Europe seemed to be united in its support for Ukraine. The EU even encouraged member states to support Ukraine with military equipment to be paid for by the European Peace Facility. Economic and financial sanctions surpassed what had been imposed earlier in reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea and incursions into eastern Ukraine. Unprecedented sanctions have been adopted, with 14 packages approved so far. Europe has been seriously reducing its dependence on Russian energy, thereby limiting Moscow's ability to influence European policies. But although some Russian propaganda channels have been blocked by the EU and some propagandists have been hit with individual sanctions, Russian influence operations can still continue. Such efforts are resonating among far-right and far-left populist parties, as well as some Russian diaspora communities. Russian propaganda also is still taken seriously by countries like Hungary when opposing further sanctions and any increase in support for Ukraine.

More in general, especially in western and southern Europe, one can see a decreasing interest in the war in Ukraine and a shift in media attention to other issues. These include migration, the US elections and the conflicts in the Middle East. One could easily speak of some form of "Ukraine fatigue", with some people pleading to end this war, "whatever it takes", even if this has to be settled on Russian terms. The same could be said about the fear of escalation, which is mostly an element of our own imagination. The feeling of urgency is waning and although a



lot of sympathy for Ukraine remains, decisive actions are lacking and assistance is just enough for Ukraine not to lose. Kyiv simply cannot win the war and impose its own conditions on Russia.

All this is in great contrast to Central and Eastern Europe, where people still remember the suffering from past Russian imperialism and envision the war as the most recent emanation of the Russian threat to European security. For these countries the implications for Europe's future are crystal clear and all have taken measures to boost their defence budgets (some up to four per cent of GDP) and strengthen NATO's frontline in deterring further Russian aggression. There is a clear realization here as well that Ukraine is involved in an existential struggle not only for itself but also in support of the European security order as a whole.

In this context, one could identify different and diverging narratives about the implications of the war and the meaning of a Russian or Ukrainian victory or defeat. Such internal differences within the EU about the war in Ukraine and what to do about it will probably remain an area of contention and add to the plethora of uncertainties concerning Europe's future. And this is exactly what Moscow is hoping and playing for: a growth in diverging views and polarization within Eu-

rope in order to win a clear victory in Ukraine as a first successful step in further challenging the European security order and imposing its will on a divided West.

Dealing with uncertainties: what is to be done?

As stated earlier, an important element contributing to uncertainty is the increasing fragmentation of world views: a fundamental contestation about the meaning of current events and future trends. The Russian narrative is clear: the war is about the protection of Russian identity and great power status, which necessitates re-establishing the “Russian World” (including in Ukraine) and countering the spread of “western” democratic values. In its struggle against the “collective West”, Moscow also finds a partner in China in a battle against US hegemony and supposedly universal values. In the Kremlin’s mind, great powers should be sovereign and able to decide on their own civilizational values. They should also have the right to project their influence in their neighbourhood as a special sphere of interest. In this respect, the war in Ukraine is also existential for Russia, as a defeat in Ukraine would threaten a regime which has invested heavily in its “special military operation” to make Russia great again.

In Europe we have different narratives about the meaning of the war in Ukraine. Whereas the war was initially seen as a major threat to the European security order and to the multilateral rules-based order as such, the urgency and willingness to go all the way in countering Russian aggression and assisting Ukraine (and by extension the European order) to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity and cultural identity as an independent state has weakened over time. Instead of supporting Ukraine “whatever it takes”, we now hear voices supporting a settlement to end the war, including a possible deal on Russian terms, “whatever that takes”.

The EU should attempt to find a **common language** to talk about the war and its implications.

As long as we have different narratives on the proper meaning of this war, and also in broader security terms, the EU will not be able to act as a coherent and pro-active geopolitical player. The EU should attempt to find a common language to talk about the war and its implications. Only then will we be able to uphold security across the European continent, both for ourselves and our partners. Here, geopolitics should trump economics: as long as our companies are still active in Russia and the economic and financial interests of individual member states undermine a coherent policy towards the war, major uncertainties about the future will remain.

Furthermore, if the EU still wants to maintain a credible form of “values-based” foreign policy, it should have a more consistent narrative about how it views a global rules-based order and its place in it. This would also imply giving up on double-standards as much as possible, as well as bridging the gap between the diverging policies within the EU about Israel’s aggressive and repressive policies against the Palestinians in particular. If Israel can get away with a whole range of serious violations of international law (as also established by the International Court of Justice), the EU cannot build a credible narrative about itself as a promotor of international peace and justice. Divergences between member states should also be bridged for the benefit of a credible geopolitical EU as a whole. Only then may Europe also attempt to bridge some of the diverging narratives at play in the Global South, where countries could then perhaps take European calls more seriously to effectively support Ukraine in its decolonization war.

Building a more credible European narrative

Finally, the EU would also need to have its own narrative vis-à-vis the United States. Isolationist tendencies in the US, its pivot to Asia and a more nationalist narrative necessitate a coherent and unified European answer. The reality is that US commitment to European security is in doubt, especially with Trump’s return to the White House. Europe should have good transatlantic relations whenever possible but needs to be able to act independently based on its own sovereign strategy and narrative. This is not only true regarding Russia but also the Middle East. Accepting a more transactional relationship would only harm efforts to build a more common European narrative.

If Europe would like to walk the geopolitical walk, it should also be able to talk the geopolitical talk. This would imply building a more credible European narrative, based on European values, in order to establish what European identity means and how we view Europe’s place in a fragmenting and uncertain world order.

Only when we as Europeans are able to find a common language and overcome diverging perspectives among member states on European security and its implications will the EU be able to have an impact on building or reconstructing its own neighbourhood. The experience of those member states in Central Europe, which have been exposed to Russian aggression and repression in the past, could lead us in building a more effective strategy towards Russia and broader global security. ~~It~~