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Europe’s strategic sleepwalking

Internal division and hesitation hinder us from shaping a multipolar world. We urgently need to turn global rupture into renewal

No, it was neither Trump nor the Europeans that set the tone for our global future at the World Economic Forum. Marc Carney, Canada’s Prime Minister, rocked Davos. His straightforward, uncompromising analysis went viral. His message was clear: medium-sized countries have an opportunity to defend their own sovereignty and the chance for a peaceful and sustainable future — even, and indeed all the more so, given the increasingly selfish and reckless actions by major powers. But only under the condition that we stop deceiving ourselves, invest in our own strengths and open global alliances to shepherd our own model of a free and fair society into a new era.

We need to cooperate on a targeted and transformative basis with like-minded players. Instead of cowering from the world’s major powers, we need to collaborate with those who share the same values or at least the same interests. Those who don’t get it will ‘end up on the menu’.

Don’t play for time...

The day before, a motion was put forward by the Green Party in the European Parliament to refer the EU-Mercosur agreement – finally signed after 25 years – to the European Court of Justice for review, instead of debating it in parliament in the near term. This, despite the risk that ratification might be delayed by up to two years. The motion was carried by 334 votes to 324. A slap in the face for those seeking reliable partnerships for Europe, as well as for those in South America and the rest of the world hoping to have the EU on their side when facing blackmail from the US.

The gloating of the far right in France, Hungary and Germany should come as no surprise. Yet even an overwhelming majority from the left-wing faction and the Greens voted to block the agreement. Even among the Christian Democrat, Socialist and Liberal groups, between 20 per

cent and 30 per cent want to put the matter on the back burner, including, in particular, the national delegations from France and Poland. What is behind this fatal move, which even has support among the pro-Mercosur factions?

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For the far-right groups such as the 'Patriots for Europe' (including Bardella's Rassemblement national and Orban's Fidesz) and the 'Europe of Sovereign Nations' (with the AfD among its ranks), which together accounted for 96 of the 334 votes, blocking Europe's scope for action is not a reproach. Right-wing extremists also generally present themselves as defenders of allegedly threatened national population groups and also find some common ground with voices from democratic factions on this.

The democratic camp has put forward a number of claims. For example, 'health standards in Europe are threatened by imports of agricultural products'. This argument simply does not hold water — the rules we established in Europe apply. They also maintain that 'European farmers' livelihoods are under threat' and that 'this particularly applies to beef imports.' Also wrong. At most, we are talking about 1-2 per cent of European beef consumption. What's more, far-reaching safety measures have been established in the event of threats to the market, and considerable sums have been made available to help seriously impacted businesses adapt. Our quality-focused agriculture needs support, but it is not Mercosur that holds the key.

Critics from the progressive camp fear further destruction of the rainforest and negative consequences for South America's indigenous population. Local suppliers, as well as labour and social standards, are also claimed to be at risk both here and in our partner countries. This argument deserves more careful consideration, but, in light of an empirically based analysis, does not justify rejecting the agreement.

Enabling dialogue on environmental and social standards

Mercosur has far-reaching sustainability criteria and, in some cases, enforceable common objectives such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, as well as plans for more sustainable forestry and the fight against illegal logging. In our current situation, the decisive opportunity offered by existing agreements

with high-quality standards resides in this very option to open a bilateral corridor for regulatory cooperation that guarantees existing standards and makes better ones possible in the future.

Both partner regions wish to present a common front, for example, to combat antibiotic resistance associated with the use of antibiotics in humans and animals, thereby promoting more sustainable agriculture.

Workers' rights and environmental protection can be enforced in the Mercosur agreement using a dispute resolution mechanism that is monitored by independent experts and in which representatives from civil society (for example, employee representatives and unions) or international bodies such as the International Labour Organization may participate.

Critical voices – particularly those from nongovernmental organisations – are right about one thing: on its own, the agreement does not represent a comprehensive guarantee of progress for people and the environment in the partner countries. It is also true that by letting pure trade agreements take their course, the strongest market players impose their interests in the extended region, largely without regard for public goods.

Yet it is precisely for this reason that high-quality trade deals represent an unmissable opportunity, in light of the collapse of the international rules-based order. Not as a one-off measure to remove customs barriers but as a partnership agreement both to shape future markets based on consistent rules and to subject market economy mechanisms to common goals.

Alongside the conclusion of the agreement itself, the progressive, values-based camp must prioritise providing ongoing support and further developing cooperation. Parties with social and ecological reform agendas, unions and engaged civil society groups need to take ownership of such an 'avenue approach' and invest in the potential of dialogue and bilateral strategic cooperation, if their concerns are to gain traction in the world of Xi and Trump.

The geopolitical situation demands that any unjustifiable ideological reservations on the subject of international trade are finally thrown overboard. Conversely, the situation may also not be used as an alibi to pave the way for outdated neoliberal practices. Besides increasing the effectiveness of the exchange of goods and services, we need to regard international trade relations as part of a social and ecological transformation strategy, whose stages need to be consciously designed and whose successes must be measurable.

Sovereignty will no longer be found in the nation state. Its historic promise of equality and happiness requires successful regional alliances, in the form of the EU and beyond.

Proponents of such an approach need to take the hurdles put up by right-wing extremists in the (internationally organised) national debate. Poland, a country led by the former President of the European Council and long-time Chairman of the European People's Party, Donald Tusk, rejects the Mercosur agreement almost entirely, despite comprehensive safeguards. The right-wing conservative PiS party, which is sympathetic to Trump, is in a position to dominate the national debate. In France, the former interior minister and current leader of Les Républicains is threatening to topple the government if President Macron signs the agreement. Here, as in Belgium and Hungary, the public mood clearly favours rejecting the deal. It is currently all too easy for right-wing nationalists to apply the brakes in Europe when new, urgently needed international coalitions need to be established.

A decisive factor here is not least the high degree of basic mistrust in Western societies with regard to democratically legitimate political institutions. The justified, but long-ignored, interests and fears of the threatened middle classes exist alongside targeted disinformation strategies and structural changes in public life in a digital, segmented world. In this context, the chances of a rationally justifiable outcome of the debate endorsed by a majority are shrinking. Britain's Brexit decision and the huge growth of populist and right-wing extremist parties testify to this.

The United Nations Human Development Report from 2021/22 describes this as the ultimate danger for Western democracies. A loss of trust and withdrawal of legitimacy pose a threat to democratically legitimised bodies in their ability to act. If they are no longer able to react to the challenges of their time with reforms that enjoy majority support, they are affected at their core and lose their key trump card when compared with autocratic systems: the ability to successfully reinvent themselves and shape the future freely and in solidarity.

In the current environment, this is the real challenge for 'progressive' parties and movements. Sovereignty – the ability to take control of one's own future – will no longer be found in the nation state. Its historic promise of equality and happiness requires successful regional alliances, in the form of the EU and beyond.

Parties in favour of social progress must not disenfranchise themselves in such a situation and provide ammunition for the interest-driven campaigns of right-wing extremists. Their task is rather to defend the perspective of a Europe in solidarity with the world against the increasingly nationalistic tendencies of major powers, in order to give their own values a chance in a new multi-polar era. This must be their common project for the future.



Udo Bullmann
Brussels

Udo Bullmann, Member of the European Parliament, a trained political scientist and Jean-Monnet-Professor for European Studies, is the Chair of the delegation to South Africa and spokesperson for the Socialists & Democrats in the Development Committee. In the former mandate he served as Chair of the Subcommittee for Human Rights and S&D group leader.