FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 23.02.2023 | Jan Zielonka

The European Union at war

The war in Ukraine has rained in 'the hour of Europe' once more. To live up to this role, the EU must move from reassuring words to tangible deeds

The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, visited Brussels on 9 February, with the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of his country looming. He was warmly welcomed by top European Union officials, who confirmed that Ukraine belonged in Europe.

It was not, however, by chance that Zelenskyy had visited Washington and London first. While the EU's overall assistance to Ukraine matches that of the United States, the latter has provided far more arms — and arms are what Ukraine needs most at present.

The EU is not a military actor but rather prides itself on preventing conflicts by creating an economic and legal environment conducive to peace. It also has a formidable record of postwar reconstruction, as witnessed in the Balkans. Yet, the EU was unable to prevent the Russian invasion and a defeated Ukraine would be 'reconstructed' by Russia. No wonder Zelenskyy has urged the EU to act more quickly and boldly.

Existential questions

This war is not just located at the EU's borders, affecting the energy bills of Europe's citizens: Russia's aggression is a response to Ukraine getting ever closer to Europe. Let us not forget that the first Russian invasion in 2014 was prompted by the flight of Ukraine's then pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovych, following mass protests triggered by his last-minute refusal – on Moscow's orders – to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.

The EU is unavoidably entangled in this war and it cannot hide behind Uncle Sam. As Heidi Mauer and colleagues have argued, Europe is bound by a 'collective responsibility to act' when faced with the Russian aggression. But is it rising to the occasion?

Wolfgang Streeck is not the only European intellectual to offer a negative answer: 'as *Realpolitik* raised its ugly head, the EU turned into an auxiliary organisation of NATO, charged among other things with devising sanctions against Russia which mostly backfired.' Imposing sanctions was the least the EU could do in response to an illegal and brutal invasion, but sanctions alone cannot determine the course of these events on the EU's eastern border.

As long as the EU lacks convincing answers to these fundamental questions, it will remain lame when bombs start to explode.

The problem is that this war, like the ones in former Yugoslavia, has raised existential questions which pragmatic – or, if you wish, short-sighted – European politicians would prefer to avoid. Where are Europe's borders? Is the US a *sui generis* power in Europe? Can a civilian power such as the EU survive in an uncivilised political environment? Should Europe's economic interests prevail over legal and moral norms? Who leads Europe when wars break out?

As long as the EU lacks convincing answers to these fundamental questions, it will remain lame when bombs start to explode.

The EU's borders have been in flux for all its history. Twenty-two states joined the original six members of the European Communities in stages, after adopting a wide body of European laws and regulations. (One has now left.)

Ukraine is far from meeting these legal conditions but, as the President of the European Commission wrote on Twitter, 'Ukrainians are ready to die for the European perspective. We want them to live with us the European dream.'

This dream does not yet amount to EU membership, but millions of Ukrainian refugees within the EU's borders amount to a kind of enlargement by default. The EU's contribution to the postwar reconstruction of Ukraine would also make the country part of the EU, albeit *de facto* rather than *de jure* for some time. Is the EU ready to recognise facts on the ground and welcome Ukraine on purely strategic grounds?

A lack of European leadership

The war in Ukraine has confirmed that the US indeed has a (virtual) seat at the EU decision-making table. This is not to everybody's liking, yet,

without it, Europe will not only be more toothless in military terms but also more divided politically.

America's commitment to Europe cannot be taken for granted. Donald Trump, were he to return as president, and Xi Jinping, president for life in China, could prompt the US to change its strategic priorities – in Xi's case perhaps by a decision to invade Taiwan – leaving the EU with no leader able and willing to stand up for the old continent.

The war has confirmed that Germany is not up to this job: it is divided internally and contested externally. And there are currently too many 'sovereigntists' at the EU decision-making table to allow any meaningful transfer of power to Brussels.

Even now, the EU spends more money on imports from Russia than on aid to Ukraine.

Yet, in the early months of the war, Mario Draghi – the previous President of the European Central Bank who became Italy's prior prime minister – showed that informal leadership of the seemingly unruly European club was possible. Leadership is about not just personal charisma but also, if not principally, the ability to formulate a common political stance reflecting European values. How to bridge the gap between those Europeans who look at Ukrainians as the heroic guardians of Europe's security and those who see instead only fanatical nationalists challenging Russia's legitimate security concerns?

Equally difficult would be the reconciliation of economic interests with legal and moral positions. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, the EU did not curb its trade with Moscow and policies aimed at reducing Europe's dependence on Russian oil and gas were pursued half-heartedly until last year. Even now, the EU spends more money on imports from Russia than on aid to Ukraine.

I do not side with those who blame German trade links with Russia for the current predicament. But 'business as usual' with those who commit international crimes is not just immoral – it is, in the long run, suicidal.

Europe's security

Does the war in Ukraine give impetus to the creation of a European army? After the wars of the Yugoslav succession, the EU decided to create a rapid-reaction force amounting to 60,000 soldiers, but this has never

materialised. Since the United Kingdom's departure, the prospect of a meaningful European army has looked even dimmer. Although after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, several member states – Germany and Poland most notably – decided to beef up their defence budgets, it is far from certain that they will match British military capabilities any time soon.

The EU could, however, do much more to boost the joint procurement of arms, if not joint arms production. This could be accomplished by enlarging the tasks and budget of the European Defence Agency. It can also significantly increase the European Peace Facility budget, which pays for the arms sent to Ukraine by member states and could possibly support future peace-enforcing military missions.

Those who complain about American hegemony in Europe should provide credible alternatives for fending off military threats. Without tangible commitments to security, the EU will not be taken seriously by Russia or America, or even Iran, Syria and Turkey.

The horrors of Sarajevo and Mariupol, Srebrenica and Bucha have taught us that reassuring words alone are not sufficient.

The EU will never be a traditional military actor, but Europe's security is not only about the number of soldiers under the European flag. It is also about security infrastructure, including sectors such as intelligence, logistics, communications and energy – all areas where common European policies can be strengthened. Above all, security requires a sense of direction and leadership, responding to Europe's collective will.

'This is the hour of Europe,' proclaimed Jacques Poos, one of the three European Community foreign ministers who flew to Yugoslavia soon after war had started in 1991. Unfortunately, Europe's ambitious aspirations were not followed by adequate actions at the time.

History is shaped by drastic events such as wars. And it is legitimate to claim that this is again 'the hour of Europe'. But the horrors of Sarajevo and Mariupol, Srebrenica and Bucha have taught us that reassuring words alone are not sufficient. Bold choices ought to be made quickly, followed by tangible deeds – or else the EU will falter.

This is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal.



Jan Zielonka
Oxford

Jan Zielonka is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the Universities of Venice and Oxford. His latest book is *The Lost Future and How to Reclaim It* (Yale University Press, 2023).

-