FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 28.07.2023 | Michael Roth

The cost of freedom

When imperialist dictators are going to war, a security policy devoted to deterrence and defence capability is not conservative but social democratic

Freedom and democracy come at a price. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced us to relearn this the hard way. As a result, Germany will boost defence spending in the coming years and, thanks to the special allocation for the Bundeswehr, at last meet NATO's 2 per cent target. Some might find it surprising that it took a Social Democratic government to finally bring this about. But in fact, there is a long Social Democratic tradition for which external, domestic and social security do not comprise a zero-sum game, but rather form the basis for solidarity and peaceful co-existence in Germany and Europe.

Under chancellors Helmut Schmidt and Willy Brandt Germany spent between 3 and 4 per cent of its GDP on defence. No one would deny that they pursued highly successful policies based on Social Democratic values and principles. For social democrats, it was clear at the time that, in the face of the threat from the Soviet Union, a defensible democracy and a social democracy were two sides of the same coin. This insight applies now more than ever. Europe's freedom and democracy are imperilled by Russian imperialism. A well-equipped Bundeswehr meeting the 2 per cent target thus provide both life insurance and practical European solidarity with our allies.

But we mustn't fool ourselves. The special funds alone and ruling out defence cuts are no quick fix for our defence spending. This is only the beginning of a protracted and costly process. Thirty years of structural underfinancing and rising demands from both national and NATO defence have left the Bundeswehr in chronic need of investment. Russia's war of extermination against Ukraine in all its savagery has brought home to us the industrial scale and technological demands of a twenty-first century war. Liberal democracies and open societies must not allow themselves to close their eyes to its horrors. They need to learn the right lessons from it. That includes massive investments in modernising the Bundeswehr. If we don't do this, authoritarian states and violent dictatorships certainly will.

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As it stands, Germany spends slightly more than 50 bn euros a year on defence, which is around 1.6 per cent of GDP. But that is scarcely enough to even get near closing the large investment gap. That is why a broad majority of the Bundestag approved the 100 bn special funds for the Bundeswehr at chancellor Olaf Scholz's prompting. Thus, Germany will finally meet the 2 per cent target (annual average) over the coming years.

But from 2026 onwards even the special funds may not be enough. The defence budget will have to grow significantly to meet Germany's international obligations. It would therefore be both provident and smart to boost defence spending by 2025 at the latest to reduce the gap early. Social Democrats will not accept attempts to offset it with cuts in social spending or on climate protection, nor would it enhance social acceptance of the *Zeitenwende*. If it comes to a choice between spending on social security and spending on external security the defence budget will always lose out. Distributional conflicts are built in. Cannibalisation among security policy tools would be equally unacceptable. Defence, decision-making cooperation, diplomacy, international cultural policy and humanitarian aid are interdependent and must not be played off against one another.

We should attach more value to protecting our people and defending our liberal and social democracy. Additional burdens should be fairly distributed and borne by all. Tax rises or new borrowing to defend our nation and our partners must be put back on the table. There's too much at stake.

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The cost and responsibility for defending our freedom and democracy in Europe must be shared. As Europe's biggest economy and a former frontline state Germany has a key role. In the Cold War we could always rely on our NATO allies to guarantee our security. This security enabled us to develop our peaceful democracy, economic success and strong welfare state. Now it is down to us to guarantee the security of our central and eastern European partners, especially the Baltic states, Poland and Romania. That is why the decision to station a brigade permanently in Lithuania was so important.

Security and defence policy are often not considered Social Democratic issues in public debate. That is our own fault because in the past we repeatedly played off social and external security against each other, but also defence against development cooperation and diplomacy. We'd do better to emulate the northern progressive democracies. They have managed to bring national defence, international solidarity and social justice together. They are liberal, open and diverse societies that need particularly strong protection against external threats. We are more vulnerable than authoritarian regimes that are fine with isolation.

Alongside these overdue investments Social Democrats must not lose sight of global arms policy. Russia's war of extermination against Ukraine has increased the danger of a new nuclear arms race. Meanwhile the global arms control architecture lies in ruins. The SPD should therefore support a reboot of global arms control.

At a time in which imperialistic dictatorships are going to war again, a security policy devoted to deterrence and defence capability is not conservative, but social democratic. Only a just peace, not a hostile power's diktat can ensure the freedom to which Europe's liberal and social democracies aspire. We mustn't disappoint them.



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