

War: will the geopolitical crisis make the European Union stronger?

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Published on September 13, 2022

In global affairs, we are getting used to crises: if not a pandemic, then inflation, an energy crisis, refugees, or even war.

Politicians and experts often repeat a well-known refrain during crises: every crisis must be used by a country or an international organisation to make it stronger.

Jean Monet, one of the founding fathers of the current European Union, once said at the very dawn of the European Community that the Community would be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises. As the subsequent history of the European Union has shown, this was a brilliant insight: in the last decade alone, we have seen the consolidation of the European Union's political activity in various areas and the creation of new institutions precisely in times of crisis: whether it was the EU Banking Union, created as a response to the global financial crisis of 2008-2012; or the European Frontex institution for border protection, created during the 2015 refugee crisis; or, finally, the multi-billion euro debt borrowed for the first time in the name of the EU for the Recovery Fund, which was set up to help the European economy under the lockdown during the pandemic.

It is clear that Russia's war against Ukraine is a geopolitical crisis on a scale that the European continent as a whole has not yet experienced. The crisis naturally raises the question of how and in what areas the European Union should strive to become geopolitically stronger in the aftermath of this crisis.

The European Union's initial response to Russia's war against Ukraine is worthy of praise: the immediate financial support for Ukraine, the supply of offensive weapons (albeit with all sorts of detours), and the seven packages of sanctions against Russia. The European Union can be proud of these steps under current circumstances. The EU has shown that it can act effectively, even in such crises and circumstances that are completely unfamiliar to it.

However, although the Russian war against Ukraine has been going on for six months now, even though Ukrainians recently have shown real military brilliance in liberating Kharkiv region and advancing in Cherson, there is as yet no sign of a deeper effort within the European Union to begin looking for a proper answer to the question of how the European Union is to become stronger in the wake of this crisis. Nor is there any intellectual effort to look into the past mistakes of the European Union's geopolitical posture and behaviour, which created the preconditions for this geopolitical crisis (Russia's war against Ukraine) to happen. This makes it worrying that the current

geopolitical crisis may not provide the necessary impetus for the European Union to reform and strengthen its geopolitical capacity.

This is even more evident when comparing the recent long-term strategic choices of NATO and the EU.

Although at the beginning of the war NATO was subject to a lot of harsh and justified criticism for more often explaining what it did not plan to do (e.g, that it does not intend to protect Ukraine's air space) instead of explaining what it does plan to do, the decisions of the recent NATO Summit in Madrid showed that NATO would emerge as a stronger defence organisation from this geopolitical crisis: NATO's geopolitical clarity of purpose has deepened, with Russia recognised as the greatest threat to the security of the European continent; the objective of strengthening defence capabilities has been articulated, with a radical increase in the rapid reaction capability from 40,000 troops (now) to 300,000 troops (soon); the defensibility of the NATO member states has been strengthened, with the approval of the deployment of NATO brigades in the Baltic States; NATO enlarging as a response to the Kremlin's threats, with Sweden and Finland (which share a border with Russia) soon to become NATO members.

Against this backdrop of NATO's commendable strategic decisions, the question is even more pressing: how should the European Union behave and what strategic choices should it take in order to ensure that not only NATO but also the EU emerges from this crisis as a significantly stronger organisation in global geopolitical affairs?

So far, there has been little or no such discussion in the European Union.

We can only welcome the fact that in the last days of the summer, the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz delivered at the old Charles University in Prague a significant, strong, strategic, and optimistic speech (entitled "Europe is our future") on the future of the European Union and on the need for its enlargement and reform as a response to the present geopolitical crisis. Germany's leadership in charting such a course for the EU is likely to give a strong impetus to make such change a reality. Naturally, this should be of particular interest also to my country, Lithuania.

As it happens, back in mid-summer, I tried to write down my thoughts on how the European Union needs to reorganise itself in order to become stronger after this geopolitical crisis. I did not rush to publish the text in the middle of the summer because, in the summer, few people care about such matters. It just so happens that I am now able to publish my text immediately after Chancellor Scholz's speech. I am not surprised that we see a lot of things very similarly because we have been discussing these issues in the international political community for quite a long time. What is new is that, for the first time, these ideas about the necessity for the enlargement and reform of the EU have been so clearly expressed and committed to by a German chancellor.

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In this text, I try to answer the question of how to make the European Union stronger in the wake of this geopolitical crisis by addressing four issues. I aim to propose one of the recipes for a strong European Union:

Can the EU become stronger by continuing to fear and appease Putin?

Fear is one of the fundamental mistakes that the West has demonstrated in its relations with Russia over the last few decades. Fear of Putin; fear of an unpredictable Russia; fear of a wild, uncivilised Russia with nuclear weapons in its hands. This fear is based on disbelief that Russia can be different, and that it can return to the path of democratic development. This has led to an unstoppable desire on the part of Western leaders to look for new opportunities for a “reset” or “dialogue with Putin forever”, regardless of how Putin behaves. This is how the West bred the new fascism in the Kremlin and encouraged Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine. Putin may even have sincerely believed that this time, too, the West would come up with a new “reset” and “dialogue” offer.

What must the European Union do today to stop being so timid and weak?

First of all, it must repeat what NATO has recently said – that current authoritarian Russia is the greatest threat to the security of Europe. NATO has the task of deterring this threat militarily and must be prepared to defend against it itself and the European Union. In the meantime, the European Union must have a long-term strategy for destroying this threat of Russian authoritarianism through political means. The threat will only disappear completely when Russia is transformed into a traditional, European-style democracy. The European Union must therefore declare without delay that its strategic objective is to assist Russia’s democratic transformation and not engage in any kind of “dialogue” with Putin. Russia’s democratic transformation will only occur if Putin suffers a crushing military defeat in Ukraine. Therefore, the European Union must also finally make it clear that it will seek a complete victory for Ukraine (something that it still does not dare to declare so far); and that the European Union will mobilise all the necessary resources for this victory; and that the EU will not be intimidated by any threats of nuclear war from Putin.

The European Union will be stronger when it learns not to be afraid of Putin, and when it believes that a democratic transformation can take place in Russia.

Does the European Union still have the courage to expand and extend the space for democracy and prosperity on the European continent?

Stability and security on the European continent is only possible if the European values of democracy and social welfare finally find their place throughout the European continent, including in Russia. This can only be achieved through a bold and coherent policy of enlargement of the European Union, at least up to Russia’s current borders. This new wave of enlargement must include the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and, one day, Belarus and Armenia. EU enlargement and integration are the only way for democracy and economic success to take hold in the lands of post-totalitarian Europe. There is not a single example on the European continent where such success was created without integration into the European Union.

Unfortunately, after the first bold wave of “big-bang” enlargement, which included not only us and the whole of Central Europe, as well as also Croatia, which joined a little later, the European Union was gripped by a fear of further enlargement, partly as a result of the Kremlin’s threats to the whole of Europe when Ukraine chose the direction of European integration at the Maidan. The Kremlin is scared that the success of Ukraine in European integration could infect ordinary Russians with its example, which would be fatal to the survival of the Kremlin regime. Thus the Kremlin threatened, and the European Union was scared. As a result, after 2014, the EU enlargement process came to a complete standstill in the Western Balkans. The EU never dared to offer Ukraine and the other Trio countries any ambitious EU membership prospects. The fear prevailed, Ukraine was left in a grey area, and Putin took this as a signal that Ukraine was being left in his sphere of influence. From here, it was only one step to war.

The European Union must finally learn one lesson: its fear provokes Putin’s aggression. The West’s desire to make concessions to reduce Putin’s aggressiveness and thus supposedly de-escalate a situation that Putin initiated only further escalates Putin’s aggressiveness.

It is good that the war has finally forced the European Union to at least partially realise its fundamental error and that Ukraine and Moldova have finally been granted the EU candidate status. However, this is not enough – we need fast and effective negotiations on the membership. According to expert assessments, Ukraine has all the potential to become an EU member in 2029, but this requires that real negotiations start in 2023.

It also requires the Western Balkans to become members of the EU in 2025, as they were promised long ago.

The European Union must finally realise that enlargement gives it new strength, not weakens it. If Europeans had been fearful of enlargement when they moved to North America centuries ago, the power of the United States today would not exist.

The European Union’s bold expansion to the Russian border is also the only way that the EU, by building on the success stories of Ukraine and Belarus, will also encourage democratic transformation in Russia through their example. Therefore, the European Union must not only overcome the fear of enlargement, but also regain its hunger for enlargement. EU must also finally realise that Ukraine’s EU membership is not only in Ukraine’s strategic interest but also in the strategic interest of the European Union itself.

With Ukraine’s membership in the European Union, the EU itself will become much stronger, both geopolitically and economically. It will even finally acquire the strongest European-style military capability, which Ukraine currently possesses.

The EU’s greatest danger is overlooking the strategic prospect of such Ukraine-related reinforcement. This buttressing can only be prevented by the EU’s inherent geopolitical short-sightedness and the preference for national localism over a European federal interest, with the security and stability of the entire European continent as a primary concern.

Would you agree that the Association of Lithuanian Municipalities, rather than the President of the Republic and the Government, should be in charge of issues of Lithuanian foreign policy?

For the European Union to become a much stronger global geopolitical actor, the institutional framework for geopolitical decision-making and implementation needs to be reviewed. To date, decisions on foreign and security policy matters are taken only by the European Council or the Foreign Affairs Council, where the consent of each Member State is required. An individual country can veto such a decision. The other institutions of the European Union, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, have only limited power and ability to influence the EU's foreign and security policy.

The EU's foreign and security policy is thus still not a "European" policy but a "Union of Member States" policy. It could be otherwise called the "Association of Member States" policy. And this is the big problem with the EU's foreign and security policy – that it has far too many "national" and not common enough "European" interests.

Some might argue that European interests should be the integral sum of all national interests. However, this would be fundamentally false because the European Union is more than the arithmetic sum of its member countries, just as Lithuania is more than the sum of its municipalities. The sum of such municipalities is the Lithuanian Association of Municipalities, but not Lithuania. That is why no one in Lithuania would ever think of entrusting the Association of Municipalities with the responsibility of making decisions on Lithuania's foreign and security policy issues. This does not mean that municipalities cannot have their own opinion on Lithuania's foreign policy; moreover, municipalities are completely independent in their relations with foreign partners, but decisions on Lithuania's foreign policy are taken by the President of the Republic of Lithuania, by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania and by the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania (Seimas), but not by the Association of Municipalities of Lithuania.

Meanwhile, the European Union and its foreign policy still live in a strange environment where decisions on the foreign and security policy of the European Union are taken exclusively by the Council, which is essentially the European equivalent of the Association of Municipalities, except that it is not the mayors of Lithuanian municipalities who gather and take decisions, but rather the heads of government and the presidents of the EU Member States. No other EU policy has ever seen a situation in which the EU's common policy is so strongly "nationalised". In all other areas where the EU has common policies, such policies are much more "Europeanised", i.e. there is a much stronger involvement of all the institutions of the European Union in the construction and implementation of such policies – the European Commission, the European Parliament, and not just the Council.

The European Union will only become a strong geopolitical actor in foreign and security policy if it can "Europeanise" its foreign and security policy. Of course, many national capitals will not like this. But the EU's "nationalised" foreign and security policy has led to the current geopolitical crisis because the EU's "nationalised" foreign and security policy has been a geopolitically weak policy, a policy without bigger geopolitical

ambitions. This is what has led to the above outlined EU's geopolitical mistakes and fears, which have very painful consequences (and not only for Ukraine).

To avoid such mistakes in the future, fundamental changes are needed. One of them is to abandon the right of veto and move to the system of qualified majority voting in the Council when making decisions on the European Union's common foreign and security policy. That is the only way to stop the current pandemic of "blackmail culture" in the European Union, where some very important EU decisions on sanctions cannot be taken because someone loves Putin very much and cannot refuse oil from him. Others are holding up the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans because they insist on rewriting the whole history of their neighbour.

The move to qualified majority voting is the first and a very important decision needed to make the EU much more effective in foreign and security policy. However, this alone is not enough. The European Union must learn not to be afraid to take decisions on foreign and security policy at the "European" level, just as the US is a strong geopolitical leader because decisions on US foreign policy are taken by the President, his administration, and the Congress, and not by the governors of Florida, Texas, California, New York, and the rest of the states, who from time to time meet for a two-day Governors' Summit.

The EU must simply not be afraid to become stronger. However, in some areas, including the European Union's foreign and security policy, this will mean that, in formulating and implementing such a common policy, nation-states' direct role and influence will become somewhat less important. If we want a strong European Union, we must not be afraid to entrust it with some of our national strength. This will only make us stronger ourselves.

Can the European Union become strong if it does not have own strong finances?

There is a lot of theoretical debate about the strength that the European Union should acquire in the wake of this geopolitical crisis. However, unless decisions accompany such debates on the resources available to the European Union, all theoretical discussions about geopolitical strength will not have any practical result. One cannot be strong if one does not back up their political capabilities with the necessary financial resources. Because that way, capabilities do not become power; instead, they remain only "untapped opportunities".

It is worth remembering that the EU's total expenditure currently amounts to only 1% of the EU's total GDP. Just 1%! The EU countries, which are also members of NATO, are committed to spending 2% of their GDP on defence alone. Meanwhile, all EU spending – from subsidies for farmers and lagging regions (including most of Lithuania) to common research, innovation, climate change and common EU foreign policy – so far, all EU countries have agreed to spend just 1% of GDP. This is twice as little as they spend on their military defence. This alone raises the natural question – do we really want a strong EU, at least as strong as our military defence?

It is worth remembering that EU Member States allocated in their national budgets, on average, about 45% of GDP (in Lithuania, only 33%) to national spending each year (before the pandemic). In the pandemic year 2020, the EU's average spending rose to 53.1% of GDP, and Lithuania's – to 42.9%.

This means that in normal, non-pandemic years, nation-states are, on average, 45 times stronger than the EU in terms of financial capacity. Meanwhile, our expectations of what we as citizens of the European Union expect from the European Union are certainly not 45 times lower than what we expect from our nation-state. That is why many people feel that the European Union is weak and incapable of doing anything: because our expectations far outstrip the European Union's resources and capabilities.

This is the main reason why the EU cannot become geopolitically strong and play a much stronger role globally. One just needs to compare the figures for aid to Ukraine. In the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine, the United States approved a decision in Congress to provide USD 40 billion in military aid to Ukraine this year alone, of which USD 30 billion will be used for the supply of arms. That is why Ukraine is receiving HIMARS and other war-changing weapons.

Meanwhile, the EU has so far only managed to allocate EUR 2.5 billion through the Peace Facility for the EU Member States to supply arms to Ukraine. This amount is incomparably smaller than that allocated by the United States. All other EU-related military assistance to Ukraine is subject to the decision of the EU national capitals: who, how much, when and what weapons will be supplied to Ukraine. Therefore, even when the war is fought on the EU's borders, the EU appears to be weak and incapable of effective geopolitical leadership. The EU simply not having the money; all that is left are declarations of solidarity and the hope that the US and Great Britain will have both money and weapons for Ukraine

If the European Union really wants to emerge from this geopolitical crisis stronger, including financially, there is only one possible solution: to realise that the Ukrainian war against the aggressor, Russia is not only "Ukraine's war", but that it is also "our war", that is, the war of the entire European Union. Only then will it be realised that to achieve victory in such a war, it is necessary to mobilise all the necessary resources, including "our" financial resources. A war cannot be won without sufficient resources. If the war is "ours", then the necessary resources must be "ours".

The war requires additional financial resources from the EU, not only in order for Ukraine to acquire the weapons it needs. In addition, the war also requires additional resources to finance the increased energy costs caused by the war within the European Union itself.

It is therefore clear that the European Union is currently facing two strategic financial problems: the first is the relatively immediate problem of how to increase and adequately finance the EU's war expenditure without delay, including social and energy expenditure within the EU; the second is the longer-term strategic problem of how to adequately finance the EU's much higher expenditure so that the EU can be geopolitically and economically much stronger, even in peacetime.

In this respect, the EU should remember the history of the financial resources of the United States. Since the birth of the US in 1790, for the first nearly 70 years, until the US Civil War, US federal budget spending was only about 1-3% of US GDP (<http://metrocosm.com/history-of-us-taxes/>). The Civil War increased such spending to 10% but returned to the 1-3% standard after the war. The same pattern in the history of US federal budget spending was repeated during World War I: spending was substantially increased during the war, but then practically returned to its previous level.

It was only after the 1930s that the New Deal anti-crisis programme in the United States and the increasing burden of global geopolitical leadership on the United States at that time led to a steady increase in the share of US federal spending. World War II and the US's role in it also contributed to this. Today, the US federal spending share in GDP is around 25%. And this is significantly more than the EU budget. This is how the US national strength and global geopolitical leadership are financed.

This geopolitical crisis must make the European Union realise that, with the financial resources available today, the EU is neither capable of adequately financing the costs of this “our war”, nor of creating a lasting financial basis for the European Union’s global geopolitical leadership.

The EU needs not to be afraid to increase the share of GDP allocated to the EU. NATO members have already learnt not to be afraid to spend 2% on defence. Because it is far more frightening not to give 2% and face aggression from the Kremlin. It is exactly the same with the European Union: we need not to be afraid of a strong European Union, including a financially strong European Union, because we need to be much more afraid of a weak, incapable, ineffective, and divided European Union. And that is also a question of finances.

To conclude these personal reflections on how we can all find the pathways to a stronger European Union in this geopolitical crisis, my summarising advice is that we should stop being afraid— we should just not be afraid:

Not be afraid of Putin and his threats.

Not be afraid of the enlargement of the European Union and Ukraine’s membership in the EU.

Not be afraid of the “Europeanisation” of the European Union’s foreign and security policy.

Not be afraid to provide the European Union with more financial resources and thus actually empower the EU.

Nothing new needs to be discovered on the European continent, but it is important to remember what Pope John Paul II had been telling Central Europe in the last decades of the last century – Do not be afraid!

This led to Central Europe's liberation because Central Europe stopped being afraid.

And now the European Union needs the same advice – Do not be afraid!

Let us not be afraid of a stronger European Union! Because that is the only way peace and stability can be restored to the European continent!