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# Europe Whole and Free and the Global Zeitenwende<sup>3</sup>

*It is beyond doubt that the international world order as we have known it since the 1990s is changing. In Europe the clearest wakeup call of this new context – let alone the more frequent systemic challenges in the last decades – has been the Russian aggression against Ukraine. It needs the EU to adapt to the new realities which were labelled by Olaf Scholz “Zeitenwende” in his historic speech. The essay explores this historical context in the light of evolving dynamics of European integration, emphasising the concept of a “whole and free” Europe through continuous expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions, which was envisaged in George H. W. Bush’s also historic speech on the eve of the end of the Cold War. The essay touches upon the enduring debate on the geographical limits and institutional capacities of the European Union (EU) in relation to its position in the world order. The subsequent theoretical assessment aims to understand the challenges the EU faces, particularly in the context of potential enlargement, acknowledging the need for internal and external strength to navigate a changing geopolitical and geoeconomic environment. The essay refrains from normative statements on enlargement but asserts that a “wholer and freer” Europe could elevate the EU’s global influence, positioning it to shape the agenda of the “Zeitenwende”, and the emerging, hopefully still rule-based world order.*

**Keywords:** EU, enlargement, liberal world order

## Introduction

The “German question” have had influenced for long the security of the Transatlantic alliance and had been the cornerstone behind the development of the European integration and the hopes for a sustainable solution – including the long-pursued unification of Germany – became elevated after the promising talks of the Soviet and American leaders the years before the end of the Cold War. Great expectations led to the visit of George

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H. W. Bush to Europe and at the end of the historic year's spring, on 31 May 1989, he delivered his landmark speech in Mainz<sup>4</sup> in front of the West German political leadership as an answer for Gorbachev's "common European home"<sup>5</sup> idea. "Let Europe be whole and free"<sup>6</sup> echoed beyond Germany and meant more than a simple reform for the socialist members of the Warsaw Pact, it envisaged liberal system changes and offered an invitation to join the Liberal World Order led by the United States.<sup>7</sup> The speech was a defining moment in the history of U.S.–European relations and the transformation of the international order, followed by a series of dramatic events that year and the next, which eventually led to the fall of communism and the integration of the former Soviet bloc countries into the European Union and NATO.

Whole and free Europe has meant the continuous expansion of the Euro-Atlantic institutions and definitely strengthened the assumption in both the EU member states and the (potential) candidates that enlargement is an endemic element of European development. Of course, it has raised many questions because of the geographical limits (enlargement) and institutional capacities (functional deepening) of the EU but it has never completely disappeared from European political thoughts that finally all countries (except Russia) on the continent may be members of a single block.<sup>8</sup>

The debates have sometimes been heated, and other times slumberous, and have always been related to the position the EU intended to achieve or maintain in Europe and more broadly in the world. Bush's speech signalled the beginning of the new world order and a new historical era of post-Cold War. We cannot neglect the fact – even symbolically it is important – that practically the end of the post-Cold War era was also announced in Germany, but now by a European leader. One year after the Russian invasion in Ukraine and the start of the war, the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz addressed the Bundestag and declared what many had also raised during the year that the post-Cold War era ended. "Zeitenwende" marks a definite new start in Europe and announced a major change in Germany's defence policy, and a new cornerstone in the "German question" considering the widely accepted Euro-Atlantic logic stemming from Lord Ismay's not official "keep the Germans down" rhetoric<sup>9</sup> which outlived the Cold War.

The following essay serves as a theoretical assessment of where we are; how Europe can be "whole and free" in a changing world order. The basic assumption here is that we need to understand the complex political, economic and societal "catch 22" the EU has been facing before any scientifically valid analysis can be made on the necessary practical steps of, for instance, letting in Ukraine to the club. On the one hand, the trap here is that the enormous possible consequences of such an enlargement need a much stronger EU, internally and externally. On the other hand, the enlargement can make the EU a credible regional power which is the basis of any global ambition. The latter is connected to debates on the EU's strategic autonomy: a whole and free – let alone stable,

<sup>4</sup> See for instance GARTON ASH 2023b.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance MALCOLM 1989: 659–676.

<sup>6</sup> BUSH 1989.

<sup>7</sup> RADA 2022: 7–29.

<sup>8</sup> BILDT 2023.

<sup>9</sup> See FUHRHOP 2023; SCHREER 2023; TAUSENDFREUND 2022.



secure and prosperous – Europe is the precondition of the future of the EU which needs to navigate in a more geopolitical and geoeconomic environment. That is, the EU would theoretically be stronger if all countries on the continent could join (including Turkey, but not Russia), but to make that happen, the EU needs to be already strong mainly internally but also externally to cope with the powers who will work against regional expansion – like Russia – and who will have concerns about a more robust EU global presence – including China and maybe the U.S.<sup>10</sup>

Our following analysis does not intend to explicitly review the EU's enlargement policy. It aims to describe the nature of the changes in the Liberal World Order and to evaluate the room for a larger, stronger and more united EU. We are not intending to bring normative statements on the usefulness of enlargement, we simply state that a whole and free Europe can put the EU on a higher shelf in global politics from where the EU may be able to influence more autonomously and effectively the agenda of the “new” – hopefully rule based – world order after the Zeitenwende.

## Zeitenwende and the Liberal World Order

You do not need to be an international relations expert to conclude that the number of (seemingly) new open conflicts and wars is alarming. Since 2022, not only has high-intensity conflict returned to Europe, but the EU also needs to face the consequences of the melting of frozen conflicts considered to be managed in its neighbourhood. The frozen conflicts have been largely kept “quiet” by the liberal world order itself. Therefore, when the order is shaking, the regional players locally price-in the change and the opportunity costs of winning, losing, or maintaining the conflict. The consequence is harsh; many conflicts other than Ukraine have turned into war since the beginning of 2022 in Nagorno-Karabakh,<sup>11</sup> Ethiopia,<sup>12</sup> Myanmar,<sup>13</sup> Niger and lately in Gaza.<sup>14</sup> The EU, and now the United States are strategically less and less inclined to be engaged. The consequences for the EU have been grave for a long time, and because of the visible challenges coming from these conflict regions, such as migration, they also create serious internal debates.<sup>15</sup> Pouring more money into the conflicts will definitely not lead to a sustainable solution. Regardless of the novelty of the intentions, the aid trap has long been a known phenomenon in international economics.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> RADA-VARGA 2023: 3–23.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance GAVIN 2023.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance The Economist 2023.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance SUN 2023.

<sup>14</sup> See more about the arguments on the causes and consequences in BEALS-SALISBURY 2023.

<sup>15</sup> The EU leadership's position is to manage the consequences through, for instance, the quota system, whilst some of the member states – including Hungary – insist on managing the problems beyond the borders of the EU.

<sup>16</sup> See the Rubik's cube model of statebuilding, for instance, in PONGRÁCZ-RADA 2023: 78–94; RADA 2009: 81–114; RADA 2011: 155–163.



The “liberal world order”<sup>17</sup> is undoubtedly facing serious questions about its existence, its basic logic, and its functioning. Russia and China have been gradually pushing the boundaries in recent years, while critical voices are growing in the U.S. and even in the EU, but there is no real alternative in sight. Countries adhere to order either because it is in their direct interest (at least in the short term), or because there is nothing else to align with. An order itself reduces uncertainty, preventing the world from becoming the reality of unchecked anarchy. Paraphrasing Winston Churchill’s famous statements made in a 1947 speech during a debate in the British House of Commons,<sup>18</sup> we can say that – since various orders have been tried – from imperial expansion, through the anarchy of power-maximising states to the relative stability brought by bipolarity at the systemic level – the “liberal world order” is not perfect and not a solution in every case; in fact, it represents the worst form of the logic of an international system, except for those we have already tried.<sup>19</sup>

The world order is the frame of balance within which foreign policy motivations are optimally coordinated. If the balance is disrupted – and the Russian aggression has altered perceptions related to this balance, if not the order itself – individual actors take steps beyond the spectrum of security and well-being to enhance their position in the world order. However, these individual steps can significantly worsen the perceived prospects of other actors in terms of security and well-being, triggering new reactions. In the interaction of reactions, the logic of the world order does not change, but the perceived benefits for individual actors, in terms of both security and well-being, may turn negative.

The motivations of actors in the international system can be infinite, but analyses, narrowing down to the realist-liberal spectrum and complemented by a constructivist methodology suggest that ultimately two questions will be crucial at the end of the day: security and well-being (money). Conversely, well-being can be ensured for a country’s citizens (and we assume, even if it is too simplistic, that this is indeed the goal of leaders even in authoritarian countries if they want to stay in power in the long run) only when security exists. Security, intertwined with the question of survival, is an absolute realist category that undeniably narrows the space for manoeuvring. If there is no security, a state is more prone to make decisions stuck in the realist domain of self-help and power. In the presence of economic well-being, a state can address issues

<sup>17</sup> The world order is intangible, and impossible to be perceived empirically, so every assertion about it is abstract intuition. Pre-existing concepts form a logical order based on the rules of gravity, meaning that the interpretation of the system by major powers becomes dominant. Through the credibility of this dominant interpretation, other actors drawn toward the core of the system strengthen the order by adopting behaviours in line with the dominant interpretation. The consequence of the transcendent nature of the world order is that actors may feel a greater or lesser need to belong to the order, independent of their experiential knowledge. In liberal theories, this manifests as emphasising values in international relations and explaining international cooperation. This essay is not intending to elaborate a precise definition, or give a synopsis of the theoretic debate about the expression. To see more on the LWO read RADA 2023a: 1–15.

<sup>18</sup> Famous quotes, taken from the speech: “Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” See Parliament Bill 1947.

<sup>19</sup> PONGRÁCZ–RADA 2023: 78–94.



characteristic of the “liberal world order” such as the continuous expansion and promotion of universally interpreted inalienable human rights. The legitimacy of the world order – meaning that its actors adhere to its rules – is derived from the balance of the order, ensuring their security, and that the creation, maintenance and development of economic well-being are tangible possibilities. However, this is a matter of perception (here the constructivist methodological logic comes into play) because it is a question of perspective (worldview)<sup>20</sup> and depends on the assessment of the leaders of states. For example, from Putin’s perspective, the enlargement of NATO is evidence of the West’s imperial expansion. In reality, NATO posed a threat primarily to Putin’s neo-Soviet imperial ambitions, not to Russia itself. Numerous studies have explored the factors leading to Putin’s decision,<sup>21</sup> but the key point is that it triggered immediate American and European reactions, thereby impacting the world order, and the chain of actions certainly disrupted the comfortable balance.

$$E_1 = \{P_{1-\infty}\} = \sim \{\text{USA; EU; C; RU; GS}\}^{22}$$

$$E_2 = \sim \{\text{USA; EU; C; RU; GS}\}$$

The formula is the same, according to the simplistic logic of liberal democracies:<sup>23</sup>

$$E_3 = \sim \{\text{Liberal democracies; authoritarian states}\}$$

$$E_1 > E_2 > E_3$$

Thus, the more simplifications and narrowing we apply, the greater the margin of error between predictions made within these limiting frameworks and reality. The leaders of states must consider a much more complex equation. Today, the balance has definitely been disrupted, evidenced by the war in Ukraine (it is rather symptom than a cause), and each actor experiences a negative deviation in terms of security and well-being. Consequently, the question of the legitimacy of the “world order” arises.<sup>24</sup> Thus, American steps taken to restore the balance of the world order, or the lack thereof, come with additional negative consequences. The “liberal world order” was established by the United States, and its balance has been overseen by Washington in recent decades. Therefore, any departure from this comes with negative consequences (perceived or real) from the perspective of the United States, which Washington immediately seeks to remedy. It is also clear that the EU has been a benefactor of the Western led liberal world order. Therefore, the balance is in the interest of the EU, which is endangered not only by revolutionary critics, such as China or Russia, but also by the (over)reaction of

<sup>20</sup> To read more about the influence of worldviews see KATZENSTEIN 2022.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, CANCIAN 2022.

<sup>22</sup> E: balance/world order; P: actors; P substituted: United States, EU, China, Russia, “Global South” such as India, Indonesia, African countries. Balance is sustained in the long term if  $E \geq 1$ . For the sake of a highly simplified quantification: if there is a direct security threat, it is  $-2$ , if indirect,  $-1$ ; similarly for the economy:  $-2$ ,  $-1$ ; and conversely, it can be  $+2$  and  $+1$  in all cases. If, for the world order,  $E < 0$ , then the order is questioned, and each actor exhibits self-interested behaviour to reduce its own losses or potentially realise perceived gains. Despite relative losses, only the United States has been willing to maintain the order in recent decades. Other countries will not, but there is no alternative system either, only the realist anarchy, which is certainly disadvantageous for everyone in the above logic.

<sup>23</sup> RADA-STEPPER 2023: 1–9.

<sup>24</sup> RADA 2023a: 1–15.



the United States. Believing that the EU's goal<sup>25</sup> is to manage and maintain balance, if all other major actors are changing, the EU should act accordingly. Thus, *Zeitenwende* refers to the volatility in which the EU needs to be more prepared, more independent, definitely stronger and more autonomous.

From a European perspective, the ideal world order is one in which the manoeuvring space expands, maintaining a special relationship and close alliance with the United States. The EU aims to be a status quo power, while China and Russia are seen as revisionist powers, and the United States is perceived as unpredictable.<sup>26</sup> Institutional tools for this purpose exist (NATO, G7, Transatlantic Partnership Council, etc.). Paraphrasing the words of the first Secretary-General of NATO, Lord Ismay, the strategy the EU should follow is to keep the Americans nearby, the Russians down, and the Chinese far away.<sup>27</sup> Although this may sound easy, the economic openness characteristic of the EU and the world of mutual interdependence, which is a fundamental tenet, make it a serious question of how to maintain the credibility of the American alliance when it is not in the EU's interest to unconditionally support U.S. geopolitical endeavours – even if part of the goal is to maintain an appropriate “liberal world order”. Another politically (economically) challenging dilemma is how long and how closely the EU can maintain relations with China if China acts as a challenger to the world order. It is also worth noting, not as a dilemma but as a reality, that the EU cannot ignore Russia, as it will need to cooperate with Russia after the war for both security and economic reasons. An important and non-negligible scenario is the likelihood that the United States, yielding to growing domestic anti-war sentiment,<sup>28</sup> gradually seeks to shift the costs of the Ukrainian war onto European partners, along with an increased responsibility for maintaining European security. Currently, a U.S. withdrawal is not timely, but regardless of the winner of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, Washington could easily opt for a new isolationist foreign policy direction.<sup>29</sup> This scenario could become particularly realistic in a new pivot to Asia,<sup>30</sup> guided by realist logic rather than liberal ideology.

The EU did not focus more seriously on developing independent defence capabilities in the past decade by chance, and the Lisbon Treaty provided an institutionalised opportunity for differentiated integration.<sup>31</sup> However, the existence of EU defence development and potential on paper alone does not represent genuine capability growth. The idea of EU battlegroups is nearly twenty years old, and although the first battlegroup was placed on standby in 2007, none have been deployed since.<sup>32</sup> The legally established Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)<sup>33</sup> was initiated in 2017 among EU member

<sup>25</sup> We do not want to dive into debates here about the EU's decision-making mechanisms, or even touch upon the issue of unified interest.

<sup>26</sup> In some opinions, the United States is itself a revisionist power (see MENON 2022).

<sup>27</sup> See NATO Leaders s. a. This was also stated in the ECFR analysis published in the summer of 2023 (see PUGLIERIN–ZERKA 2023).

<sup>28</sup> CHATELAIN 2023.

<sup>29</sup> SIKORSKI 2023: 66–77.

<sup>30</sup> Obama–Clinton era's “Pivot to Asia” already considered China a competitor, but in line with neoliberal beliefs, the goal was for China's economic growth to bring about democratisation (see BLACKWILL s. a.).

<sup>31</sup> KOLLER 2012: 35–57.

<sup>32</sup> For further information see EEAS 2023.

<sup>33</sup> See Permanent Structured Cooperation – PESCO (s. a.).



states interested in it. Despite adopting the Strategic Compass<sup>34</sup> and establishing the European Peace Facility in 2022 the war shows that the EU would hardly be able to deter a revisionist power without support from the United States (and NATO).<sup>35</sup> In addition to creating institutional frameworks for defence capabilities, European unity must also function in practice for credibility enhancement, a necessary condition. In crucial matters for the future world order, such as cooperation with Russia after the war and relations with China, there is no unified European position, and larger EU member states pursue individual foreign policy interests, undermining the effectiveness of EU foreign policy.<sup>36</sup> Germany has been particularly scrutinised in this regard.

From the perspective of European strategic autonomy, the first comprehensive German national security strategy<sup>37</sup> presented in June 2023 can be considered a milestone, even if, according to critics, not the document itself.<sup>38</sup> In the spirit of the Scholzian “Zeitenwende”, it integrates theoretical issue-specific security challenges<sup>39</sup> with practical defence issues. The document reflects the changed political thinking observed in Europe, signalling Germany’s departure from its historical reluctance to articulate a political vision for European security. In Germany’s case, this strategic thinking and birth of some kind of strategic culture indicate the need for serious and noteworthy development, which is complemented by the development of the German military and increased defence spending. A crucial interpretation of the national security strategy is that Germany envisions the future in the current “liberal world order” and within the institutional security frameworks provided by NATO and the EU. Germany sees itself in close alliances and partnerships with the United States while envisioning a future cooperation with China. In this scenario, Germany, as Europe’s most populous and economically strongest country, acknowledges a pronounced responsibility for maintaining peace, security and prosperity in a free but increasingly multipolar international order.

The declared shift in German strategic thinking is of paramount importance for the entire EU, and a modification in the traditional European vision led by the Franco-German tandem can be anticipated. Historically, the political content of this vision was primarily determined by the French, whereas its economic content was shaped by the Germans. The evolving German political concept envisions increasing responsibility from Berlin to maintain a world order that fundamentally aligns with the peace, security, prosperity (and democracy) ensured by today’s institutional framework, an order which is gradually becoming more multilateral, with China playing an important role in it. According to the German strategic vision, this approach will be effective only when the EU can unite, prevent illegal migration, foster economic unity, and reduce efforts blocked by particular interests toward pan-European goals.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See EEAS s. a.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, in some ways, the U.S. presence was not enough to deter Putin.

<sup>36</sup> SIKORSKI 2023: 66–77.

<sup>37</sup> See the German National Security Strategy in The German Federal Government 2023.

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Atlantic Council Experts 2023.

<sup>39</sup> See more about issue-specific security complexes in MARTON et al. 2015.

<sup>40</sup> See the security strategy in The German Federal Government 2023.



## “Wholer and freer” Europe

The EU has developed into a postmodern economic and political entity that is ill prepared to cope with a world full of traditional security threats. The symbolic idiom “economic giant but political dwarf”<sup>41</sup> has changed considerably, but the EU’s economic project designed and managed under the German leadership of monetary orthodoxy, fiscal austerity, and free-flowing trade and investment implies a liberal world order. The once sacred principles of liberal economic ideology have been questioned by the geoeconomic reality.<sup>42</sup> Ursula von der Leyen referred to the ambition for change accordingly already in her early speech in 2019.<sup>43</sup> The EU has traditionally not been a political power to use its vast economic tools for political purposes to actively set the agenda of the world order. As a consequence of the pandemic and based on the grim experience with inadequate capacity to cope with the global pandemic, the European Commission became active in setting up large scale macroeconomic resilience instruments – for instance unprecedentedly massive Covid recovery fund<sup>44</sup> – and in overseeing European solidarity, whilst being more active and vocal in countering unfair competition vis-à-vis and pressure from both the United States and China.

The EU’s origin is a regional peace project and a successful regional economic project. However, to maintain the positive benefits of these processes, the EU has needed to put real money behind the political ambitions to be and remain resilient and proactive in a changing world. The global and more intense strategic competition between the United States and China may easily eat away the EU’s market share in critical industries, for instance, in innovation and technologies related to car manufacturing, green energy, AI, etc., all of which require those raw earth minerals that are also not abundant in Europe. Consequently, the EU has started to move forward towards a stronger central regulatory power within the single market to be effective outside of the EU. The International Procurement Instrument,<sup>45</sup> the Foreign Subsidies Regulation,<sup>46</sup> and the first ever independent economic security strategy<sup>47</sup> all help “weaponising” the economy and protect the EU from any external pressures and trade wars. This process also leads to less and less tolerance within the block towards individual member states. That is, the logic of a more powerful EU, which is, in turn, more stable and secure for the members, comes with a price of less independence for member states.

The literature is relatively unified regarding the fact that Russian aggression has created a geopolitical situation for the EU, which has not been experienced since the Cold War – to some extent, since World War II.<sup>48</sup> Putin’s empire-building efforts and the attempt to colonise Ukraine require the EU to be capable of politically unified thinking

<sup>41</sup> BRÖZEL 2014.

<sup>42</sup> MATTHIJS–MEUNIER 2023: 168–179.

<sup>43</sup> Her commission would be a geopolitical one (for further information see European Commission 2019).

<sup>44</sup> See European Commission 2020.

<sup>45</sup> See European Parliament 2022.

<sup>46</sup> See European Commission 2023b.

<sup>47</sup> See European Commission 2023a.

<sup>48</sup> TGA envisions the European empire as a voluntary, mutually beneficial democratic political form (see GARTON ASH 2023a: 64–75).



at least on strategic issues, because of the need of quicker decision-making. However, according to some critics,<sup>49</sup> it may potentially lead to unwanted federalisation. Even a strategically autonomous EU does not guarantee that the EU will stay out of global conflicts, even though the demand for increased security would call for remaining neutral. Due to economic interdependence and the necessity to elevate, at the very least maintain the level of well-being, the EU would not remain away from, for instance, a U.S.–China conflict.<sup>50</sup> After two years of the war in Ukraine, estimates suggest that it has cost the EU around 190 billion Euros; the sanctions against China and their global economic impacts would result in far more severe and expensive consequences.<sup>51</sup>

The return of revisionist challenges to Europe necessitates the creation of a stronger Europe, building on a more balanced transatlantic relationship and relying on a strategically autonomous and capable EU. In terms of security, it is crucial for the EU to disconnect unreliable Russian energy (and raw material) sources while gradually transitioning to green energy with the ultimate goal of climate neutrality. The EU must serve as a political force based on shared values, that provides an effective and attractive alternative to Putin's retrospective world. This alternative should be open to Western Balkan and Eastern European countries. In other words, the EU will become stronger after enlargement.

It has been a widely accepted<sup>52</sup> logical assumption that domestic strengths are the building blocks of regional, and consequently global power. A political entity that cannot control its region, or manage the problems stemming from the immediate neighbourhood will logically be occupied too much with local problems to be able to influence the global level. We note here that the evolution of the EU's foreign policy also followed this trait,<sup>53</sup> considering that the EU's most successful foreign policy tool has been the enlargement.<sup>54</sup> The goal of enlargement and similarly the neighbourhood policy of the EU has been to extend the sphere of security, stability and prosperity<sup>55</sup> to regions which can have direct consequence on the security, stability and prosperity of the members.

Regional conflicts can have global impacts, but they definitely and significantly shape a region's future, sometimes in a way that none of the directly involved players intended. The open Russian aggression practically opened the box of thoughts about a larger and stronger Europe – in some ways a postmodern regional power, or post-imperial power.<sup>56</sup> It posits that for the EU to maintain regional influence and secure a role in global affairs, akin to a form of strategic-economic autonomy, it must adopt characteristics reminiscent

<sup>49</sup> See SONNICKSEN 2022: 114–133; MCGEE 2021; KUDARAUŠKAS 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Contrary to what Macron said in an interview after the Beijing summit (see ANDERLINI–CAULCUTT 2023).

<sup>51</sup> SIKORSKI 2023: 66–77.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Mazarr, the senior analyst of Rand Corporation collected arguments around the question: what makes a power great. He analysed this question mainly from the American point of view with the unhidden goal to check whether China is ready to be a great power. The EU was not explicitly part of this assessment but the logic can be applied similarly (see MAZARR 2022b: 52–63; CHARP–MAZARR 2022; MAZARR 2022a).

<sup>53</sup> GRAJEWSKI 2023.

<sup>54</sup> STANICEK 2022.

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance, Strategic Communications 2021; BURAS–MORINA 2023.

<sup>56</sup> GARTON ASH 2023a: 64–75.



of an empire, necessitating stronger central decision-making and unity. The discussion traces the evolution of the enlargement policy, noting the onset of “enlargement fatigue” during the global financial crisis and subsequent crises (Eurozone, identity, Brexit, illegal migration and finally Covid), which prompted potential members to seek alternative options and weakened the EU’s position in its neighbourhood. This relative weakness of the EU has allowed some global players to build pillars of political and economic footholds in these very neighbourhoods. China’s Belt and Road Initiative’s expansion (e.g. Montenegro), or Russia’s open intimidation in the Eastern neighbourhood had been visible before Ukraine, too. The later example is very interesting, as the chain of events in Ukraine started with the possible EU perspective of Ukraine which is utterly incompatible with Putin’s mirageous dream about the neo-Soviet empire. The trigger of Russia’s open intervention was the outbreak of the revolution in Kyiv which ousted then President Yanukovich for cancelling the imminent Ukrainian membership in the comprehensive DCFTA program in 2013.

Assumptions clearly failed in Ukraine that the stability of the neighbourhood can be sustained if the EU membership perspective is vague as EU’s “expansion” may outrage other powers.<sup>57</sup> This realisation led to the revival of the enlargement policy and Charles Michel’s recent announcement that by 2030 the EU needs to be ready to accept the new members.<sup>58</sup> We need to note here that – even though it is qualitatively new in its way – the president of the EU did not take much risk with the announcement as it will happen after two EU elections (2024 and 2029) and after the agreement on the new budget in 2027. Michel’s speech logically followed Olaf Scholz’s announced commitment to enlargement last year in Prague,<sup>59</sup> in which the German Chancellor envisaged the future membership of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the entire Western Balkans after the EU underwent to this expansion required serious reforms and deepening of the integration.

After the enlargement in the 2030s, the EU will control the whole of Europe (maybe with few exceptions like Belarus, Turkey or Armenia) and through the already existing and in some sense globally significant regulatory power<sup>60</sup> and the precedence of EU law in the new territories will make the EU resemble more of an empire with global outreach. The integration and enlargement are the processes towards a larger and stronger supra-national authority, and the postmodernity is expressed by the fact that the expansion is based on voluntary decisions of the old, as well as the new members.

The EU as a peace project and a project for economic prosperity brought stability to a historically war-ridden continent after the Second World War. And even though the different enlargement rounds happened in different geopolitical and historical environment and had different central reasons, they expanded the EU’s sphere of stability and prosperity. During each round the experts warned for the unintended negative effects and some even envisioned the internal collapse.<sup>61</sup> After the 2000s and both external and domestic challenges, the EU experienced “enlargement fatigue”<sup>62</sup> cooling the ambitions

<sup>57</sup> See Kissinger’s thought in Davos in 2023 (LOWRY 2023).

<sup>58</sup> JONES 2023.

<sup>59</sup> GEHRKE 2022.

<sup>60</sup> BRADFORD 2019.

<sup>61</sup> BILDT 2023.

<sup>62</sup> BRUNET – DURAND-OCHOA 2013.



in the Western Balkans. The war in Ukraine reopened the box and strengthened the discussion about the connection among a bigger Europe, stability, autonomy and the coming world order.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion: Putting things together and the capacities of the EU

The frontier of the EU is unquiet.<sup>64</sup> To manage it, the EU's decision-making process must be more efficient and quicker, and cooperation should be established in defence and development. In global issues, cooperation with China is inevitable, and the EU must also have strong ties with the Global South.<sup>65</sup> All of this urge important conclusions for Hungary and other EU member states, including France. Germany now aspires to a political leadership role, continuing through the EU, but Berlin will likely take visible and predictably assertive steps to achieve its goals. This may involve increasing criticism of the United States, asserting German weight in relations with France, and initiating reforms of EU institutions that, in strategic matters, will not tolerate long-term unilateralism if Berlin does not find it justified by well-founded national interests.<sup>66</sup> An example could be the future of the European energy mix and relations with Russia. The German stance falls somewhere between Washington and Budapest, which Hungary must consider but it also presents an opportunity for participation in shaping common compromises.

Thus, "Europe's real test is yet to come"<sup>67</sup> and it is an open question whether the EU is going to be able to cope with the challenges of a new world order and how resiliently it can adapt the change from a stable – yet in some ways unipolar – international system to a more competitive multipolarity. The "brave new world"<sup>68</sup> is less postmodern, more traditional in which realist reflexes may be stronger and we can even risk stating more sought for. In the new set up NATO is more robust, visible, the EU member states are stronger individually than before, Russia is slipping towards the Global South or into a vassal of China.<sup>69</sup> The reaction of the United States to the changes will also be definitive as after 2024 – actually no matter who will win in November at the presidential elections – Washington may turn back to domestic issues. An isolationist U.S. could dismiss Ukraine as a global problem and let the solution to the EU. More escalation in the South China Sea also would demand a more robust and autonomous EU defence as

<sup>63</sup> By the time of publication, the European Council (December 2023) already discussed the official opening of the accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova.

<sup>64</sup> The expression refers to the work of Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel who used a very similar title to their book which analysed the strategic environment of the United States (see GRYGIEL-MITCHELL 2017).

<sup>65</sup> SCHOLZ 2023: 22–38.

<sup>66</sup> RADA 2023b: 321–336.

<sup>67</sup> SIKORSKI 2023: 66–77.

<sup>68</sup> The expression refers to Aldous Huxley's famous novel and was also used by István Gyarmati (see GYARMATI 2002: 3–18).

<sup>69</sup> Brzezinski's prediction has been shared by realist American scholars since, including John Mearsheimer.



Pentagon – no matter of the open political references about the American capacities to cover the World from Israel to Taiwan – long abandoned the goal to be able to fight two major wars simultaneously.<sup>70</sup>

Stronger defence and common strategic thinking need the EU to further deepen the integration. The signs are visible for this ambition, but the results of actual deeds are rather mixed. In theory differentiated integration<sup>71</sup> is a logical model for the future and it is reflected in the EU style “coalition of the willing” in the form of the PESCO.<sup>72</sup> The later adopted Strategic Compass and the mostly debated European Peace Facility are also important steps towards a more robust and capable EU defence but there are still many questions related to the fact that the EU has never faced major traditional security threat without the active support of the United States. The worst-case scenario is an open conflict between the United States and China. Let alone the fact that the EU would remain alone with multiple threats in the immediate neighbourhood,<sup>73</sup> any sanctions against China would contribute to the EU’s economic collapse. According to rough estimates,<sup>74</sup> the sanctions and the indirect costs of the war, plus the aid to Ukraine for the EU has piled up to more than 1% of the GDP which is enormous compared to the rather moderate budget of the EU.<sup>75</sup> Russia is a relatively small economy in the world. Any decoupling from China would result in unprecedented harshness, and it is very difficult to imagine that the EU could be neutral: either the Chinese, or the U.S. market and partnership may be lost without choosing sides.

That is, the EU’s strategic choice is to be stronger, more visible, more credible that it can independently moderate the escalation between the United States and China. To do so the EU needs to maintain close ties with both and maybe to manage the “Kissingerian realist triangle”. But first the EU needs to understand the “Zeitenwende” and provide security and prosperity in the immediate neighbourhood.

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<sup>70</sup> FARLEY 2021.

<sup>71</sup> KOLLER 2012: 35–57.

<sup>72</sup> LEBRUN 2018.

<sup>73</sup> See Russia’s Second Front in Europe.

<sup>74</sup> KILFOYLE 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Important to note that the costs are unevenly distributed in the member states, and it is not covered entirely from the EU’s budget.



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