

SHOWING TEETH OR HOPING FOR PEACE: EUROPEAN UNION AS A POWERFUL GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR IN WARTIME

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STUDENT PAPER
2023



TEPSA
Trans European Policy Studies Association



Co-funded by
the European Union

Abstract

The EU had successes and failures in strengthening its geopolitical stature. The Union has applied multiple sanctions and demonstrated readiness to tackle energy dependency. Nevertheless, there is a long way ahead of the EU for it to consolidate a strong geopolitical position. Member States should raise military spending, deepen international cooperation between each other, and provide sufficient education on EU matters to the citizens.

Introduction

It goes without saying that most of the European countries won the geographical lottery. Especially Western, Central and Northern counties of the European Union (EU) are safely shielded from the tragedy of natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, etc. (Marshall, 2021). Because of such a fortunate location, countries can use fertile land, a soft climate and convenient access to the sea. Yet, there is a difference between geographical and geopolitical factors. When analysing the history of the European continent from 2014 to 2023, the threat of Eastern politics becomes apparent. Hence, it is vital for the EU policymakers to stay alert to not just the economic or ideological, but also the geopolitical status of the Union in the global arena. When one talks about the strength of the EU, one would seldom mention geopolitical reputation as its component. In fact, the Russian invasion of Ukraine displayed the weaknesses of the peaceful European mindset (Lehme, 2020). While EU leaders might have perceived peace and cooperation as the general will of humanity.

However, these values ended up being just one of the frames to view international relations and not an objective reality. Unprovoked Russian aggression encouraged the EU to renew intense work towards advancing its geopolitical presence.

Analysis

The efforts of the EU towards strengthening its geopolitical image while a conventional war is being waged on the continent should not be underestimated. The most prominent tool is the diverse sanctions imposed by the EU. Specifically, the import ban on Russian goods (including energy, tourism, telecommunications, etc.), and the suspension of the visa facilitation agreement (Portela & Kluge, 2022). Until this day, the Russian economy is slowly collapsing with the predicted decrease of GDP by 7-15%, impairing its technological and respectively military potential (Raam Op Russland, 2022). On top of that, the economy had a shock of over 1000 international businesses withdrawing their operations. Sanctions created tensions and power struggles of elites with each other and with the Kremlin regime.

In the case of EU sanctions, the EU successfully enters geopolitical competition not just as an international commodities regulator, but also as an international law advocate. Interestingly, international law and geopolitics are closely interrelated. The geopolitical leader is the actor, who is capable of assigning what rules should be broadly accepted as 'objective' (Orakhelashvili, 2008). The EU has indicated increased conviction in exercising punishment upon transgression. Similarly, to financial restrictions, the European Council adopted a legislature prohibiting Russian's aircrafts from taking off, landing in or overflying the EU Member States (Council of the EU, 2022). This is one more explicit display of the strong geopolitical position in the region.

Another successful measure of the EU is the decisive steps towards disconnecting from Russian energy sources. Resource dependency used to be a convenient reason for Russian blackmailing. EU showed significant resistance and readiness to prioritise its independency and sustainable development over the convenience of affordable resources. Namely, after Russia threatened to shut down the energy supply to Poland and Bulgaria, Europe committed to searching for alternative energy suppliers and increasing the share of green energy (France 24, 2022). Such commodities as oil or gas tend to be not simply functional goods, but also an initiative for geopolitical power-play. Interestingly, artefacts possess politics, meaning that goods (whether renewable or traditional energy) are entitled to represent certain types of ideologies (Winner, 1980). Russia, as a state, associated with oil, gas and nuclear facilities, represents the authoritative part of the spectrum. While, the Netherlands, for example, is increasing its locally sourced energy powered by wind, which is typically associated with a mature democratic government (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2022). Thus, by decreasing the influence of the energy from the authoritarian government and transitioning to renewable sources, the EU is starting to change the geopolitical dynamics in the region to its benefit.

Such a quick and decisive response might have surprised the critics of democratic decision-making. Nevertheless, the response should be even more determined when considering the war crimes being committed 1400 kilometers from the EU border. There are several geopolitical gaps that can be identified in the status quo of European decision-making. As was previously mentioned, the EU States underestimated the differences in mindsets that their Eastern neighbors hold. In 2021, EU countries spent on average 1.5% of their GDP on the military, while Russia spent 4.1% (The World Bank, 2021).

This transfers an abstract difference in 'mindset' to measurable calculations. In 2014, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) released the benchmark of 2% military spending, which is still not reached by most European NATO members (NATO, 2022). The potential for such money is investments in equipment, readiness, digitalisation, research, development and, most important, deterrence (Chollet et al., 2020). As the war in Ukraine showed, fighting for freedom is very demanding and expensive, thus, the latest military innovations are needed when a war breaks out.

Recently the EU and the rest of the Western countries faced one more challenge: the limited geopolitical power of intergovernmental institutions. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an arrest warrant to Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova for illegally deporting children from temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories (Beaumont, 2023). Nevertheless, the decision can be executed only in countries that are the signatories to ICC. Russia backed up the Rome Statute in 2016, hence, disabling the ICC to execute punishments. This demonstrates the geopolitical inefficiency in the legal framework: although the criminal is detected, (s)he cannot be captured on the non-ICC member territory.

The last problem is internal, but still disadvantageous to the EU's geopolitical image and general stability. The levels of Euroscepticism have been progressively increasing inside certain Member States (De Vries, 2018). The main indication of such a trend is Brexit. On top of that, certain values discourses arose in other countries, such as disputes over the rule of law in Poland and Hungary. According to scholars such as De Vries (2018), lack of education on EU matters and national problems are the causes of anti-EU attitudes. It goes without saying that a geopolitically strong region should be strong from the inside first of all.

Recommendations

Increasing military spending

A good starting point for EU Members, most of whom are NATO countries, is to reach the goal of spending 2% on military needs. However, this should not be a ceiling but an indicator of the minimum defence budget. It is important to acknowledge, that several European countries, alarmed by the cruelty of Russian aggression have already started increasing their military budgets. For instance, Poland announced the goal to spend 3% of its GDP on the military in 2023 and Germany dedicated an additional €100 billion on defence (Cavendish, 2022). Nevertheless, individual willingness to spend can help the EU in strengthening its geopolitical image only to a limited extent. It is vital to institutionalize such change, thus, the European Commission should consider writing a proposal of regulation for the Member States to increase their military budgets to at least 2%. This will facilitate deeper cooperation between two powerful institutions (EU and NATO), enhance European military capacity and set a strong benchmark for non-EU NATO members on how the spending should look like. It will be difficult to deny the geopolitical power of the entity that is leading in military matters in a region.

Facilitating international cooperation as a tool to overcome institutional limitations

The issued arrest warrant for Putin and Lvova-Belova is a showcase of why the Rome statute and the ICC have significant limitations: criminals on Russian territory are extremely difficult to capture. On top of that, countries with authoritarian governments, where the abuse of power is likely and punishment is implausible, would logically not be interested in ratifying the statute of ICC. Thus, it is very important to build a way to overcome the limitations of institutional rigidity.

It takes a lot of resources and effort to bring change into institutions in times of crisis. This is why deeper international cooperation for capturing international criminals is needed. For instance, third countries must be asked to capture and arrest criminals when detecting their arrival. If those countries are the allies of unfriendly states, sanctions from the EU should be imposed. For instance, if Putin were to visit Serbia or Hungary, those governments are responsible for capturing him.

The most recent Putin's visit outside of Russia was to Mariupol (a temporarily occupied Ukrainian city). Although Ukraine did not ratify the Rome statute, it allowed the ICC to investigate war crimes on its territory. This increases the chances/likelihood of capturing human rights violators on Ukrainian land and legitimizes the threat of arrest. Crucially, a very detailed and rapid exchange of information is needed between different countries and institutions. The facilitation of such an effective space of intergovernmental informational flows will strengthen the geopolitical image of the EU countries as those who can make an impact beyond their borders while respecting the rule of law.

Educating EU citizens on EU matters

When looking into developing geopolitical reputation, it is crucial for the EU not just to be perceived as strong but to remain united and stable from within. This is why it is crucial to keep an eye on and strategically address the appearances of nationalism and Euroscepticism. The study by De Vries (2018) showed that Euroscepticism is very likely to occur in societies for a variety of reasons. First, citizens might assume that their national government is receiving less money than giving away to the shared budget. Second, people might fear losing their national identity while adhering to the Union.

Third, citizens might perceive their national problems as ones caused by the EU membership when, for example, the national economy or labor market is not performing well. To solve these issues, citizens should be properly educated on EU matters. It is crucial to comprehensively disclose to people how the EU allocates the budget, how it helps the countries in need (e.g. EU Cohesion Fund) and what are the additional benefits of the membership. This can be provided in the form of workshops at universities and high schools.

Conclusion

While the EU is progressively moving ahead with its response to Russian aggression, some aspects need to be improved to strengthen the geopolitical image of the Union. The EU showed great decisiveness when imposing various sanctions and embargos on the aggressor. The EU has also established its position when it comes to vital resources such as gas and oil while also developing more sustainable solutions. Nevertheless, increased military spending, deeper international cooperation, and internal education on EU matters are the discussions that need to arise soon in the European Commission and European Parliament. It is vital to remind other states that the EU circumscribes not only the area of free movement and economic prosperity but also outlines the land of respect for sovereignty, democracy and sustainable development.

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