

EUROPE SHOULD AVOID TWO TRAPS AS IT CONFRONTS WAR IN UKRAINE

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As it confronts the most serious armed conflict in Europe since the end of the second world war, the European Union should avoid two traps: framing the war in civilisational terms and weaponizing multilateral economic institutions. The result of these would be to build another Fortress Europe which was not the initial project of those who started the process of integration of the continent when they created the Coal and Steel Community and decades later turned it into the European Union.

The EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen declared that Ukraine is “one of us”. She is not alone in framing this conflict in civilisational terms. Many commentators have, since the start of Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, expressed surprise that such a conflict could have happened in “civilised” Europe as opposed to the world beyond. The same people seem to feel sympathy for the Ukrainians because they “look like us”. On the BBC, a senior western official said that what made the situation so emotional for him was that those being killed were “European people with blue eyes and blond hair”. The EU has been generous in its approach to refugees from Ukraine as it should be. Poland has led the way, influenced no doubt by a sense of ethnic solidarity and a communality of destiny: this is the country led by the same government which very strongly opposed accepting asylum seekers from Syria in 2015 and, since last summer, has condemned migrants at the Poland-Belarus frontier, threatening human rights defenders trying to help asylum seekers.

The civilisational way the war in Ukraine is being framed helps to explain why much of the world simply has no dog in this fight. Most African and Middle Eastern countries abstained during the vote at the UN General Assembly as did India. They see it as a fight between Russia on the one hand, the US and the EU on the other in which they have no stake. They note that the US and their European allies have done little to protect the Palestinians from Israelis grabbing their land for decades; that Iraq is a wreck and that Yemen is bombed with weapons bought by Saudi Arabia in France, the UK and the US.

As Russian troops massed in ever greater numbers on the borders of Ukraine last January, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken declared

that “the inviolability of frontiers” was among the guiding principles for international behaviour. After Russia’s parliament recognised the independence of the two self-declared republics Moscow had cleaved from eastern Ukraine, Blinken said that that infringement on “Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” was a “gross violation of international law”. The EU is on the same wavelength but has failed to commit political capital to finding solutions to other long-standing abuses of another country’s sovereignty: the Israeli land grab of Palestinian property is only the most obvious, and long-standing example. People in southern Mediterranean countries and many in Europe take note of what they see as western hypocrisy. Double standards raise awkward questions about the EU’s self-proclaimed respect for and guardianship of democracy and the rule of law, key factors of its soft power.

Hans Kundnani, the director of the European programme at Chatham House raises an issue that has been haunting Europe for decades. “Is the EU a civilisational project? Does being European mean being white?”. In a conference at Oxford University, Kundnani explain how “historically, being European meant being white (and predominantly Christian I would add). After World War II, a new European identity emerged around the European Union, but it too had a civilising mission and was based on forgetting the history of European colonialism and its relationship with European integration”. This throws us back to Europe’s promise to accept Turkey into the EU which it then reneged on. It would be unwise for EU leaders to rekindle the fires of the Clash of Civilisations debate which were initially fuelled by American conservative groups and successfully promoted by George W. Bush with his speech on the Axis of Evil. Those EU leaders who genuinely care about Europe and her societies should focus on extinguishing these fires, and working for the common destiny based on reconciliation, not profits for the arms industry.

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Kundnani points to another danger in the current situation. “First, we did too little to oppose Russia. Now do we risk going too far the other way?” The economic sanctions against Russia agreed by the EU and its G7 partners are unprecedented since 1945. The risk here, the second trap if you prefer, is that weaponizing multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organisation risks doing serious damage to Europe’s standing in the world. The predicament of Germany is real and brutally described by Constanze Stelzenmuller of The Brookings Institution in The Economist. The country has “outsourced its security needs to

the United States, its energy needs to Russia and its export-led growth to China". After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the EU deliberately excluded energy from its sanctions against Moscow. The following year, Germany chose to increase its dependence on Russia by agreeing to build the Nordstream gas pipeline in 2015. "Europe's Faustian pact with Putin has unravelled spectacularly" was how Jonathan Guthrie of the Financial Times summed up the situation (FT March 11).

The EU totally failed to deter the Russian president's next move. Kundnani writes: "if Russia is surprised at how tough and united we have been in our response to the invasion, that is not a success but a failure. It means deterrence didn't work because we failed to convince Russia that we would be that tough and united – and this should be our starting point in thinking about what to do next". The frantic scramble to do something smacks of overcompensation. Europe must avoid falling into the trap set by neoconservatism in the UK and the US which seeks to frame "international politics as a global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism". History is not a morality tale. The speed at which the EU has changed tack and the fact that nobody knows which economies are going to be hit worst, and when, is terrifying. The mutual dependence between Russia and the EU economies is greater than many people imagined. The ripple effect of sanctions will prevent the export of Russian and Ukrainian wheat to the Middle East and North Africa. Do EU leaders need reminding that food insecurity and rising prices helped trigger the revolts across Arab lands in 2011? What happens if Egypt grows hungry and the only democracy in the Arab world, Tunisia faces huge wheat and corn shortages and price rises?

By its very harsh economic sanctions the EU risks fanning the flames of unrest along its entire south Mediterranean borders. It risks reinforcing the idea that multilateral economic institutions and rules are now entirely at the service of its and America's foreign and strategic policy. If it runs its course, in the mid/long term this policy risks discrediting and marginalising Europe and weakening its role in world trade. This would inflict huge damage on Europe's international standing and the prospects of future generations of Europeans.