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Left-wing isolationism: a path to political irrelevance in Europe's defence debate

- Features -

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The European Parliament has voted on the resolution that sets the line on defence and rearmament. The harshest criticism of the European Commission's resolution on defence and rearmament comes from the Left political group. Among them is Manon Aubry (France Insoumise), who denounces, "You find money for tanks but not for hospitals." She sarcastically remarked, "It's as if, all of a sudden, there was no longer any global warming or poverty, and the only priority was armoured vehicles." Similarly, Benedetta Scuderi of the Greens argues that "this arms race" undermines growth and public finances. Other voices have joined the chorus, including the Left co-chair Martin Schirdewan and Danilo Della Valle of the Five Star Movement. During Della Valle's speech, a group of representatives of the Five Star Movement held a protest waving placards such as "No more guns" or "More jobs, less guns".

At its core, the position of these politicians boils down to this: let the world around us crumble, let countries be invaded—it's none of our business. They declare their desire to preserve their social model by increasing the budget for welfare while limiting spending on security – an ideal that any left-wing politician would share. What they conveniently ignore is that the very social model they seek to protect was made possible precisely because security was outsourced to other actors—namely, the United States. But what happens when security is no longer guaranteed by them? This is a question they never address, advancing simple slogans instead. The realities of international power competition—now at one of its most intense moments in decades—are simply dismissed.

While France, Spain, Italy or Germany may not face an immediate military threat, for Poland, the Baltic states, and the Nordic countries, the danger is direct. When your neighbour is one of the world's largest military powers, a country that has violated every major international agreement in the last decade, bombs Ukrainian cities daily and surpasses all European countries in military expenditures, the ability to defend yourself is not an "arms race"—it is a prerequisite for survival.

At the core of this issue is a refusal to see Europe as a common project. Ironically, this brand of left-wing opposition to European defence is a form of nationalism in disguise. But nationalism, in its historical form, is precisely what fueled centuries of war, destruction, and division on the European continent. The European Union was never just an economic project—it was a political and security project designed to prevent war, a lesson learned from the repeated catastrophes of the past.

What makes this stance particularly self-defeating for the left is that it mirrors the isolationism of sovereignist right-wing parties. This is clearly illustrated in how Alternative for Germany (AfD) voted alongside the Left. However, unlike the left, the right is consistently isolationist. Their position is straightforward: they reject external military engagements and oppose migrants, reinforcing a worldview in which only their nation's interests matter, and nothing beyond their borders deserves attention. This stance at least has the advantage of consistency—which makes it more appealing to voters who believe in absolute self-interest.

In contrast, the left's selective isolationism—where security threats are ignored, yet calls for international solidarity on social and environmental issues persist—lacks coherence and fails to resonate with the broader public. By stirring up isolationist and selfish sentiments, the populist left cultivates an emotional terrain that ultimately benefits the right. After all, if the dominant political mood is one of national egocentrism, it is the right—not the left—that offers a clearer vision.

However, it must be acknowledged that left-wing and ecological critics of Europe's rearmament plans are right to emphasize that neither the ecological crisis nor systemic inequality has disappeared. These are indeed existential threats to humanity. But are they justified in portraying military preparedness and support for Ukraine as being in opposition to tackling these global challenges?

In reality, the fight for security and the fight against climate change are deeply interconnected.

Take fossil fuel consumption as an example. Europe's—and especially Germany's—dependence on cheap Russian fossil fuels has not only been an environmental disaster but also a severe geopolitical liability. Energy dependence on Russia gave the Kremlin one of its most effective tools of political leverage over Europe. It financed Russia's war machine while simultaneously making European nations vulnerable to energy blackmail. Thus, the rapid development of alternative energy sources is not just an environmental imperative—it is a geopolitical necessity. It is precisely what Ukrainians and other states threatened by Russian expansionism are demanding. Democracies that make themselves reliant on authoritarian regimes for something as critical as energy are sabotaging their sovereignty and security. As Li Andersson, also a member of The Left group, rightly said, the EU should set a strategic goal of reducing our dependencies on external actors, including energy and the digital sphere. However, at this very moment, according to iStories German, Russian, and U.S. authorities are discussing the resumption of Russian oil and gas supplies to Germany—a move that directly contradicts Europe's long-term security and energy independence.

Solving global challenges such as climate change and inequality is undoubtedly a priority, but doing so within an isolationist, sovereignist framework is a contradiction. In a world where the concept of the common good disappears and politics is dictated solely by the maximization of national interests, the forces that benefit are not those advocating for climate justice or social equity. Instead, such a world is precisely what Trump and Putin openly promote—one in which nature and human life are expendable resources in the pursuit of state power, serving the autocrats in control. This is not to say that liberal democracies automatically prioritise nature and human life. The difference, however, is that within democratic systems, there is space for opposition and the possibility of imposing alternative visions. One only needs to ask Russian and Chinese eco-activists and trade unionists about their ability to fight for social and climate justice. And in the United States, the Trump presidency demonstrated how quickly environmental and social projects could be dismantled and their values silenced and criminalized.

Neither human life nor the environment can be protected in a state that falls within the “zone of interest” of autocratic imperial powers. The irony of the isolationist left is that by rejecting security cooperation, they are accelerating their own political irrelevance. In a world dominated by unchecked great-power politics, they and their values will be pushed to the margins—first politically, then physically.

The social contract in our societies is built upon the idea that the state exists to protect the rights and freedoms of its citizens, not to sacrifice them for expansionist ambitions. Authoritarian regimes view human life as an expendable resource to be used in pursuit of geopolitical goals. Democracies are constrained by ethical and political considerations. Authoritarian states possess centralized control over media and effective repression, allowing them to wage wars with little regard for public opinion. Politicians in democracies, focused on electoral cycles, prioritize short-term results over long-term strategies.

Thus, democratic societies face an inherent strategic vulnerability when confronted by aggressive authoritarian states. Still, many people prefer to cling to the belief that diplomacy, economic interdependence, or moral superiority alone will prevent us from eventual military aggression. This wishful thinking leads to inaction and even greater vulnerability that authoritarian regimes effectively exploit, by portraying a resistance to autocratic powers as unwinnable and unnecessary.

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Abstract slogans about “abolishing war” reveal not only a lack of practical solutions but also an unwillingness to take responsibility. Instead, they allow one to feel righteous without engaging in the difficult work of governance and strategy. By refusing to confront military realities, these movements become spectators rather than actors, commenting on events rather than shaping them. In doing so, they ultimately surrender the critical tasks of security and defence to those they ideologically oppose.

Instead of retreating into empty rhetoric, the left must proactively shape the solutions. The left must unite in pushing for a defence strategy where security is not funded by cutting social programs but by increasing taxes on the ultra-wealthy. As Li Andersson rightly argues, “It would be a historic mistake to finance this by cutting welfare,” as such a move would only fuel the rise of the far right. The most immediate and effective step would be the confiscation of frozen Russian assets and their swift reinvestment into military aid for Ukraine. Yet, La France Insoumise, the party Manon Aubry represents in the European Parliament, voted against confiscating Russian assets in their national parliament. Additionally, the 5 Star Movement has a history of pro-Kremlin positions, which include opposition to sanctions before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

If the left fails to take concrete action in the face of aggression, it will not only lose credibility but also forfeit its role in shaping Europe's future.

[Valigia Blu](#) 18 March 2025

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