

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8549>



Europe

The Drums of War are Banging in Europe

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV593 - June 2024 -

Publication date: Thursday 6 June 2024

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These weeks see the end of the term for an ineffectual European legislature which served during the worst pandemic of this century, during Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and with it, the outbreak of a war on European soil that evokes the worst memories of the world wars of the last century. And as we witness the televised genocide of the Palestinian people, it appears that the international system of liberal governance seems to be collapsing like a house of cards.

The next parliamentary term is unlikely to improve the continent and world, but instead will accelerate the most damaging processes: the rise of the far right, remilitarisation, the return of austerity, racism, xenophobia, neocolonialism and a global disorder marked by inter-imperialist conflicts.

The beginnings of the last parliamentary term did not seem to foreshadow this context. In fact, it began with a 'historic' declaration of climate emergency [1] by the European Parliament, which demanded the European Commission align all its proposals with the objective of limiting global warming to 1.5°C. That will require reducing emissions by at least 55% by 2030 in order to achieve so-called carbon neutrality by 2050. The political and democratic justification for the European Green Deal came into being. However, it is critical to remember that this proclamation would not have been possible without the massive climate justice mobilisations led by the youth in several European countries and elsewhere, in the months preceding the 2019 European elections.

Above all, since the 2008 crisis, the lack of a European political project beyond the pursuit of maximum profit for private companies, the constitutionalisation of neoliberalism, and the establishment of a model of bureaucratic authority immune to popular will have eroded popular support for the EU, threatening its legitimacy and even its integrity. In this sense, the European Green Deal appeared to be justified by the urgency of infusing renewed political and social legitimacy into the neo-liberal European project by painting it green.

Yet the relative post-austerity hiatus during the Covid pandemic has not resulted in a shift away from the EU's neo-liberal policies. Faced with the health emergency and the effects of the pandemic, the EU has been unable to develop a common health response beyond a vaccine purchasing centre – while denying vaccines to the world's poor because German, Norwegian, Swiss and British leaders would not waive Intellectual Property rights when asked by more than 100 countries from 2020-22. The EU has not taken advantage of the situation to strengthen Member States' health systems nor to establish a European public pharmaceutical company to deal with potential future epidemics.

Meanwhile, on the economic front, the leading governments, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank have increased the public debt, rather than financing a large portion of the financial outlay with tax revenues that should have come from the windfall profits of Big Pharma, GAFAM, and the banks which were the main beneficiaries of expansive economic policies during the crisis. Once again, we have witnessed how the EU has become a millionaire's project at the expense of millions of poor people.

And in this sense, the pandemic was the prelude to the reassessment of the policies that were to accompany the declaration of climate emergency adopted by the Parliament. It served as a catalyst for a (new) gigantic transfer of public money to the private sector, with stimulus funds being used to support the interests of big business.

All the while, wily politicians peddled the Euro-reformist idea that it is feasible to pursue a non-austerity policy without definitively rejecting the European treaties and the fundamental principles that have governed the European

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economy for the previous three decades. Yet this represented merely an optical illusion of ‘another way out of the crisis’ that has, in practice, excessively deepened each country’s productive specialisation within the EU, and in the process, solidified hierarchical relationships between the central capitalist countries around Germany, France, the Benelux countries, and the peripheral countries.

However, if handling the pandemic served as a cover for the subsequent ‘shock doctrine,’ Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has become the perfect pretext for both full-blown austerity and the re-militarisation of Europe. Not only is the EU arming itself with expensive weaponry in order to speak the ‘hard language of power’ in a world beset by increasingly intense conflicts over scarce resources.

In addition, the most aggressive European capitalist agenda is also being amplified under the guise of war. Anything goes when we’re at war. An excellent illustration is how quickly and easily the EU’s green make-up was tossed out the window when in 2022, the European Commission’s ‘taxonomy’ included methane gas and nuclear power as supposedly ‘green’ energy under the guise of breaking energy dependence on Russia.

Just as dubious a policy is to put Europe’s carbon- and methane-cutting responsibilities in the hands of financial markets – the EU Emissions Trading Scheme – whose grasp of the planetary arson threat is so frivolous that immediately after Putin’s invasion, the price charged for emitting a tonne of CO₂-equivalent crashed 30% and then between February 2023 and 2024, the price crashed by half.

Environmental policies approved in the middle of the parliamentary term also included the ‘farm to table’ strategy [2], one of the pillars of the European Green Deal, which promised to triple the area devoted to organic farming, to halve pesticides and to reduce chemical fertilisers by 20% by 2030. But that too became yet another casualty of the war in Ukraine. All’s fair when there’s war.

Similarly, the European Commission has declared that it will allow the use of ‘ecological interest’ zones and set-aside land to increase European agricultural production. Again, the argument is that food security must take precedence over the advancement of organic farming. War is again used as a justification.

In the absence of traditional military threats to justify increased defence spending, the EU’s external border security policy has evolved into a goldmine for the European defence industry [3]. These are the same military and security companies that profit from the sale of arms to the Middle East and Africa, fuelling the conflicts that force so many people to flee to Europe in search of refuge. These same companies then supply border guards with necessary equipment, border surveillance technology and the technological infrastructure to track population movements. A far-flung ‘xenophobia business’ has emerged, in the words of French researcher Claire Rodier, [4] one which, given its opacity and obscure margins, increasingly relies on EU budget lines disguised as development aid or ‘promoting good neighbourliness’. In fact, it could be said that the closest thing to a European army to date has been Frontex, the agency responsible for administering Europe’s external border surveillance system as if it were a military front.

This dynamic is, as Tomasz Koniecz argues, inseparable from the crisis-riddled imperialism of the 21st century, which is no longer simply a phenomenon of plundering resources, but also strives to hermetically lock off the centres of superfluous humanity that the system produces in its throes. Thus, the protection of the last relative islands of well-being is central to imperialist strategies, reinforcing the security and control measures that fuel growing authoritarianism [5].

The tightening of EU migration laws in recent decades is a prime example, culminating in the ratification of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum in April 2024. This authoritarianism of scarcity is perfectly in tune with another brutal process: shrinking economic welfare that, after decades of neo-liberal policies, in turn create misery for

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large sections of the population. This sense of scarcity is at the heart of the xenophobia of welfare chauvinism, which fits in perfectly with the rise of a neo-liberal authoritarianism whose slogan is, in essence, 'everyone for themselves!', in the war of last against the second last.

In addition to the imaginary barbarian [6] invasions of Fortress Europe and its authoritarian drift, there is now the danger of the new Russian imperialism. Nothing is more cohesive and legitimising than a foreign enemy, when it comes to constructing the European neo-militarist project, which is not really about defending Ukraine but instead supports European leaders' authoritarian neoliberalism. The new mantra in Brussels is that 'Europe is more united today than ever,' a phrase repeated to ward off the ghosts of recent crises and demonstrate to the outside world that Europe now has a common political goal.

The remilitarisation of Europe is an aspiration that European elites have long concealed behind euphemisms such as the 'strategic compass' [7] or the quest for greater strategic autonomy for the EU. Until now, there seemed to be too many stumbling blocks for it to be achieved. The President of the European Commission herself, Ursula von der Leyen, asked rhetorically in her 2021 State of the Union address, why no progress had been made so far on common defence: 'What has prevented us from making progress so far? It's not a lack of resources, but a lack of political will'.

It is precisely this political will that seems to take precedence over everything else since the invasion of Ukraine. That war has become the perfect pretext for accelerating the agenda of Europe's neoliberal elites, who no longer see in the remilitarisation of the EU merely a lifeline to deter invasion. This is, more openly now, the new strategic project for European integration to complement the market constitutionalism that has prevailed until now. A Europe of markets and 'security'.

Thus, the global polycrisis – which is further undermining the EU's geo-economic and geopolitical weight – is causing new leaps forward in its financial and, in turn, military integration, in the name of competitiveness and in response to the invasion of Ukraine. A few weeks after the invasion of Ukraine, Ms Von der Leyen told the European Parliament that the EU was more united than ever and that more progress had been made on common security and defence 'in six days than in the last two decades', referring to the release of €500 million in EU funds for Ukraine's military equipment.

It cannot be denied that the European elites are using the war in Ukraine to accelerate the agenda of neoliberalism, including a closer financial and trade alliance between them and, in turn, a remilitarisation of the EU as a useful instrument for their project of a 'Europe of power'. The military and security integration is obviously aimed at transforming the European economy for war.

We are facing a real paradigm shift. The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, claims the EU 'must learn quickly to speak the language of power' and 'not only rely on soft power as we used to do' [8]. With this in mind, in March 2022, the Member States approved the famous Strategic Compass, an action plan to strengthen the EU's security and defence policy by 2030. Although the Strategic Compass took two years to draw up, its content was quickly adapted to the new context opened up by the Russian invasion of Ukraine: 'The more hostile security environment requires us to make a quantum leap forward and increase our capacity and willingness to act, strengthen our resilience and ensure solidarity and mutual assistance'. The new strategy envisages European defence as no longer based on peacekeeping, but on national-European security and the protection of 'key trade routes.' In other words, the aim is to protect European interests by ensuring the EU's 'strategic autonomy'.

The interest of Europe's elites in speaking the hard language of power is intimately linked to the EU's neocolonial and 'green' extractivism, which aims to secure the supply of scarce raw materials fundamental to the European economy and its so-called green transition, against a backdrop of growing struggles between old and new empires. As Mario

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Draghi puts it: 'In a world where our rivals control many of the resources we need, such an agenda has to be combined with a plan to secure our supply chain – from critical minerals to batteries to charging infrastructure.' [9] The remilitarisation of Europe is only the necessary step towards being able to speak the hard language of power that secures the raw materials and resources that European businesses need.

The Strategic Compass repeatedly states that 'Russia's war of aggression constitutes a tectonic shift in European history' to which the EU must respond. And what is the main recommendation of this strategic compass? Increased military spending and coordination. Precisely in a context when the military budgets of EU Member States are more than four times those of Russia, and European military spending has tripled since 2007. [10] This increase in defence spending was confirmed at the Versailles European Council in March 2022, when the Member States agreed to invest 2% of their GDP in defence. [11] This is the largest defence investment in Europe since the Second World War. For the same reason, at the summit, the President of the Council, Charles Michel, stated bluntly that the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the EU's budgetary response had 'confirmed the birth of European defence'.

Just two months ago, the European Commission presented the first Defence Industrial Strategy [12], an ambitious set of new actions to support the competitiveness and readiness of the defence industry throughout the Union. The main objective is to improve the Union's defence capabilities by promoting the integration of Member States' industries and reducing dependence on arms procurement outside the continent. In short, it's about preparing European industry for war. As Mrs Von der Leyen told the plenary session of the European Parliament, while 'the threat of war may not be imminent, but it is not impossible', so 'Europe has to wake up'. [13]

Although the Strategic Compass increases European strategic autonomy, the document admits 'how essential NATO is for the collective defence of its members'. Since the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO has endeavoured to redefine itself and adapt to a new geopolitical environment in which the transatlantic link appeared to have been overcome. French President Emmanuel Macron himself argued in 2019 that the absence of American leadership was leading to a 'brain death' of the Atlantic Alliance and that Europe had to start acting as a global strategic power. Today, as Russian soldiers have invaded Ukraine and Moscow tacitly threatens to use nuclear weapons, NATO is experiencing a resurgence, a return to *raison d'être* and a new sense of its existential purpose.

Indeed, Macron himself has left the door open to sending NATO ground troops to fight in Ukraine: 'We will do everything possible to prevent Russia from winning this war'[14]. [14] In addition to providing Kiev with 'long-range missiles and bombs,' which had not been done previously for fear of escalating the conflict, Joe Biden and his European partners have recently authorised the use of their military equipment against targets in Russian territory in an attempt to mitigate Moscow's offensive against Kharkiv. As the months pass, all of the United States' and European Union's red lines and safeguards become diluted, pushing us progressively closer to an armed clash with NATO soldiers on Ukrainian soil, which might lead to a Third World War with completely unknown and dangerous scenarios.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine has not only allowed European public opinion to coalesce around a strong sense of insecurity about external threats; in response to the EU's call for rearmament, Spain's defence minister, Margarita Robles, stated that society 'is not aware' of the 'total and absolute threat' of war, legitimising the largest increase in military spending since World War II. However, it has also allowed NATO and US imperialism to erode any semblance of the EU's political independence while restoring long-lost legitimacy and unity, especially after the failed occupation of Afghanistan.

While Putin's invasion of Ukraine quickly became a figleaf for hiding the insecurities and pain stemming from neo-liberal social fragmentation – by exponentially increasing defence budgets and promoting European integration based on remilitarisation – so it does support for the State of Israel in its genocidal, collective punishment of the

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Palestinian people now function as an accelerator of the EU's militaristic and warmongering drift.

The most powerful EU leaders not only approve the Zionist state's policy of war crimes against the civilian population of Gaza, citing a non-existent 'right to defence' on the part of an occupying power. They also repress and attempt to ban any internal voices that oppose unconditional EU support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine and genocide of Gazans. The McCarthyite drift has a true goal: not simply to eliminate solidarity with the Palestinian cause, but to discipline the European population around the geostrategic interests of its elites, namely the remilitarization of Europe around the war in Ukraine and unconditional support for Israel.

Perhaps the only positive outcome of all of this is that we can finally consign to the dust bin, all of the so-called 'European values' and 'founding myths of peace' that the EU liberal propagandist machine continues to hammer away at.

In this sense, the construction of domestic enemies as scapegoats to justify and support increasingly repressive models and curtailments of general freedoms, which particularly target minorities considered to be dangerous, plays a fundamental role. And here, a dangerous minority is anyone who does not fit into the identity framework of European Christian whiteness. [15] That identity framework has a limited flexibility, since membership in the community no longer depends on a matter of birth, but instead on an ideological commitment to the values that the elites stipulate as authentically European. [16]

Thus, a French person is not one who was born and nurtured in France, but rather one who identifies with a predetermined French identity. Anyone who rejects these French ideals loses their French identity, regardless of where they were born, what is inscribed on their passport, or whether they wear a national team jersey. Today, belonging to a national community is linked to a supposed identity and is increasingly thought of in ethno-cultural and ideological terms.

In this context, the far right sets the agenda, and the so-called centre complies, executes and normalizes it. And this is not only out of simple ideological conviction, but also out of pure strategic interest: in capitalist societies experiencing multiple and growing crises and instabilities, reinforcing repression and securitization becomes a necessary form of economic life insurance. Exploring and exploiting fears and insecurities to build an ideology of security gives the authoritarian neo-liberal project coherence and identity. Societies are rebuilt, and tensions are contained by the exclusion and expulsion of the most vulnerable or dissident sectors.

The far right is gaining a growing share of power within the EU, to the point of becoming a fundamental factor in determining parliamentary majorities in the next parliament. Indeed, the Eurocrat bureaucracy in Brussels, aware that it will need the support of part of this political family to ensure the governance of the EU, has embarked on a campaign to differentiate between the 'good far right' and the 'bad far right', i.e., between the far right that unambiguously adheres to neo-liberal economic policy, remilitarization and geostrategic subordination to European elites, and the far right that still questions them, albeit in an increasingly timid fashion.

The European Eurocracy is planning to give the extreme right a specific role in European government, thereby burying all of the taboos and precautions that Western democracies have taken against these political movements since the end of WWII. All of this occurs in a context where the drums of war are beating in the chancelleries, bringing us dangerously close to a new global military confrontation, against a backdrop of climate emergency and the ineptitude of the multilateral governance and international legal systems that have governed neoliberal globalisation over the last few decades.

European elites are taking advantage of the situation to launch a new phase of the European project, with the goal of

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establishing an oligarchic, technocratic federalism. For this is what Mario Draghi, the former Managing Director of Goldman Sachs in Europe, openly proposed in his recent report commissioned by von der Leyen: to accelerate the introduction of joint decision-making mechanisms for European institutions, to promote the union of EU capital markets, and to be able to act under better conditions in the race for ever more intense competitiveness with the other great powers, whether in decline or booming, after the end of happy globalization.

This dangerous cocktail promises new conflicts, a recomposition of the players, a widening of the battlefield and, above all, an acceleration of inter-imperialist conflicts. Beyond assessments of military tactics, what is beyond doubt is that the winners so far from the Russian invasion of Ukraine are: Russian imperialism itself, which succeeded in annexing and occupying part of the resource-rich territories Putin has long coveted; NATO, which has gone from a state of 'brain death' to the most aggressive geopolitical agenda in its history; the old desire of European elites to use militarism as an integration mechanism; and the corporations that manufacture death, which have never made so much profit. [17] And the main losers, as always, are the citizens, in this case the Ukrainian people who nevertheless continue to resist the invasion and who deserve our support, just as do the Russian activists who are fighting Putin's war.

While the European Parliament began the 2019 legislature by declaring a climate emergency, it ended by sounding the war drums in European chancelleries, promoting a remilitarization incompatible with any eco-social transition process. It seems that the next parliamentary term will see the return of austerity recipes, but this time under the straitjacket of an expansive defence budget that will ensure the remilitarization of Europe and the conversion of the European arms industry. It is therefore more necessary than ever to work towards building a broad transnational anti-militarist movement to challenge the elites' plan for a combination of austerity, internal repression and remilitarization of Europe, co-governed by the deep centre and the reactionary wave of far-right parties.

To achieve this, it is essential to challenge the concept of security based on spending on armaments, defence and military infrastructure. As an alternative, we need to propose an anti-militarist security model that guarantees access to a functional public health system, education, employment, housing, energy, improved access to social services that ensure a dignified life, and a response to climate change based on an ecosocialist horizon. As the ReCommons Europe manifesto states, 'the forces of the political and social left that wish to embody a force for change in Europe, with the aim of laying the foundations for an egalitarian society based on solidarity, must imperatively adopt anti-militarist policies. This means fighting not only the wars of European imperialist forces, but also arms sales and support for repressive and bellicose regimes'. [18]

Condemnation of the Russian invasion and solidarity with the Ukrainian people must intrinsically integrate rejection of Russian imperialism and rejection of the remilitarization of the EU and the strengthening of the Atlantic Alliance. Under no circumstances can our support for the Ukrainian people and the fight against Russian imperialism appear subordinate to our own imperialism. We must avoid the binary trap of having to support one imperialism against another, accepting the logic of the Union Sacrée at the dawn of WWI with new war credits. As anti-capitalists, our task should be precisely to break down this dichotomy and adopt an active, clear anti-militarist stance in support of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples, creating our own field independently of the conflicting imperialisms and defending: the right to conscientious objection and to active desertion by all soldiers and to be welcomed as political refugees; non-payment of the Ukrainian debt; an end to neo-liberal dictates (e.g. from the IMF) impoverishing Ukraine; peace without annexations; the unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine; and guaranteeing the right of people, without exception, to freely decide their future.

Without successful resistance, the EU elites will continue jeopardizing the societal model for decades to come. In this world on fire, the underlying conflict is between capital and life, private interests and common goods, property, and rights. We will never be able to undertake an ecological and social transition without fighting the capitalist disease of militarism. Today, more than ever, it is essential to open a new cycle of mobilizations capable of moving from the national to the European level. We need to shatter the EU's Euro-reformist illusion to force through a democratic,

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anti-neoliberal, anti-militarist, feminist, ecologist-socialist and anti-colonial system that opens the door to a new project of European integration. Only then and there will we be, as Rosa Luxemburg insisted: socially equal, humanly different and totally free.

6 June 2024

Source: [CounterPunch](#).

PS:

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