

Poland: Enough with the struggle of superpowers. Voices from Central and Eastern Europe

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In a recent article in *Berliner Zeitung*, Michael von der Schulenburg argues that Russia's deployment of more than 100,000 troops to its border with Ukraine was a direct response to NATO's announcement that Ukraine could one day become its member. This opinion reflects numerous voices on the Western left – some of them also from German government circles.

Russia's fear for its security is used as the main argument to justify Russian military action. A critical gaze shifts from Putin to NATO, accused of disturbing the balance of power in Europe with its „expansion” or even „aggression” and of interfering in Russia's „sphere of influence”.

Despite our sceptical attitude towards NATO and American foreign policy, we see a trap in this way of thinking. Following it makes it easy to overlook the real reasons for Moscow's actions: an illegitimate sense of sovereignty over Ukraine and neo-imperialist aspirations. We argue that foreign policy should be guided by anti-imperialism and concern for the self-determination of citizens. Acknowledging Russian imperialism does not contradict a critique of the USA but rather allows us to move beyond Cold War, or even colonial, ways of looking at geopolitics.

A matter of perspective

Razem is a Polish party founded in 2015 that aims to strengthen the Central and Eastern European perspective among the European left. We have noticed such perspective is very rarely taken by Western European leftist politicians, also in the context of Europe's defence on its eastern flank. Bringing in our perspective – out of the centre of a region in a difficult neighbourhood with Russia – we want to bring more nuances to the Western perspective on, for example, the Ukrainian-Russian crisis. Engaging our partners and friends in the West with this view could help avoid fatal simplifications that may lead to naïve support for the Russian side.

We cannot afford such simplifications. Not at a time when Russia is relentlessly trying to undermine Ukraine's statehood and sovereignty and the Ukrainians' right to self-determination. The annexation

of Crimea in 2014, the fuelling of the separatist conflict in the Donbas, and the deployment of more than 100,000 troops to Ukraine's borders – all this is a continuation of Russia's strategy of political and military subjugation of the former Soviet republics. We are against an order in which the stronger tries to impose its will on the weaker by force – because that is how Moscow's latest steps need to be understood.

Aggressive denial of Ukraine's emancipation

The Kremlin has been trying to reverse this actual power relationship for decades. To justify its actions, it uses the rhetoric of Russia being „surrounded“ by hostile forces that pose a threat to its security. However, this is contradicted by the facts. Unlike Russia, NATO has never considered plans to invade any member country of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Russia's military capabilities exceed those of the Allies, in Europe. The enclave of Kaliningrad – a heavily armed Russian „island“ in the centre of the Baltic – is often forgotten in Western debates on the degree of Russian threat. And given a huge arsenal of nuclear warheads, Russia's self-portrayal as a potential victim of an attack is, frankly, incomprehensible.

The Russian side's open military aggression is accompanied by verbal attacks. Official demands and statements disregarding the sovereignty of Ukraine and Eastern Europe lend context to the military force – the Russian desire to colonise the region and restore the Cold War order. One of many examples comes from the Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov: „We demand written confirmation that Ukraine and Georgia will never, ever join Nato.“ Add to this the historical revisionism embedded in Putin's Great Russian fantasy in which Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians form one nation. Such statements resonate strongly in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and are perceived as an aggressive denial of the region's completed or ongoing emancipation by a neighbouring power.

A blatant expression of Russian colonisation efforts in Central and Eastern Europe is Putin's demand to reset NATO presence to the status quo of 1997. Let's recall: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic – acting out of their own free will – joined the Alliance in 1999, the Baltic states – in 2004.

Beyond the imperialistic cliché

Unfortunately, these facts seem to be overlooked by some of our German partners on the left. Gregor Gysi and Sevim Dagdelen of Die Linke repeatedly use phrases like NATO's „expansion“ or „aggression“. During this tense week, Rolf Mützenich of SPD, in turn, expressed understanding of Russia's „justified security concerns“. Such statements embed these politicians, often incidentally, in a Cold War rhetoric, which the left is, after all, trying to move away from.

Michael von der Schulenburg also describes the situation in Ukraine as a „conflict between the two strongest nuclear powers in the world, the USA and Russia, on European soil“. Conducting a public debate on this crisis over the heads of the people in Central and Eastern Europe ultimately leads to the exclusion and objectification of the countries directly affected by the conflict.

A good example of sidelining Eastern Europe in action not only words is Nord Stream 2, a gas pipeline project that has been repeatedly protested against by Central and Eastern European politicians, and which today reveals its destructive potential. From our point of view, such words and actions are reminiscent of similar haughty politics that the West has pursued and continues to pursue towards Africa or the Middle East.

Instead, the European countries, and especially left movements, could choose a different strategy,

where adherence to the imperative of peace and the slogan „no more war” means building consensus through practical action within strategic alliances as well as pragmatic dialogue, not naïve pacifism. Specifically, we expect the Western left, instead of routinely resorting to NATO criticism, to actually come up with alternative proposals on how to guarantee security of Eastern Europe, the Baltic and Nordic countries in the face of Russian imperialism on the continent. Razem, therefore, proposes the development of a European security strategy as a key element to maintaining peace.

In war, everybody loses

There is no doubt that we all stand to lose if the conflict escalates. At worst, it could result in the devastating chaos of war, from which Ukrainian citizens would suffer the most. Pessimistic scenarios assume that over a million civilians would flee to Poland. Russian citizens – who must be clearly separated from Putin and the undemocratic elites – would also suffer. As opinion polls show, Russians are not ready to die for the Kremlin’s Greater Russia project. In the end, we, the citizens of the European Union, will also be affected. From our perspective as Ukraine’s neighbour and a country on Europe’s eastern flank, this scenario is particularly worrying, as it poses a direct threat to our security.

We, therefore, find particularly damaging the narrative of the US State Department and the liberal media in the US supporting Biden, reinforcing the impression of the inevitability of conflict. This, as Ukraine points out, unnecessarily stirs up hysteria. Such a portrayal reduces the parties’ motivation to engage in further negotiations and increases the likelihood of intensifying military action.

Listening to the voices from the East

We categorically reject war – diplomacy should be the main tool to resolve the conflict. However, as European allies, we must support Ukraine in building its defence capacity in the event of Russian aggression. What is needed is, among other things, intelligence cooperation and support with military equipment.

However, our goal must not be to build up our own leverage and impose our will on Ukraine. We should rather try to create a space in which the country can make sovereign decisions about its future, even if they do not coincide with Great Russian ambitions and yield to the pressure of Western capitalism.

Therefore, in line with the Ukrainian party – “Social Movement”, we call for a revision of the socio-economic course that the West proposed in Ukraine. Instead of destructive neoliberal reforms under IMF pressure, we support the unconditional cancellation of Ukraine’s foreign debt.

The war that started in 2014 has left its mark on the country’s economic situation. The ongoing tensions are adding to the scale of the crisis. We must, therefore, be prepared to provide increased financial support to the war-affected regions, which would primarily benefit the inhabitants.

On the other hand, we can no longer tolerate the embedment of the Russian oligarch elite into the European financial system. We cannot continue with a system that threatens Europe and exploits Russian citizens. We also must support similar steps against the Ukrainian oligarchy, which has stood in the way of the country’s further democratisation for decades.

A European solution

Razem does not endorse the NATO transatlantic alliance in its current form, but we accept its existence as the most effective guarantor of Poland's and Europe's security at present. Nonetheless, as we believe, Europe can afford to be autonomous and self-determined in this regard and that it has the potential to defend itself collectively. The door to co-creating this security system should always be open to Ukraine.

We call on the countries of the European Union to discuss a joint security system, including energy security. This is essential if we are to enter into a genuine partnership dialogue with the United States and negotiate with Russia on an equal footing. A multidimensional and solidarity-based commitment of the countries, institutions and all leaders of the European Union to the security of the continent is necessary. We cannot afford to be constrained by the national interests of individual member states.

Europe is waiting for Germany to take the lead in creating this joint security system. The current conflict has made it clear that decisive action is needed in this area. Such developments are also in the interest of Germany itself: The creation of a broader European initiative would spread the responsibility for security among all members of the community.

Towards an inclusive dialogue

The voice of our part of Europe should be heard. We call for a dialogue with the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe based on respect for their self-determination and a sincere partnership. By this, we also mean noticing and supporting the emerging left-wing emancipation movements in our region, including Russia. International solidarity based on mutual understanding is our chance to build a viable alternative to the existing system. The recent statement by Die Linke's leaders could be seen as a breakthrough in its policy towards the East so far and shows readiness for such dialogue. It is precisely such dialogue and support that Putin fears. In the end, it is not a coincidence that he supports the extreme right all over Europe, from Madrid to Warsaw, undermining the democratic European project. We should not allow him to do that.

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P.S.

- Partia Razem. 27 LUTEGO 2022:

<https://partiarazem.pl/2022/02/enough-with-the-struggle-of-superpowers-voices-from-central-and-eastern-europe/>

- This article appeared first in Berliner Zeitung - Die polnische Linke über den Russland-Konflikt: Weder Putin, noch Biden (berliner-zeitung.de) :

<https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/wochenende/die-polnische-linke-ueber-den-russland-konflikt-weder-putin-noch-biden-li.212559>

Artykuł ukazał się także w języku polskim na stronie internetowej Krytyki Politycznej:

<https://krytykapolityczna.pl/swiat/lewica-w-europie-wobec-rosji-i-nato/>

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