Will the Ukraine war be the undoing for the European Union?

Michael von der Schulenburg

With the ending of the division of Europe, we will strive for a new quality in our security relations while fully respecting each other's freedom of choice in that respect. Security is indivisible and the security of every participating State is inseparably linked to that of all the others. We therefore pledge to co-operate in strengthening confidence and security among us and in promoting arms control and disarmament.

Charter of Paris for a New Europe, 21 November 1990

The madness of war reigns again in Europe. The delusion that only weapons provide security is once again in high season among politicians, in think tanks and in the media across Europe. It has become acceptable once again in Europe that human sacrifices are being offered at the altar of alleged decisive battles. As if we had learned nothing from the past, the Ukrainian counter-offensive is now supposed to become such decisive battle that should bring a solution militarily to what we could not - or did not want to - achieve politically. In doing so, we Europeans are leaving the future of Ukraine and Europe, and perhaps even that of the world, to the unpredictability, fury, and brutality of the battlefield. And all of this, although it remains completely unclear what 'solution' could be expected through the present intensification of the war. It will certainly not bring peace to Europe.

This war has increasingly become a war between Russia and NATO, with nuclear weapons playing a decisive role in the military calculations. No one can say where the red lines would be in such a "decisive battle" beyond which there could be a nuclear escalation. By ignoring this and continuing all-out war efforts, we are exposing not only ourselves but all humanity to an incalculable danger - for a conflict that could have been resolved diplomatically.

Despite all those enormous dangers, finding a peaceful solution to the underlying conflict that triggered the war - NATO's planned expansion into Ukraine and Georgia - appears no longer to be possible among NATO, Ukrainian and Russian politicians. This is an appalling political irresponsibility, for which we cannot blame only Ukraine, Russia, or the United States. The European Union and its member states also bear a considerable responsibility for the catastrophe that has now befallen Europe. As this is a war on European soil and between European countries, the EU, as the largest community of states on the European continent, cannot just pretend it had no part in all of this. Indeed, the EU and its members carry a heavy blame for failing to prevent this war, for now escalating the war and for refusing a negotiated solution out of this war!

For the 27 EU members hold the majority among NATO members and could, or better should have used their influence to prevent this war and, once it had broken out, to end it as quickly as possible. In the conflict over NATO's eastward enlargement, which had been brewing since 1994, the EU, in its own interests, should have tried to mediate between the geopolitical ambition of the USA in expanding its global dominance and Russia's fears of being militarily encircled by NATO and cut off from its access to the Black Sea. After the war broke out, the EU should have supported the Russian-Ukrainian peace negotiations in March/April 2022 and attended the Istanbul peace summit. It could have ended the war one month after it had started. However, the EU didn't do either.

Instead, the EU had aggressively supported NATO's eastward expansion, as well as its own eastward enlargement. It must have been clear to EU politicians that with their support, Europe has been put on a path of confrontation; a confrontation that has now led to war with Russia. There were ample warnings not only from Russia but also from Western political personalities about the possibility that this could lead to war. The EU decided to ignore them. Now, with the outbreak of the war, the EU failed to calm the situation. To the contrary, after some hesitations, the EU pursues a military escalation of the war, which today surpasses even that of the USA. Several EU countries, for example, have described the Ukrainian attacks on Russian territory as legitimate, although the USA has strictly opposed them. And while the US tends to hold back on the supply of such sophisticated weapons systems, it is EU-countries that, together with the UK, are supplying the most advanced tanks, war drones, long-range missiles, and uranium munitions. It is also a European coalition that now plans to provide F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine. Even the EU Commission has become an arms dealer; its multi-billion-dollar ammunitions purchases for Ukraine are ironically financed through the European Peace Facility (EFF).

Yet peace, not war, should be the EU's main concern. However, the EU has neither developed its own peace proposal nor undertaken any diplomatic peace initiative, and it remains firmly opposed to any immediate ceasefire. The EU continues to insist on the maximum demands in the Zelensky peace plan, that Russia must first be defeated militarily, and that the entire Ukrainian territory must be recaptured before negotiations can take place. With this uncompromising stance the EU is alone in the world. None of the world's major regional organizations, whether the G20, the BRICS countries, the states of Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN, the African Union, OIC or CELAC, support such a demand. Even the US is increasingly skeptical, and voices of influential US politicians are growing stronger in favor of a negotiated peace with Russia to end the war.

This path of confrontation and escalation taken by the EU was in no way preordained or even inevitable. In 1990, only one year after the end of the Cold War, all European states, as well as the USA and Canada, solemnly pledged, in the **Charter of Paris for a New Europe**, to build a common peaceful Europe spanning from the Pacific to the Atlantic coast – i.e., including Russia – a Europe that would be free of wars and military blocs. According to the Charter, the security of each state in Europe should now be regarded as inseparable from that of all other states and

any conflict that arises should be settled peacefully in accordance with the UN Charter. In other words, only by working together and not against each other should a lasting peace be created in Europe from now on. There was no role envisaged for NATO; NATO was not mentioned once in the Charter of Paris.

And yet, early on, the EU abandoned the Charter of Paris for a New Europe and opted for a Europe dominated by NATO, a Cold War military alliance. Such a drastic reorientation was not in Europe's interest. The fact that the EU acted under pressure from the USA and some Eastern European states, should not be an excuse, as the Charter would have been a huge advantage for all of Europe, including the EU member states. It offered a new peaceful pan-European perspective to a continent that had suffered through two World Wars and a Cold War. It had freed Europe from the straitjacket of the Iron Curtain and the constant threat of nuclear war hanging over it. There was real peace in Europe for the first time since the outbreak of the First World War. No longer were there any military dangers that could have justified an intensively pursued expansion of NATO. At that point, Russia had fallen into internal chaos after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and China had not yet become a global player, neither economically nor militarily. It was NATO's advance to Russia's borders that had triggered Russia's military backlash, not the other way around.

The EU member states should have known better and avoid a war in Ukraine. Already in the First and Second World Wars, control of the territory that today constitutes Ukraine was of great strategic importance for Russia/the Soviet Union and the German Kaiser-/NAZI Reich, and lead to some of the fiercest military battles in these wars. The recently discovered remains of German Wehrmacht soldiers found in the now dried-up riverbed of the Dnieper bear witnesses to these terribly bloody "decisive battles". Is history repeating itself?

Then, as now, each side had taken advantage of the internal divisions among the Ukrainian population. Even after Ukraine's independence in 1991, presidential and parliamentary elections regularly showcased the country's deep division in two roughly equal parts of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian loyalties, a division that also divides the country geographically between western and central Ukraine on the one hand, and eastern and southern Ukraine on the other. In the last free all-Ukrainian elections in 2010 and 2012, in which people living in Crimea and the Donbass still participated, there was even a narrow majority for a pro-Russian president and pro-Russian parliament.

If the EU had really been concerned with preserving and strengthening Ukraine, it should have supported the cohesion and striving for harmony between the two populations and should have vigorously promoted the continuation of the project of a bi-national and federal Ukraine, as proclaimed in 1991. However, it did the opposite and sided with a policy of mono-ethnic Ukrainian nationalism. During the negotiations on an association agreement with the EU in 2013, the then EU Commission President, Jose Barroso, presented Ukraine with the alternative of either moving closer to the EU and breaking with Russia, or renouncing any close cooperation with the EU. Both, he argued, could not be reconciled. But, why not? Becoming an economic

and trade bridge between Russia and Central Asia on the one hand and the EU on the other would have been of great political and economic advantage for Ukraine, as well as the EU. It was the EU's divisive stance that triggered the violent overthrow of an elected president, which in turn set in motion a development that ultimately led to today's war.

While constantly proclaiming to wanting to help Ukraine, the EU is de-facto contributing to its destruction and to immense human sufferings. The weapons supplied by the EU, not only prolong the war, but also contribute to death and destruction on Ukrainian territory, just like Russian weapons do. Today, Ukraine may not only be the most destroyed country in Europe, but also the politically and ethnically most deeply divided country. After a year and a half of war, Ukraine, which was the poorest country in Europe already before the war, has been driven deeper into poverty and foreign debt, while becoming the most militarized country in Europe. The Ukrainian economy is in ruins and is plagued by one of the highest levels of corruption in Europe. Ukraine is also the country with the fastest shrinking population in Europe. Worse, Ukraine could lose up to 20% of its territory as well as its access to the Azov and Black Seas. How can Ukraine survive as a functioning state under such conditions?

The EU not only shares responsibility for the gradual destruction of Ukraine. It is also pursuing a self-destructive foreign policy that will lead to the EU losing access to the economically attractive raw materials and energy sources of Russia and Central Asia for many years, perhaps even decades, and to being cut off from the land access to the major growth markets of Asia. In an alleged effort to free itself from economic dependency from Russia, the EU now seems to have fallen into a much more expensive and less favorable economic dependencies. The EU is thus de-facto amputating and hurting itself.

With its sanctions policy, the EU seems to ignore changing global realities. The EU's share of the global population is below 5% and declining; its share of the global economic output is just 15% today, and declining. By contrast, the share of the BRICS countries of the world population is 40% and rising, while its share of the global economic output is 32% and growing. And not only that; triggered by the Ukraine war, the Global South has taken on a considerably more self-confident stance and now challenges the global dominance of the USA, and by implication also that of the EU. That today China, India, Indonesia, and other Asian states are moving closer together on the Ukraine issue is not because they suddenly love each other, but because they want to prevent NATO from expanding towards Central Asia, stop US global domination and move towards a multi-polar world order.

Ignoring these global changes, the EU Commission is currently putting together its 11th sanctions package and aims to punish third countries and their companies for having trade relations with Russia. As if that wasn't enough, the EU believes it can intimidate China by de-coupling or de-risking their economies. What arrogance! The EU has long since lost the political and economic power to be able to enforce such economic threats. The sanctions will therefore primarily hit its own economy.

The next president of the USA does not necessarily have to be called Trump, but we can assume that the USA, will turn its back to the expensive Ukraine adventure after next year's presidential election, as it did in so many other of its wars. Then the full force of its misguided foreign policy will hit the European Union. The EU will then be part of a Europe that, once again, is divided by an Iron Curtain that stretches from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and that could be more impermeable through (its own) sanctions than anything we remember from the Cold War era. The EU will then have to coexist on this continent with a devastated Ukraine, which represents a huge long-term political and financial challenge, and perhaps also with a destabilized Russia, which poses a permanent threat with its 6,000 nuclear warheads. While the economies of the EU states may be badly hit by these changes, it will be the EU that will have to pay for the enormous follow-up costs of this war. This will most likely lead to social problems within EU member states, which may escalate into political and social violence. And all this may happen only because the West insisted on NATO expansion, opposed a neutral und ignored Russian security concerns. Isn't that a too high of a price to pay for all of Europe - and a price for a conflict that could also have been resolved through negotiations?

To prevent hurting itself and saving Ukraine, the European Union must, out of its own self-interest, distant itself from its self-righteous war narrative, abandon the militarization of its foreign policy and stop believing that NATO enlargement will bring security. The European Union must return to a language of peace and develop a peace plan for Europe that is built on the **Charter of Paris for a New Europe** and that includes Russia and Ukraine. In doing so, the EU would prevent further bloodshed in Europe, forestall the danger of internal frictions breaking out within its members and forestall its own economic decline. This would help to improve the EU's standing in the world as the peace project it was once conceived as after the Second World War. For this it will need courage - peace needs a lot of courage!