

Matthias Waechter* - 15 April 2025

European Security and Defence in Times of Transatlantic Estrangement: An Opportunity for Forging a European Identity?

Recent electoral results, such as the European Parliament elections of 2024, provide an unequivocal message: populists are on the rise, be it France (where RN scored 31.37 % of the votes), in Germany (where AfD achieved 15.5 % of the votes and sends the second biggest cohort to the EP), in Austria (with FPÖ as the strongest party at 25.36 %), or in Poland (with PiS scoring 36.16 %). According to collaborative research done in all 27 member states, the aggregate election results show that populist parties score more than 30 % of votes in the 2024 European Parliament elections.¹

It may easily be argued that populism is an ill-defined shibboleth covering a vast variety of parties from the far left to the far right. But one thing cannot be ignored: all parties labelled populist have a nationalist propension and take a stance towards European integration, reaching from hostile to strongly skeptical. The rise of populism in the EU means, there is no doubt, a rise in Euroscepticism. The seemingly inexorable rise of nationalist, eurosceptic populism may in hindsight appear as a paradox, when we take into account the obvious benefits of European integration. The European Union delivers more and more public goods, it has fared well through crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, providing millions of citizens with vaccines and helping the economic reconstruction through a recovery fund of unheard dimensions. The common currency is for 20 member states an undeniable anchor of economic stability in an increasingly volatile world economic order. And still, it seems extremely difficult to build a European identity around these achievements which most EU citizens are ready to espouse and to defend. The current state of political identification with the European Union defies the logic of neo-functionalism, whose advocates argued that a progressive increase of competencies on the European level would also entail a shift of loyalty of the citizens from the national to the supranational level. One of the reasons for the lack of a viable European identity may have to do with the nature of European Union policy fields. Many of them

are not very identity-sensitive (for instance the internal market, competition, cohesion, fisheries, agriculture...). Others, on the contrary, such as the free movement of people across borders, are seen by many citizens as an essential threat to individual security and national identity, which makes the EU an easy target for nationalist populists.

It could thus be argued that European identity will remain a pious wish as long as one decisive field of policy-making is not encompassed by the European Union: security and defence. In order to foster a real “we-feeling” among the members of a political community, there arguably needs to be a common perception of threats, common strategies to tackle them, solidarity against adversaries and a commitment to common defence. So far, the European Union has not succeeded in creating a “we-feeling” in this sense; thus, it remains only an incomplete security community without a robust political identity.

Evidently, there are historical reasons for this. First and foremost, the only past attempt to create a full-blown European Defence Community (EDC) resulted in one of the most damaging setbacks in the history of European integration. It was in 1950 that French Foreign Minister René Pleven proposed to the members of the European Coal and Steel Community a great leap forward: the creation of a European army as a means to provide a solution for the problem of the rearmament of Western Germany, necessary under the auspices of increasing tensions with the Soviet Union and the American strategy of containment. With the aim of making the reappearance of a German military a few years after World War II acceptable for its neighbouring countries, the EDC should have provided a European framework for the remilitarisation of the Federal Republic. Yet, the EDC project went a lot further than the creation of a European army: in order to avoid it becoming a “body without a head, an army without a state”,² it included the creation of a “European political community”, which would have led to a premature federalisation of Europe. However, neither the EDC nor the “European Political

*Matthias Waechter is Director General of CIFE.

Community” ever saw the day. On 30 August 1954, the French National Assembly rejected the ratification of the treaty. Later, the failure of the EDC was rationalised as a more or less inevitable failure, since the project had departed from the initial, step-by-step logic of the integration project. From this point of view, the defence community was doomed to fail as it skipped many steps, by directly tackling a key domain of state sovereignty. Against this interpretation it must be underlined that the failure of the EDC was in no way a fatality, but the conscious work of nationalists from the Right as well as from the Left.

“The failure of the EDC meant the defeat of the European camp”, argued political scientist Raymond Aron in 1956, “and it has never recovered from it.”³ After 1954, defence and security were outsourced to NATO. And worse, with the return to power of General de Gaulle in 1958, France strove to become an independent, autonomous actor in security and defence, driven by recovering its “greatness”. De Gaulle put his European partners, notably West Germany, in front of the impossible alternative to choose between its transatlantic embeddedness, indispensable for its nuclear protection, and a close alliance with France. The countries’ own nuclear capacity, the “force de frappe”, was not meant to reinforce European security, but was considered an instrument of national sovereignty. Thus, security and defence were not only excluded from the scope of European integration, but even became a bone of contention between European states. The end of the Cold War opened up new avenues for a proper European security and defence policy, but progress in this domain remained incremental, conditioned by the abortive past experiences. The Union’s common foreign, security and defence policy is still hampered by decision-making nearly exclusively by unanimity and by diverging preferences of the member states.

The Russian attack on Ukraine has put the question of the EU’s role in security and defence at the top of the agenda. One might have thought that the return of full-scale war to our continent would have led to a unified European strategic approach, but up to now, this has not been the case. On the contrary, the Russian war of aggression has highlighted the shaping influence of US hegemony over the continent and divided Europeans into different camps: there are on the one hand those who can be labelled the “Gaullists”, going back to former French President Charles de Gaulle’s stance for a European defence and security policy

largely independent from the United States. Emmanuel Macron stands for this balancing strategy, having campaigned, since his coming into office in 2017, for a “strategic autonomy” of the European Union. On the other hand, there are those who can be called the “Atlanticists”, for whom the Russian aggression was a reminder of the vital necessity of American protection, an occasion to reinforce the ties within NATO and to align one’s own positions with those of the United States. Germany, Italy, Poland and the Baltic States can be seen as representative of this hedging strategy. Within our member states, we also find self-styled “Pacifists”, who warn against a too strong involvement into the war and push for negotiations and a rapid diplomatic solution. Finally, there are the “Putinists”, who claim to understand Russia’s animosity towards the United States and look for maintaining cooperative relations with Putin. Thus, European stances towards the Russian war against Ukraine are to a certain extent a function of our different attitudes towards the United States. The outcome is that since 24 February 2022, the European Union has not succeeded in forging a common security and defence identity.

It can be argued that the decisive moment for building such a common European security identity has come now, with the second Trump administration in the United States. European states are now in the process of being abandoned by their transatlantic protector. The American security guarantee as the cornerstone of NATO is losing credibility. The Trump administration turning its back on Europe also means that a strategy of aligning EU positions with those of the United States is no longer feasible. Abandoned by their American hegemon, Europeans might finally come around with defining their own common security and defence identity. In a timely manner, Emmanuel Macron has recently overturned a decade-old taboo and has declared his readiness for a debate on extending France’s nuclear dissuasion to Europe. This announcement has been positively received by Friedrich Merz, leader of the incoming German government.

It is thus very timely that the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy just brought out a “Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030”. The document formulates right at the outset the crucial questions: “Does (Europe) want to muddle through the years ahead, attempting to adapt to new challenges in an incremental and

cautious way? Or does it want to decide its own future, free from coercion and aggression, ensuring that the people of Europe are able to live in security, peace, democracy and prosperity?⁴ Without further ado, the paper addresses the “ability to set clear central direction of travel” as an area of “comparative weakness” of the European Union.⁵ At the same time, the White Paper remains a cautious document insofar as it attaches great importance to not encroaching on the prerogatives of the member states: “Member states will always retain responsibility for their own troops, from doctrine to deployment, and for the definition needs of their armed forces”.⁶ The High Representative sees the role of the EU principally as that of a facilitator, a coordinator, supporter and catalyst for synergies and partnerships. The objective of the new impetus for a European defence is not only to build up sufficient deterrence capacities, but also to continuously support Ukraine in times where assistance from the American protector becomes more and more uncertain. It is very salutary that the White Paper endorses partnerships with non-EU countries as an instrument to enhance European security. Enlargement and neighbourhood countries such as Albania, North Macedonia, Moldova and Türkiye are explicitly mentioned, as well as close partners such as Norway, Switzerland and Iceland. European defence is clearly an opportunity to partly overcome the alienation from the UK created by

Brexit, in line with the “coalition of the willing” proposed by Prime Minister Keir Starmer. The White Paper also includes non-European countries such as Canada into the scope of possible partnerships.

The mix of boldness and realism characteristic of the White Paper’s propositions is certainly appropriate in the current situation. On the one hand, member states need to be vigorously alerted to the necessity of European defence efforts, on the other hand, projects must remain achievable and well-founded. It is reasonable to view the enhanced engagement of the European Union in the domain of defence as a step-by-step process. But one important aspect should not be left out: the potential of European security and defence as a catalyst for a European identity. The call for a new momentum in European defence and security should not only be addressed to the member states, but also directly to the citizens. They must be stakeholders in the forging of a common European security identity. The White Paper mentions the citizens only insofar as they are in need of protection. But they should espouse the objective of making the security of our countries neither a national, nor an American, but a European cause. Abandoned by the United States, Europeans are now left alone with their continent. Ensuring its security should give the EU a purpose a great majority of our citizens can adhere to.

References

- 1 Gilles Ivaldi/Emilia Zankina (Ed.), 2024 *EP elections under the shadow of rising populism. A report by European Center for Populism Studies*, Brussels 2024.
- 2 Quote from the Italian federalist Ernesto Rossi, in: Robert Belot/Daniela Preda, *La Communauté européenne de défense, retour sur un échec 70 ans après*, in: *L'Europe en Formation. Journal of Studies on European Integration and Federalism*, no. 396, Winter 2022, p. 10.
- 3 Aron quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 4 High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030*, Brussels, 19 March 2025, p. 1.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

