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## **CAN THE DECLINE OF EUROPE BE STOPPED?**

Looking at the geopolitical developments of recent years, it is sad to say that Europe, represented by the EU, has lost a lot of influence. The US under Donald Trump wants to retain its leading role in the world and is making it clear to Europeans that they now only have a supporting role to play. In the negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, European heads of government are merely spectators; they were not even informed about the American-Israeli attack on Iran in March 2026.

As early as 2024, Mario Draghi, the long-standing President of the European Central Bank, noted in a report that Europe is losing ground to the US and China in terms of economic and technological competitiveness. Without far-reaching reforms, there is a risk of long-term economic stagnation. This would require additional annual investments of several

€100 billion per year, which unfortunately is not available. In fact, China's GDP will grow by 57% between 2019 and 2030, while the EU's will grow by only 16%. In order to harm Russia, Europeans have largely withdrawn from cheap Russian oil and gas imports, with the result that German companies have relocated their production to China in order to benefit from cheap Russian energy there.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, the American president has repeatedly stated that Ukraine is indeed to blame for its outbreak. And American Secretary of State Marco Rubio has even called the conflict a "proxy war". The EU, on the other hand, has already granted Ukraine €193 billion in aid since 2022 and is determined to continue sending money to Kyiv "as long as it takes".

There is no doubt that the European Union has brought its citizens many benefits: they have benefited from the abolition of customs controls and waiting times. Austria has quadrupled its exports to other EU member states over the past 30 years, from €33 billion in 1995 to €137 billion in 2023. A single market has been created with the aim of facilitating the free movement of people and goods, and the Schengen enlargement initially sought to abolish all borders. Nevertheless, the question arises as to why Europe has lost its importance in the world. Probably because some fundamental issues have not been resolved.

Now many media outlets are proclaiming that the EU should massively rearm in order to regain its standing in the world. "We must convert our economies to a war economy," we hear. French Chief of Staff Fabien Mandon has even demanded that we must be prepared for our children to die on the front lines. In my opinion, this warmongering is madness and completely counterproductive when it comes to improving Europe's standing in the world. It is as if ancient Greece would have had a better place in history if it had armed itself against imperial Rome or the Parthian Empire.

What the EU needs to do, on the other hand, is to resolve fundamental questions about its existence:

- What kind of union are we striving for? A federal state or a confederation of states?
- How should transatlantic relations be shaped?
- Europe with or without Russia?

\*The Treaty of Rome, adopted in 1957, set out the goal of achieving an "ever closer union" in Europe. Jean Monnet and his supporters wanted a supranational community in which the role of nation states would be greatly reduced. The then French President de Gaulle wanted a "Europe of fatherlands", i.e. a union of nation states. To this day, this dispute has not been resolved. Worse still, both sides are increasingly acting as if the other did not exist. EU Commission President von der Leyen acts as if she were the "President of the United States of Europe". Others, such as the radical right-wing and radical left-wing parties, want to severely curtail Brussels' powers. A solution is not easy to find. In the USA, a bloody civil war was fought over this issue.

The current situation is that we are living in a period of "shared sovereignty": national sovereignty has been relinquished, but no European sovereignty has been created. We have given up national currencies; there is a European monetary union with the euro. But there is no European economic union, which would be a prerequisite for a functioning common currency. We have given up national border controls, but the "Dublin Decisions", which were supposed to be the basis for a common refugee policy, have proven obsolete in times of crisis. There is talk of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), but the large EU countries in particular were not prepared to give up their own foreign policy to assert their interests. Now EU leaders are using the war in Ukraine to achieve a Europe-wide military leadership role. But this behaviour is in no way covered by the treaties.

Even the advocates of "European sovereignty" have long been inconsistent in their stance. In a keynote speech at the Sorbonne on 26 September 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke of the need for more "European sovereignty" and was celebrated for it. At the same time, however, he also demanded more French sovereignty in areas such as defence, economic policy, industrial policy, climate and energy. So "European sovereignty" is often more about wishful thinking than reality. And although agricultural policy has been a European matter since the founding treaties, the French Ministry of Agriculture is still officially called the "Ministère de l'Agriculture et de la Souveraineté nationale". Perhaps a pan-European convention would be able to provide more clarity on this existential issue.

\*What is the state of transatlantic relations? These have never been as ideal as "transatlanticists" sometimes portray them. On the other hand, Donald Trump is wrong when he says that European integration has been directed against the United States from the outset.

Fundamentally, the US has supported European unification from the outset where it believed that a united Europe would integrate into and subordinate itself to an Atlantic partnership. This was already the case when, after the Second

World War II, within the framework of the OEEC (Organisation for European Economic Cooperation), to coordinate the Marshall Plan and facilitate trade and payments on the old continent in order to promote a future free trade area.

Many saw no disadvantages in accepting American leadership, at least no contradiction to the concrete advantages for European countries. Jean Monnet, in any case, is said to have been very open to advice from American politicians. Another great European, Jacques Delors, took a slightly different view of transatlantic relations when he once stated: "We do not interfere in the internal affairs of the United States, trusting that the Americans will not interfere in European affairs." But it is obviously not that simple.

Time and again, powerful forces have advocated American leadership in Europe, particularly on security issues. But there have also been repeated attempts to counter this. In 1963, for example, French President Charles de Gaulle sought to use the Élysée Treaty to push through France's vision of a united Europe with Germany's support. But the German Bundestag ultimately insisted on including a reference to the importance of the transatlantic partnership for the Federal Republic in the preamble to the treaty.

Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon, feared that the unification of Western Europe could weaken America's leadership role. He preferred bilateral relations with individual European states and spoke of Europe as a "Frankenstein monster". The aim was to tame this monster in the long term. In the context of the Cold War, the security integration of Western countries was advocated because it also strengthened Europe's dependence on the US. European integration was therefore only tolerated by Nixon and Kissinger if it strengthened American hegemony in the transatlantic alliance, but not if it threatened to dilute or even undermine it (Klaus Larres).

So when Donald Trump takes a rather critical view of the European Union, this is not a fundamentally new stance for an American administration. The current American president undoubtedly has his own style and his own way of expressing himself. European leaders are currently behaving somewhere between submissiveness and defiance: we should consider how a fundamental reshaping of transatlantic relations is possible, how a self-confident Europe can develop under American leadership.

Another crucial question: Can Russia be our partner? De Gaulle, at any rate, aspired to a Europe "from the Atlantic to the Urals." Even before the war in Ukraine, there was no other country against which the United States had imposed as many sanctions as against Russia. Yet Donald Trump actually wanted to improve bilateral relations during his first term in office. Hardliners in the United States accused "Putin" had interfered in the 2016 presidential election campaign and prevented Hillary Clinton from being elected. Neoconservatives in Washington openly proclaimed "regime change" in Moscow; American ambassadors in Moscow, such as Michael McFaul, were also of this opinion. Obviously, no consideration was given to the fact that Russia's political system has followed its own rules for centuries. How this is suddenly supposed to change remains a mystery to those who pursued this policy. Russia cannot be subjugated and subordinated like other former communist countries. Russia is not Albania.

When France and Germany took the first steps towards European integration, they were prepared to give up sovereignty in order to create peace. The former communist countries of Eastern Europe, Poland and the Baltic states gained more sovereignty through their membership of the European Union, as their national identity had been largely erased during communist rule. They wanted to use this new sovereignty to take a stronger stance against Russia. Given what has happened throughout history, this attitude is understandable. But security in Europe is difficult to achieve without Russia. Russia is part of our continent; geography cannot be changed. So far, there is no indication that Europeans have emerged stronger from the conflict with Russia. Now that the US has rediscovered that good business can be done with Moscow, EU leaders should at least consider whether a realistic stance on Europe's part would also be appropriate. Wishful thinking is not a good basis for successful politics.

In view of all these developments, it will not be easy to halt Europe's decline. But at least an attempt should be made.

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