

The EU after One Year of War: Widening, Deepening, Rebalancing

by Nicoletta Pirozzi

The Russian aggression on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 had an overwhelming impact on the European Union, which at the time was starting to recover from the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Widening

One year later, the EU looks different. First of all, it is bigger, or at least it is preparing to become bigger in view of the accession of two new candidate countries – Ukraine and Moldova.¹ The path to enlargement looks long and not without obstacles, starting with major reforms that will have to be implemented by Kyiv in economic matters and with regard to respect for the rule of law – not an easy task, especially in wartime. But the door is now open to welcome two additional members – and perhaps Georgia as well – into the European house.

¹ European Council, *Conclusions, 23-24 June 2022*, <https://europa.eu/!TCKrrj>.

This will have two major consequences: one relates to the other front of enlargement, the Western Balkans, which needs a decisive boost in order to confirm the EU's full commitment to the region. This is crucial to maintain the anchorage of the region to Europe, promoting its development in accordance with the democratic principles of the EU and limiting the influence of external strategic competitors such as Russia, China and the Gulf States.

Deepening

The other consequence concerns the internal reforms that the Union will have to put in place to function at 35 (and possibly more) member states. In its reaction to the war on Ukraine, the Union has shown to be capable of mobilising its resources for a more timely and effective foreign policy action. There are five million Ukrainian refugees benefiting from the EU's

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Temporary Protection Mechanism.² In addition, to date, the Union has provided 3.6 billion euro in military support to the Ukrainian armed forces and a total support of 50 billion euro to Kyiv.³ The Union has also been united in imposing tough sanctions on Russia.⁴ Nevertheless, its initiatives have been repeatedly delayed or diluted by the exercise of the veto power, in particular by Hungary, highlighting how difficult it is to guarantee the respect of fundamental values also internally.

Against this backdrop, the future enlargement to new member states with significantly diverse interests and domestic situations inevitably calls for a change in the decision-making process of the EU, toward an expansion of qualified majority voting to at least certain foreign policy matters such as sanctions and human rights, but also the reinforcement of the role of common institutions, starting with the High Representative.

Rebalancing

In addition, the EU is experiencing an internal rebalancing in favour of the Baltic and Eastern European countries that have been at the forefront of the European response to the Russian aggression and have raised their voices

in Brussels to assert their vision for the future of the Union. Politically, this has translated into firmer containment against Russia, a far cry from the cooperative approach of the Merkel era. At the same time, the war has confirmed that European defence remains inescapably tied to the role of the United States and the Atlantic Alliance, despite the ambitions for strategic autonomy put forward by French President Macron and von der Leyen's "geopolitical" Commission. Moreover, the visions and concerns of northeast EU countries may play a greater role also in other issues on the EU agenda, such as the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact, the European response to Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and migration. In parallel, the Visegrád Group has lost momentum, mainly due to the deterioration of relations between Hungary and Poland over Budapest's attitude towards the war on Ukraine.

The strengthening of the north-eastern front goes hand in hand with a further weakening of the Mediterranean front. Traditionally, Mediterranean countries in the EU have struggled to form a solid coalition due to competing interests on specific and highly sensitive topics, such as migration or foreign policy priorities. However, they have often found common ground on crucial aspects of European integration, above all economic governance and the social agenda. Today, additional difficulties of coordination with France and Spain have emerged on a number of dossiers, not only on migration but also economic governance and energy transition, in the wake of the change of government in Italy. Finally, there

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Ukraine Refugee Situation*, last updated 28 March 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

³ Council of the European Union, *Infographic - EU Solidarity with Ukraine*, 14 March 2023, <https://europa.eu/!CVXT7B>.

⁴ European Commission, *EU Agrees 10th Package of Sanctions against Russia*, 25 February 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1185.

is less solidity in the Franco-German engine, which has been hampered by domestic policy difficulties of the two governments and a lack of alignment on key aspects of the European reform agenda and foreign policy choices. This engine jam is no good news for the EU at a time of exceptional stress of its internal balance and external competition.

Navigating the challenges ahead

If we look at public opinion, the polycrisis that Europe is experiencing has led to the emergence of fragilities and fears. The Eurobarometer shows that the main fear of Europeans is the rising cost of living (93 per cent), followed by poverty and social exclusion (82 per cent) and climate change and the potential expansion of the Ukrainian conflict to other countries (both at 81 per cent).⁵ Despite these concerns, a large majority of the public opinion is in favour of continuing efforts to support the Ukrainian cause: three-quarters of Europeans approve the Union's policy in support of Kyiv and specific measures such as sanctions, although with significant differences at the national level – for example, the percentage drops to 62 per cent in Italy.

In this situation, the temptation for governments to resort to national responses, even at the expense of greater European coordination, could grow, along the lines of what has already happened in Germany with measures to support households and businesses

⁵ European Parliament, *EP Autumn 2022 Survey: Parlemeter*, January 2023, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2932>.

to counter the energy crisis (the so-called 200 billion euro “bazooka”)⁶ or in Italy with respect to the governance of migration. The impact of this tendency would be nefarious for the European project and its international projection: the prevalence of a transactional logic in Brussels would never lead beyond the lowest common denominator among different national interests and would deny the Union the vision and political drive needed to navigate the present scenario.

In order to navigate these difficult times, the EU needs to square the circle between widening, deepening and rebalancing, thus enabling the Union to accomplish internal consolidation as well as addressing the geopolitical risks in its neighbourhood. This requires striking a difficult balance between new forms of flexible integration to accommodate ever-growing national differences on the one hand, and the reinforcement of common policies based on shared rules and institutions on the other. This way, the Union can ensure the resilience of the European pact with its citizens – but also with the governments and people in its neighbourhood for the realisation of their European democratic aspiration.

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⁶ “Germany to Spend \$220 Billion for Industrial Transformation by 2026”, in *Reuters*, 6 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/sustainable-business/germany-has-earmarked-220-billion-industrial-transformation-by-2026-2022-03-06>.

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