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## EUROPE'S LACK OF LEADERSHIP

### IS IT THE SMALLER STATES' TIME TO SHINE?

*Russia's war in Ukraine has raised questions about who is fit to lead Europe. While it is too early to predict a shift of power to Europe's Northeast, the smaller EU member states have an opportunity to adopt a more proactive stance on shaping EU policy, as Europe recalibrates its relations with Russia and prepares for a major enlargement.*

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had a contradictory impact on Europe: on the one hand, it has unified the West in its support for Ukraine. On the other hand, it has caused rifts between Europe's (North-)East and (South-)West and lent new urgency to the debate over enlargement vs. deeper integration in the European Union (EU). Russia's war has also put an end to any European illusions of strategic autonomy independent of the United States (US). If left to their own devices, European countries would not be able – or willing – to sufficiently support Ukraine in its fight against the Russian invasion: the US supports Ukraine with nearly twice the sum that Europeans have so far been able to muster.

The Northeastern European countries in particular have viewed the leadership of the Franco-German tandem, also known as the 'motor of European integration', as disappointing. Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz and France's President Emmanuel Macron have both had a steep learning curve in wartime leadership. Scholz, who had taken over from Angela Merkel only a few months before the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has seemed out of his depth in navigating the new security threat in Europe. Macron was initially preoccupied with presidential and later also with parliamentary elections, in which he lost the majority in the National Assembly.

Both have also repeatedly demonstrated an inability to understand the security concerns of their Northeastern partners: A few days before the invasion, Scholz stated in Moscow that NATO's eastern enlargement would not take place during his term of office. It was an example of lack of comprehension, not only of Ukraine's, but also of Finland and Sweden's security situation. Macron, in turn, infuriated many with his appeals "not to humiliate Russia" in May and again in June.

After initially being accused of ambiguity in their support for Ukraine, France and Germany have stepped up and are now providing weapons that make a difference on the battlefield. However, the

perceived ambivalence of the Franco-German approach to Russia has damaged their European partners' trust in their leadership at a time when existential questions of security are at stake. This is particularly the case in Northeastern Europe, where Russia's attack on Ukraine feels much closer and more personal than further in the (South-)West.

The war has also brought "Global Britain" back to Europe. The United Kingdom (UK) has been a solid supporter of Ukraine from the beginning and despite domestic political crises, the Brits remain firm in their commitment to European security. The UK is a long-standing and the most important regional defence cooperation partner for Northeastern Europeans, and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) is an example of British leadership. However, having decided to leave the EU in 2016 and constantly struggling with the consequences of that decision ever since, the UK is in no shape domestically to aspire to a wider European leadership role.

But does Europe need the big countries to lead? Leadership requires not only the necessary resources but also the support of the other states subject to leadership. As a result of the war, the Franco-German leading position may

decline, paving the way for smaller EU member states to take more responsibility instead of hiding behind the larger ones. Indeed, the time for complaining is over and the smaller states should take a more proactive stance.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Northern, Central and Eastern Europe (NCEE), which includes the Nordic, Baltic, Central and Eastern European states (with the exception of Hungary), has been united in its shared threat assessment and sense of urgency to support Ukraine. In the EU context, what the NCEE countries have in common is their opposition to a reform of the EU's treaties and belonging to the camp supporting the EU's enlargement, especially Ukraine's EU membership perspective, rather than a further deepening of integration.

Although it is a valid argument that initiating a lengthy treaty convention with an uncertain outcome while there is a war in Europe is risky, institutional reform will likely be unavoidable when the EU gets closer to accepting new members. Particularly with regard to Ukraine, it is not only a question of whether the candidate country is ready for the EU, but rather whether the EU is ready for the candidate. In order

to maintain the EU's capacity to act with ultimately more than 30 members, opening the treaties could become necessary. It will be a test for the NCEE countries, with regard to whether they can overcome their status quo thinking and adopt a more constructive approach to European integration – including institutional reform if need be. So far, NCEE has been mainly united in its opposition to initiatives perceived as "going too far", but simply opposing is not enough for shaping a vision for Europe's future.

It remains to be seen whether NCEE truly represents an emerging region of cooperation or rather a loose ad hoc coalition brought together by the acute security threat. In the best case, the NCEE countries' newly-found voice will create more sense of ownership for them over the EU's direction. The Baltic states and Poland are rightfully experiencing a "told you so" moment when it comes to their warnings about Russia and their views can no longer be ignored when building a new security architecture in Europe. This needs to be converted into a tangible impact on the EU's policymaking. /