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Can the EU Relaunch its Foreign Policy Mechanism?

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The telephone conversation between the leaders of Finland and Norway and the Russian president, and the subsequent reaction, vividly highlights the systemic problems within the EU's foreign policy machinery. Without addressing these issues, the European Union will not only cease to be a key geopolitical actor in the world but also risks completely ruining the entire European integration project. But how can the blocked foreign policy mechanism be relaunched?

In recent years, the European Union, through its numerous representatives, has declared its desire to be a key geopolitical player on the global stage. This ambition is not only understandable but also justified. However, to realize it, mere desire or loud statements are not enough. The EU's foreign policy mechanism must be capable of formulating not just a unified position, the need for which European politicians and bureaucrats are now vociferously insisting on, but a position that adequately addresses the Union's interests in the increasingly complex international environment that exists today.

The 27 October telephone conversation between Finnish President Alexander Stubb and Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre with Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted the problems within the EU's foreign policy mechanism, which are hindering its potential as a geopolitical actor.

The battle over the call to Putin

As all participants emphasized, the conversation was a continuation of the contacts that took place the week before. First, on 20 October, talks were held in Oslo, Norway, with the participation of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, US Presidential Special Envoy Steve Witkoff, and representatives of several European countries. Then, on 21 October, Witkoff was hosted by Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg.

The leaders of Finland and Norway also emphasized that the phone call with their Russian counterpart took place at Kyiv's request and in consultation with it. Furthermore, although Stubb and Støre spoke "as the leaders of their countries and did not speak on behalf of all of Europe," they emphasized that they had informed some (though by no means all) NATO allies of their intentions in advance. Specifically, the Americans, Poles, and the Nordic countries. Ukrainian officials confirmed that the European politicians' call to Moscow was indeed coordinated with Kyiv. Foreign Minister Andrei Sybiha called it "the right approach" and welcomed "such active support for our diplomatic efforts and the peace process."

The Finnish president explained the need for personal discussions with Russian leadership, citing the fact that *"the results of this war will have a direct impact on our security and broader European security."* He also believes that *"at this stage, peace cannot be achieved by avoiding dialogue; ending the war requires direct discussion."* The Norwegian prime minister stated that the "importance of de-escalation" was emphasized in his conversation with the Russian leader, as *"war inflicts enormous human and material losses" and "the suffering and destruction will impact entire generations."* Oslo and Helsinki also make no secret of their belief that re-establishing direct contact with Moscow is crucial for their national interests: Norway and Finland border Russia, making their security particularly sensitive to escalatory flare-ups in the Baltic Sea region.

Despite all the aforementioned preliminary consultations and coordination with a number of allies and partners, including Ukraine itself, the telephone conversation between the leaders of Finland and Norway and the Kremlin sparked a storm of indignation in some EU capitals. The harshest criticism came almost immediately from Danish Prime Minister Metta Frederiksen. She expressed great scepticism about the diplomatic initiative of her Nordic neighbours and emphasized that the call was not coordinated "with any of the rest of us." In her opinion, *"We must maintain European unity, not act alone."*

Comments from many other European politicians were less forthcoming, but there is no doubt that a significant number of them also reacted negatively to the Finnish and Norwegian initiative. Some do so because they sincerely believe contacts with Moscow are futile or even counterproductive. Others simply fear media and political ostracism if they abandon their harsh and uncompromising rhetoric against the Kremlin.

The situation demands it

However, Stubb, Støre, and a growing list of other European politicians and diplomats have not simply begun searching for ways to restore dialogue with Russia. It is not out of any ethical considerations that they have concluded that the *de facto* criminalization of diplomacy within the EU must be abandoned. It is not out of mere interest that they are considering how to refocus on real diplomatic work instead of "silence" accompanied by useless, loud statements and scathing social media posts.

They are doing all this for the simple reason that the existing situation demands it. Or rather, not even the existing situation, but the rapidly changing situation. This applies both to the Russian-Ukrainian war and its connection to the European factor, and to broader regional and global contexts. And by attempting to revive their diplomatic activity, Oslo, Helsinki, and some other European capitals (recall, for example, the recent meeting of the German and Russian foreign ministers on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly) are responding to this clearly changing situation.

In this regard, it is telling that Finnish President Alexander Stubb is at the forefront of this process. Back in April 2024, he expressed assessments that were directly opposed to what he is saying now. Back then, he insisted that "the only path to peace [for Ukraine] is through the battlefield." Back then, he was not discussing the importance of direct dialogue with Moscow, but rather calling for a maximum show of force, since "that is the only thing Putin understands."

But today, even long-time proponents of the "let's show force," isolation, and sanctions-based approach are finding it difficult to ignore the realities on the ground. Due to the sanctions and EU political pressure on Russia, the war is not only far from ending, but it is escalating further, and its horrors are creeping ever closer to the EU's borders, and sometimes even crossing those borders.

At the same time, the European Union is gradually shifting from a key global player to the "second league" of world politics. It is increasingly entrenched on the periphery of key geopolitical processes that will determine the future of Europe and Eurasia for decades to come. The EU's abandonment of diplomacy in the context of the Ukrainian crisis has clearly led to its opinions and interests being increasingly disregarded. This applies not only to Russia, but also to its key ally, the United States. It is not surprising that in recent months, many European diplomats and politicians – both in private conversations and even publicly – have been repeating a well-known metaphor as the main problem: without a seat at the negotiating table, the EU finds itself "on the menu" at a table where other actors are sitting.

Moreover, the rejection of full-fledged diplomacy in favour of a postmodern parody of it has become one of the reasons for the deteriorating economic situation within the EU and its declining competitiveness in global markets. And these trends are no longer merely speculative. They are also

linked, among other things, to the growing socio-political tensions in many EU member states. These foreign policy failures (not only in relation to Russia or in the context of the Ukrainian war) are among of the drivers of the rightward turn currently underway in a number of key EU states, amid the astonishing erosion of political centrism.

The EU needs to do something about its foreign policy mechanism

This means that the European Union's need to revive full-fledged diplomacy to advance its own interests is becoming clear. But how can this be done?

The situation surrounding the call to Putin and its subsequent criticism can be viewed in different ways. But the conclusion is clear: the EU's foreign policy mechanism is currently dysfunctional and does not serve European interests. It is effectively blocked. And the paradox is that a dysfunctional mechanism is incapable of unblocking itself.

The simple and somewhat populist calls for unity currently heard from every European powerhouse are of little help. Unity is wonderful. But it either exists or it does not. And if it does not exist in reality due to the fundamentally different worldviews of the 27 member states, then such calls, based on the principle of the lowest common denominator, will continue to keep EU foreign policy effectively stagnant.

In most cases, this principle predetermines the most primitive, one-dimensional, and poorly thought-out solutions. This means it will always prioritize passivity over proactive policies, populist slogans over clearly articulating one's own interests, and the *status quo* over timely adaptation to rapidly changing international conditions. This is a path not to nowhere, but to geopolitical oblivion.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that if it continues like this for any length of time, the EU's foreign policy impasse will become one of the causes of a broader systemic crisis of European integration. This is especially true given the growing popularity of right-wing forces in several key member states, for whom the very idea of delegating national sovereignty to the needs of integration is unacceptable. Therefore, the consequences could be highly unpredictable.

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