

# Lilliputian Nationalism in the Time of Authoritarian Superpowers

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*The article contends that Europe, once nearly destroyed by ultranationalism, faces again the threat of nationalist fragmentation – this time amidst mounting authoritarian and imperial pressures from Russia—and potentially China. We take a closer look at the manifestations of “lilliputian nationalism” and argue for the necessity of innovative solutions both with regard to security and defense, and in the cultural sphere. We argue for a pan-European narrative that would bolster Europe’s democratic ethos and counter the ‘fatal attraction’ of right-wing ideas which nourish illiberal democracy.*



In 1933, the year of the Nazi takeover, the French writer Julien Benda wrote his Discourse to the European Nation, urging Europeans to come together around their shared universalist values and against the rising monsters of nationalism. The monsters of nationalism prevailed. The result of the ultranationalist fever was World War2, where European civilization as we know it almost collapsed in the grip of Nazi totalitarianism. After defeating the barbarians - and against the background of the continent in ruins –

Winston Churchill spoke of a “United States of Europe” in 1946. Again, the united European states were neither united nor able (nor willing) to understand the de-civilizing power of voracious, Soviet imperialism. The result was that, for some good 45 years, Eastern Europe was put under the Soviet boot and made into an economic wasteland and cultural desert.

The 21st century resurgence of Russian imperialism, Putin’ aggression in Ukraine and his hybrid war in EU have opened a cupboard with old and rickety skeletons. Again, the EU is muddling through the squabbles about how to oppose – or not oppose - Russian authoritarianism. And again, many European countries romance right wing nationalist ideas whose eager spokesmen – and Euro-deputies - aim to detonate the EU rather than to cement an alliance that can fight the next, authoritarian Middle Ages.

To mention a few current examples: In France, The National Rally, led by Marine Le Pen, reflects growing Euroscepticism and nationalism flirting with pro-Putin sympathies; In Italy under Prime Minister Georgia Meloni, Brothers of Italy advocate for conservative values and national interests; In Germany Alternative for Germany (AfD) has made notable gains, especially in eastern regions, promoting anti-immigration policies, EU skeptics and adulation of Germany’s National-Socialist past; In Austria The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) achieved significant victories, marking a shift toward nationalist politics; In Hungary, Prime

Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party emphasizes national sovereignty, pro-Putin stance and openly illiberal values.

Some of the European fringe parties wallow in unrealistic nationalist phantasies. Take Polish Konfederacja – an ultra-nationalist Polish party whose support swings between 7 and 14% - that insists that Poland has enough muscle and enough God's protection to do without the EU or NATO's "dictatorship." Or take Norway, where there are still US and NATO-skeptical politicians who seriously doubt that Russia would ever launch attack on their peace-loving nation. In the unlikely case of Russian aggression, they argue, "there is always NATO that will protect us". This is a crooked mindset of the worshippers of national sovereignty – a mindset that spells disaster.

## Lilliputians Among Superpowers

There are several dilemmas that face Europe forged along the lines of radical nationalists. Firstly, small and medium-sized nation states no longer command resources and clout to protect their interests and territories against authoritarian empires like Russia and China. Compared to the 21<sup>st</sup> century superpowers that are rivalling for geopolitical influence, nationalist movements in Italy, Austria, France, or Hungary launch a conception of pathetic 'lilliputian' states, outsized in both scale and scope. In this situation, ongoing European divisions through further nationalist fragmentation are a recipe for disaster.

The second dilemma has to do with increasing Russian interference – through deep fakes, bots and acts of sabotage - which aim at de-stabilizing Europe as a union. The fact that several potential EU-exiters have been blessed with financial backing from imperial Russia, indicates that some of them are willing to betray the sovereignty of their own nations. In short, Euro-nationalists are, once again, "useful idiots" helping the Eastern superpower to conduct its hybrid war and its 'divide et impera' strategy.

Thirdly, the consolidation of authoritarian power in Putin's Russia, its security and defense pact with China and military assistance from North Korea, have dramatically reversed the European defense and security capabilities. The re-election of Donald Trump has raised additional concerns about the US commitment to democratic norms, not to mention its dedication to NATO as a guardian of peace in Europe. The threats from a more and more aggressive Russia, demand a policy reorientation which is opposite to the one proposed by the "pygmy nationalists". Europe needs an operative security policy that would match the potential of its neighboring superpower.

## From Nato and US Dependency Towards a European Defense and Security Policy

In the absence of a unified capacity for effective self-defense, Europe has historically relied on external powers for protection. The United States' transatlantic support was instrumental in defeating German Euro-imperialist ambitions during World War II and functioned as vital deterrent against Soviet-Russian expansionism. While European member states have contributed troops, partial funding, and some military resources to NATO missions, the onus of expenditures and leadership was on the US: a rather convenient but ultimately self-undermining arrangement for the EU countries. Convenient, because it has allowed European nations to foster their nonchalant complacency. Self-undermining because it significantly

reduced the EU defense capacity. That era of false sense of security has now come to a close. Even without Donald Trump's hectoring about EU stingy contribution to NATO; it is the EU countries, not the US that are most directly threatened by Putin's dreams of limitless expansion.

As Europe takes on greater responsibility for its own defense and security, it benefits from the framework provided by new unitary institutions such as the European Union. However, key EU decision-making processes—particularly in areas like the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP)—require unanimity, often resulting in protracted negotiations and the influence of veto players.

Given these constraints, a pragmatic consolidation of European defense and security policy is more likely to emerge initially through the Europeanization of NATO. In this model, pioneering European nations could take on a more proactive role under NATO's leadership, bypassing possible stalemates imposed by EU veto players. When paired with military-industrial expansion and the ripple effects on technology and employment, such efforts would not only enhance collective defense capabilities but also incentivize broader participation across the EU. Over time, this approach could foster greater cohesion and a wider European following. The early contours of this strategy are already visible in emerging defense alliances within the NATO framework, such as coalitions of Eastern border states, which lead the way to a novel security paradigm.

A genuine European *perestroika* requires fostering a sense of European patriotism alongside the love of one's own country—an ideal that may seem utopian at the moment. Without a collective willingness to stand united in defense of shared values, Europeans will have little chance of withstanding the coordinated and boundless ambitions of empires like Russia and China, or the unpredictable policies of the United States and India, the latter poised to emerge as the next global superpower.

## Building a European Democratic/Humanist Allegiance

According to a well-known, albeit unconfirmed, anecdote, Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the EU, was supposed to have said about the European project: "If I had to do it all over again, I would begin with culture." What is intriguing is that Monnet supposedly regretted that the United Europe was constructed on the "solid" ground of economics, rather than on any unifying myth or narrative. It is now taken for granted that edifying stories, poetry, and art were crucial to shaping national feelings and cement distinct national identity in all European countries.

The post WW2 European elites spun no narratives that would build a sense of collective "WE". The European alliance was constituted around coal and steel resources of six European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg (BENELUX). Needless to say that one does not build Euro-patriotism only on steel and coal, even if Europe's later consolidation as the world's largest economy is truly impressive. Matters were not improved by enrichment of the European Union with several post-Soviet republics after the Autumn of the Nations in 1989 – most of them focused on their own past traumas and resentments, even at the height of Europhoria. Even Beethoven's Ode to Joy – written by the 19<sup>th</sup> century German composer – has not been enough to stir the hearts of Poles, Greeks or Frenchmen and make them beat in transnational pride and joy.

True enough, the attempts to strengthen EU as an economic and political alliance were accompanied by intermittent projects of scientific and cultural unification such as educational programmes, scholarly

initiatives and occasional cultural events. It may well be that creating a unifying European narrative - and the accompanying pedagogy – has been an unrealistic dream. After all, the European Union - a motley of prosperous nations, wounded empires, struggling paupers, and ever-grieving former vassals of genocidal regimes – had too diverse histories and identities to make EU citizens gather around a common mythology. The best one could do was to preach an anemic meme of “unity in diversity.”

Admittedly, a conspicuous lack of unifying and attractive stories and images of Europe as a community is not only the result of right-wing nationalist attacks. It owes as much to one-sided ideas of Europe as promoted by the post-war Left. These ideas have made Europeans ashamed rather than proud of their patrimony. In the dominant discourse of ‘progressive’ elites, Europe has been represented as a theatre of brutal religious persecutions, imperial impositions and the Holocaust genocide. The vision of the continent which was a birthplace of breathtaking social and technological innovations - from steam engine to freedom of expression and women’s rights – was eclipsed by the images of a barbarous, “Frankensteinian Europe.” Ironically, while deconstructing Europe’s savage past, many inquisitors adulated genocidal heroes and beastly legacy of the East- from China’s Mao through Lenin, Stalin to Pol Pot. Whatever the reasons of this oversight, it is partly the elites’ blunders that stimulated politically correct amnesia and blocked the creation of a positive, modern European narrative.



This narrative neglect has been both unfortunate and amnesic. We believe that there are at least two modern founding stories of European identity which have been disregarded by EU elites. Both were created in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and both chronicle the victory of liberal democracy over despotism. One goes back to the triumph of humanist Europe over brown totalitarianism preached and practiced by Hitler. The other is an account of the defeat of the brutal Soviet empire that started from the extraordinary, antiauthoritarian *Solidarnosc* movement in

Poland (1980-81) and concluded with the peaceful “Velvet revolution” that took place in Eastern Europe in 1989. The latter marked not only the victory of the open society over despotic rule, but the return of the “kindnapped Europe” (to use Milan Kundera’s resonant concept) from the Soviet prison to the world of free nations.

One can only wonder why these two stories – and a gallery of assorted heroes – from the anti-Nazi humanists such as bishop Bonhoeffer, to anticommunist dissidents such as Vaclav Havel – have not been included in the common European curriculum. The forgotten stories of Europe’s glorious deeds – if intelligently disseminated - might counteract the ultimately self-destructive lilliputian nationalism by strengthening the cultural backbone of EU. Last but not least, it could have an added effect of forging the democratic and anti-authoritarian ethos as the basis of a confident and muscular Europe - the world’s largest economy.