

ZEITENWENDE ON STEROIDS: EUROPE'S MOMENT OF TRUTH

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EDITORIAL



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When Chancellor Scholz first spoke of *Zeitenwende* [1] following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he was more right than he could have known at the time. Yet he, like other European leaders, was slow in drawing the necessary conclusions. Now, with President Trump back in the White House and openly siding with Putin, any lingering illusions of salvaging the old world order have crumbled. It is painful to watch the United States (US) voting at the United Nations (UN) with Russia, North Korea, Belarus, and, sadly, Hungary. Europe must decide: does it wish to appease a condescending and contemptuous monarch? Or will it seize the moment to resolutely chart its own course?

Zeitenwende can move in different directions. One possible future is bleak: Europe as a vassal, its countries falling under the influence of competing global powers—Member States bending to China, others remaining subservient to America, and even a few under Russian sway. The spectre of a 21st-century *Stefan Zweig* one day chronicling the disappearance of the world we once knew is no longer far-fetched.

But the future is ours to make. Had Zweig not despaired in 1942 and taken his life, he would have witnessed democracy's revival, European reconstruction, and the opening of a long era of peace and prosperity first in Western Europe and later integrating the countries formerly under the Soviet domination. Europe should transform *Zeitenwende* into building Europe as a true global power, founded on decency, values, and the rule of law, yet strong enough to withstand external pressures. This will not come easily. It requires 'blood, sweat, and tears'. It requires endurance, courage, and political will.

Today, one leader stands out for his combination of vision, courage, and resilience: President Zelenskyy. From comedian to wartime leader, he exemplifies how extraordinary times can elevate ordinary men. Europe needs its *Machiavellian moment*, as Hans Kribbe wrote, invoking historian John Pocock's term: saving the Republic by demonstrating strength in the face of external threats. There is no alternative. The probable future German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, seems to understand this. His remarks on transatlantic relations on the evening of the German elections mark a significant shift in attitude. He called for Europe to abandon its transatlantic illusions and make itself stronger and more autonomous.

A Defining European Council

President António Costa has convened a special European Council meeting on 6 March. This is long overdue. What Europe needs now is clarity, resolve, and action. The conclusions should, this time, fit on a single page, written in simple, strong sentences, with verbs rather than adjectives. No grandiloquence, no repetition—just recalling what the European Union (EU) has done over the past years for Ukraine[2] and firm commitments for the future:

- We do not recognise Russia's annexation of Ukrainian lands.
- We insist on Ukraine and the EU being part of talks about the future of Ukraine and the EU.
- We will support Ukraine in negotiating a just and lasting peace.
- We will carefully examine any bilateral agreement on rare earth metals between

[1] *Zeitenwende* in German literally means 'Turn of the times'.

[2] Maybe annex a simple fact sheet listing precisely what the EU has delivered and what America has done.

Ukraine and the US.[3] And yes, we will retaliate against unfair US tariffs!

- We will build a European defence industry, in partnership with the United Kingdom.
- We will accelerate accession negotiations with Ukraine and other candidates.

On the last point: I was among those sceptical about rushing into an EU accession promise to Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Our leaders decided to do so, and we must respect that. But once you make such a promise, you must do everything possible to make it happen (which, of course, does not only depend on the EU!), be it for Ukraine or the Western Balkans. If we abandon Ukraine now—especially with America doing bilateral deals with Russia, pressuring Kyiv to accept a Russian land-grab and to compromise its sovereignty—we risk not only betraying Ukraine but also sowing the seeds for future instability across the continent. In fact, the signal to send now is that we will accelerate matters. Ukraine might not be the most difficult accession negotiation here, witness Georgia, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ukraine has made strides in fighting corruption, it is a democracy, and it holds up admirably under huge pressures, with GDP growth of 4% last year! It would bring to table significant assets: a capable army, a vibrant agriculture (we should not just look at the competitive threat it can pose to EU farmers), an innovation-driven economy (just look at the drones industry), and a highly educated population. Of course, its accession will cost a lot of money. But a Ukraine left to itself will come at a high price too, because we will have to assist with the reconstruction anyway if we do not want Ukraine to become a Russian vassal and a US supermarket.

Some will object: "What about Prime Ministers Orban and Fico?" Well, if they refuse to support a strong European stance, the other twenty-five should make a political statement. The world will recognise it as Europe's position. Yes, Hungary and Slovakia can obstruct certain steps later, but one thing at a time. I have often defended Orban's right to pursue Hungary's national interests, but aligning with the EU's adversaries is another matter entirely. A moment of reckoning is coming.

What about the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic forces more generally across Europe? The best way to counter them is by demonstrating that the EU stands firm in defending European interests. Nationalists will struggle to justify a policy of selling out to Russian and American oligarchs. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's evolving stance on foreign policy illustrates that even politicians coming from the far-right corner can adapt to European and geopolitical realities. Making this point does not mean that we should underestimate the potential danger for the EU of being undermined from within by extremist ideas and movements. But that is another story.

Redefining Transatlantic Ties

Some will ask, "Can we afford to sever ties with America?" It is not us who are severing them; it is the present US government. This obliges us to forcefully defend our democracies, our societies, and our economies. We just cannot stand idly by as our 'closest ally' weakens Europe and undermines the EU, a construction that

[3] Here, the American attitude is not just revolting. It also raises serious questions. It is based on false figures concerning US and EU assistance to Ukraine. It also raises questions of unfair discrimination against European industry. In this context, it bears pointing out that Ukraine is a candidate country for accession to the EU. The Ukrainians themselves should remember that.

benefitted from the support of a wiser American political class finding the right mix between American self-interest and generosity.

Paradoxically, standing up to President Trump may be the best way to preserve the transatlantic relationship over time. Millions of Americans are appalled by their country's current trajectory. Many of them are looking to Europe for resistance and leadership. The more Trump isolates the US, the more its soft power will decline. America will not be "great again" but increasingly resented and even hated. It has its own structural problems: a staggering \$37.5 trillion national debt, trade deficits with every major economy, and an overreliance on debt-fuelled consumption. Meanwhile, BRICS countries, led by China, are actively undermining the dollar's dominance. Saudi Arabia has already begun accepting yuan for oil. Trump's belligerence will only accelerate these trends.

Europe should see opportunities here. In an [article for the Irish Times](#), Fintan O'Toole calls for Ireland to capitalise on America's turmoil to attract disillusioned American scientists and researchers. The EU should do just that. If some of America's best minds want to escape Trumpian America, we should welcome them with open arms.

An Intellectual Battle

Finally, we must engage in the battle of ideas. Geopolitics is not just about military strategy—it is about narratives, institutions, and intellectual groundwork. The American right-wingers spent decades laying the ideological foundations first for the neo-con revolution, then for "Trumpism." Europe needs its own

intellectual movements thinking about European sovereignty and autonomy. Over the recent weeks I have seen many encouraging instances: a friend who draws on Hannah Arendt to imagine a new European approach, a distinguished professor authoring a book about "Superpower Europe"[1], more politicians and people across the continent accepting that Europe must become ["Gaullist."](#)

Europe's *Zeitenwende* is here. The question is which direction it will take. It is up to us to shape it and transform it into a European renaissance.

[4] See ["Can the EU be a true superpower?"](#), our latest EuropeChats, with Marc De Vos, author of "Superpower Europe: The European Union's Silent Revolution".

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