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under discussion

Shaping Europe Pragmatically

“Perhaps We Need This Geopolitical Shock to Take Some Bold Steps”

European Policy in Times of Crisis and the Future of the EU beyond the Left and Right-wing Populists

An Interview with Lars Hänsel

Lars Hänsel, Head of the Europe and North America Department at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, talks to International Reports about Europe's response to the Russian war of aggression, the new interest in Eastern Europe and the need for an EU with a greater capacity to act – and he explains what constitutes Christian Democratic European policy.

International Reports (IR): Dr Hänsel, what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word “Europe”?

Lars Hänsel: To me, Europe, and in particular the European Union,

means an area of freedom. I'm from Saxony and for me personally the door to Europe opened when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. I'm very grateful to be able to experience what we have now. Being familiar with the lack of freedom in the GDR, I particularly appreciate the freedom that we have in Europe today.

Moreover, I see the EU as a region of peace. My family experienced displacement and expulsion, and we constantly remind ourselves of what a difficult time that was. I think a lot of people now take for granted what we've achieved in the EU. But we shouldn't.

IR: You mentioned Europe and the European Union. As you see it, how do those two terms relate to each other?

Hänsel: All nations in Europe should potentially have the opportunity to become part of the European Union of course. This has been the case since the beginning of the EU: after all, Europe isn't just seen as a geographical area but also as a region with a shared historical experience and intellectual tradition. Manfred Weber, the leader of the European People's Party, likes to talk about the “European way of life”. In the 2019 European election campaign, he illustrated this by saying that in every place he campaigns in Europe, there's a church.

But there are obviously problems with this idea of an EU that is potentially identical to Europe: not every country wants to or is able to become part of the EU. Nor was any provision made for members to leave again, as happened in the case of the United Kingdom.

Geographically, Russia belongs to Europe too, at least in part. But the hope that Russia might become a state that fits into European structures in the post-Communist era has so far proved to be an illusion, also raising the question of how European the country is or can be at all in terms of its culture and values. Turkey is also a difficult case in many respects. And Switzerland, a central European country, has no wish at all to become part of the EU. So there will continue to be a difference between “Europe” and the “EU” for the foreseeable future.



Capacity to act, but not isolationism: The EU should be able to define and pursue its interests effectively. The more it succeeds at this task, the more attractive Europe will be to the US as a partner, says Lars Hänsel.
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IR: Something that many people probably associate with Europe – or associated with it for a long time, despite the Balkan Wars – is the word “peace”. You mentioned it yourself. A major interstate war has now been raging in Europe again since 24 February 2022, when Russia began its attack on the whole of Ukraine. What are the main measures the EU has adopted in response to this attack and how do you assess this response?

Hänsel: As I see it, the key reaction of the EU is that it has demon-

strated unity and determination. The war has brought the European Union closer together. There is a clear, shared understanding that Russian aggression must be resolutely opposed. That was not necessarily to be expected. There was an unambiguous condemnation of Russia, eleven sanctions packages have been jointly supported to date, and support for Ukraine is strong – politically and economically, as well as in terms of humanitarian aid and military assistance. Another point here is the fact that Ukraine was swiftly granted candidate country status. This united response is by no means to be taken for granted: after all, the dependencies and interests of the member states differ considerably.

IR: Something that has come strongly to the fore in recent years is the issue of security policy and therefore the question of the EU's position with regard to Russia, and also with regard to the increasing competition between the United States and China. France's President Emmanuel Macron has repeatedly spoken out in favour of a "strategic autonomy" of the EU. It sounds good, but do you think it really is?

Hänsel: I think Macron's idea is basically right. But the term "autonomy" sounds too much like isolationism to me. For this reason, I'd prefer to speak of "strategic sovereignty" and the capacity to act. The EU has to develop a greater capability to take action: that's the core of the idea. This applies not least to areas such as security and global trade, where stable supply chains and the availability of raw materials are at stake.

But it's important that this capacity to act is not understood as being directed against our transatlantic partners. Transatlantic relations are the foundation of our foreign policy. Our interests don't always overlap with those of the United States, of course – when it comes to China, for example. Unlike the United States, the EU doesn't view relations with China in the context of a global struggle for hegemony. But globally speaking, the EU's most important partner strategically and in terms of values is the United States. My experience in the US suggests to me that the Americans are better able to deal with us when we clearly formulate our own interests and demonstrate our capacity to act than when we are weak. It is important for us to strengthen the European pillar of NATO and achieve the two per cent target on a stable basis from now on. What is more, the greater our capacity to act, the more attractive we are to the United States as a partner.

IR: And we could certainly do with this kind of partnership in the current global political situation, couldn't we?

Hänsel: The geopolitical situation has indeed become more complicated. The BRICS expansion has shown that the West is under pressure and no longer naturally in a position of leadership. In view of this, we must not only preserve and strengthen the transatlantic partnership but also find our role as the EU. We need to rethink how we deal with states that do not necessarily share our values but with whom we can still pursue common interests. This is where values-based foreign policy reaches its limits. It's important for the EU to make attractive offers that take greater account of the partner's interests, too. "Smart cooperation" is the key idea here. This might be the EU's Global Gateway Initiative, for example – as a sustainable alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative – where we also take greater account of the interests of the respective partner countries.

IR: In view of the fact that many Eastern European EU members seem to have been more correct in their assessment of the threat posed by Russia than some of the Western European countries, there is now repeated talk of the EU's centre of strength shifting to the East, and in particular of the idea of the dual Franco-German leadership in the EU being obsolete. Is such a shift in power really taking place?

Hänsel: I'd be cautious about that.

Yes, more attention is now being paid to the positions and interests of the Baltic states, the Czech Republic and Poland, for example. They never had any illusions about Russia's aggressiveness. Here in Germany, this attitude was often explained on the basis of the historical experience of these countries: it was relativised or not taken seriously. Now we can see that they were right and that it's better to listen to what they have to say. But I don't see this new interest translating into concrete political influence in Brussels. There are institutional reasons for this, too. Poland is not in the euro, for example, so it doesn't have a seat at the table when it comes to taking important decisions concerning the financial architecture.

What we need are fresh European stimuli, not least from Germany and France themselves, of course. But moving forward, we must also involve the Eastern Europeans more when it comes to shaping the future of the EU. We need to take their concerns more seriously and breathe new life into formats such as the Weimar Triangle, a forum in which France, Poland and Germany cooperate.

IR: What ideas do these countries have about the future of Europe? In recent years, at least among the public here in Germany, the impression has not infrequently prevailed that Poland and Hungary in particular have thwarted agreements at the EU level rather than enabling them; to exaggerate somewhat, they always seem to have known exactly what they don't want, but have failed to develop a positive vision for Europe. Is this impression wrong?

Hänsel: I don't think it's true to say that these countries only know

what they don't want. In Poland, there is now a government that will play a more constructive role at the European level. But expectations of Europe tend to be different in Central Eastern Europe. They have a more pragmatic approach to European policy. In this connection, the question arises as to how far the EU wants to go in certain policy areas where Central and Eastern Europeans are rather sceptical about further initiatives, such as LGBTI rights or education and family policy.

But there are also areas where Eastern European ideas are closer to ours than those of the Southern European nations, for example. It's possible to build bridges here. This is the case in the area of economic policy, for example. The Southern Europeans have a much stronger interest than we do in transferring competences to the EU level in the social sector, too, and in giving much more weight and priority to the issue of solidarity. In Eastern Europe, they tend to share our cautious position.



I believe that in general, when individual Eastern and Central European states and their positions come into conflict with “Brussels” or the German government, the discussion this triggers often reflects a very fundamental question that we have to answer with regard to European integration: where do we draw the line between what we want to allow as an expression of culturally and historically determined diversity within Europe and what must be subject to uniform standards and rules across the EU as a whole? For me, the crucial thing in this context is that Europe constitutes a common legal framework. If the basic rules of a democratic constitutional state are violated, that crosses the line.



More than just veto players: Many Central and Eastern European states work for a more pragmatic and limited European Union. In doing so, alongside some well-known differences, they also create overlapping interests with Germany, for example in the area of social policy. [Photo: © Łukasz Gałgulski, epa, picture alliance.](#)

IR: Let's stay in Eastern Europe but go back to security policy for a moment. Even among our eastern neighbours, there are varying attitudes towards Russia. While in Poland or the Baltic states, for example, there is a very high level of solidarity with Ukraine and support for the country, Hungary is acting with much greater restraint. How do you account for this?

Hänsel: First of all, it should be noted that all member states subscribe to European solidarity with Ukraine. All of them condemn the Russian war of aggression and support the sanctions. Nonetheless, the historical experience of the various states differs. This is striking in the case of Poland: the country has been the victim of Russian aggression several times and felt betrayed by the great powers when it was divided up among Prussia, Russia and Austria in the 18th century, for example, or by the Hitler-Stalin Pact in the 20th century. Poland is not only marked by the Communist period and Soviet control, it also harbours deep anti-Russian sentiment. For this reason, the country today attaches importance to being very strong itself, not least in military terms.

By contrast, despite having often been under foreign influence, Hungary was never a victim to the same extent as Poland. So the attitude towards Russia is different from that in Poland or the Baltic states. In addition, Hungary accuses Ukraine of failing to protect its Hungarian minority. And Hungary is heavily dependent on Russia for raw materials and energy supplies.

IR: One issue on which the positions of Germany and some Eastern European states have repeatedly diverged in recent years is asylum and migration. A reform of the previous EU asylum rules - the Dublin Regulation - was discussed in June 2023 by the Council of EU Interior Ministers and is currently the subject of negotiations between the EU institutions. Roughly speaking, the plan is to reduce the overall influx from outside, but to distribute those with the prospect of staying more evenly among the member states. The reforms should make it possible for people from countries with a low recognition rate to go through the asylum process at the EU's external border and therefore not even enter the EU. Is all this going in the right direction - and does it go far enough?

Hänsel: There is consensus that the challenge of migration cannot be solved nationally. Ultimately, we will only be able to solve the problem at the European level. The EU is in urgent need of crisis-proof, effective and fair asylum legislation. A credible refugee policy includes more effective external protection. Both are important: humanity and regulation. This is the only way to preserve one of the EU's great achievements, namely the Schengen area with its freedom of movement.

The Council's recent decision in June is an important step considering that the discussion process was completely paralysed for a long time. The mandatory border process is also a step in the right direction. But, as you mentioned, the trilogue between the EU institutions is not yet over and we have yet to see which measures are ultimately implemented. As we know, political forces such as the Greens are already calling for

more people to be exempted from the border process than was originally envisaged. If you make more and more exceptions, however, you undermine the reform, and that won't get us anywhere.

IR: The European Union is often attacked by populists on the left and right and blamed for a host of ills. In its election manifesto for the European elections, the AfD (Alternative for Germany) calls the EU a “failed project”, for example. How should such sweeping criticism be countered?

Hänsel: To call the EU a failed project is absolute nonsense of course.

The EU's success starts with the issue of security: the EU is an area of peace, something that is by no means to be taken for granted, as I have already mentioned. And our prosperity is closely linked to the EU. The European Union is the largest single market in the world and is the prerequisite for us to be able to hold our own globally. Moreover, the EU is a judicial area from which many people benefit. Take consumer protection, for example: you might get annoyed at some of the details, but in principle it means that everyone in the EU enjoys a great deal of protection. As an example: when parents buy children's toys, they can rely on the quality.

So it's about these very concrete, tangible things, too: from travel without border controls and roaming for mobile phones through to freedom of establishment and study programmes such as Erasmus. It's not for nothing that so many countries want to join the EU. The European Union is a historic success story: if we didn't have it, we'd have to invent it. But fortunately public figures such as Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schumann and Alcide de Gasperi did the groundwork for us.

IR: Beyond populist blanket criticism: where do you see actual weaknesses within the EU that need to be addressed?

Hänsel: The EU has to increase its capacity to act – that's the biggest

challenge as I see it. To do this, it has to pool its efforts, which means to concentrate on the things that really need to be done at the European level, but then really do them properly while at the same time staying away from the issues that are not so important. Big on big things, small on small things – that's the motto.

The issue of EU enlargement is an important one. We need to address this. We've been stalling the Balkan states for a long time. Now we have a new geopolitical situation in which it's crucial for the EU to gain clout, not least through enlargement.

But this enlargement must be accompanied by institutional reforms that strengthen the EU's capacity to act. It's already the case that we have veto players who make it difficult for us to take strategic decisions. But the idea of institutional reforms is controversial: the Eastern Europeans are against an extension of majority voting, for example. There's a dilemma here: you have to proceed carefully, step by step, if you want to get everyone on board with the reforms. And yet we don't really have the time for this. We need to be able to make majority decisions quickly so that we are more agile.

IR: How likely do you think it is that this dilemma will be resolved?

Hänsel: My perception is that there is a growing awareness that change is needed in terms of the institutional set-up. This is connected with the geopolitical shift and the increasing pressure on the EU. If we fail to move, we will increasingly become the object of history rather than the subject.

And part of the history of the EU is that it sometimes took crises to make progress. The fact that we have a more stable banking system today goes back to the 2008 financial crisis. Perhaps we need this geopolitical shock to take some bold steps.

IR: As you mentioned, the countries of the Western Balkans have wanted to join the EU for many years. Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova submitted their applications in 2022. Should we process these applications according to the – sometimes rather technocratic – procedure we have been using to date and strictly insist that they meet all the accession conditions, or should these questions be decided on more quickly, with a view to the political message they send out?

Hänsel: Since the Russian attack on Ukraine and other geopolitical shifts, the accession issue is now being viewed in a new strategic light. Geopolitical arguments are becoming more important – as indeed they must. The accession issue surrounding the Western Balkan countries has gained fresh momentum; we're now giving these countries clear prospects. At the same time, the candidate countries certainly have to advance reforms, especially in the area of the rule of law – the EU cannot and should not make any compromises here. Otherwise it would be under threat from the inside.

The President of the Commission recently emphasised once again that the door is wide open to the Western Balkan states, and Council President Charles Michael mentioned the year 2030 as a target for when he could imagine both sides being ready for membership. I think it's risky to set a date since it carries the risk of new frustrations. The main thing is to help the candidate countries make rapid progress on reforms. They need a realistic and credible perspective to keep them on their path to the EU.

IR: The European elections will be taking place in early summer 2024. Elections are always about alternatives and different ideas of how to shape the community. How does the Christian Democratic idea of the European Union differ from that of left-wing parties, and also from that of right-wing populists?

Hänsel: There are differing positions among the right-wing populists. For example, not all of them share the AfD's view that the EU should be dissolved and refounded. In principle, I see the right-wing populists as sharing a preference for an EU in which a minimum of sovereignty is transferred and the sovereign nation states are the pivotal actors. Joint action is then limited to a few areas.

By contrast, the Christian Democratic approach is to strike a sound balance between shared European sovereignty and nation-state sovereignty. Subsidiarity is crucial in achieving this balance. Sovereignty should not simply be transferred to Brussels: there should be a precise definition of what everyone wants to do together – and what they do not. Sovereignty should be transferred if – and only if – this works better or if it can only be effective at all at the European level.

We regard the EU neither as a federal state nor as a loose community of states. The EU must have supranational elements: only then is it capable of acting globally and only then can it play a relevant geopolitical role. Unlike the left, however, we don't want to transfer further competences across the board, including on socio-political issues but also with regard to finance. Unlike the left, we don't want debt mutualisation. Unlike the right-wing populists, however, we recognise the value of the euro as a common currency that should be preserved and strengthened.

We're basically back to the question I referred to earlier in our conversation: where do we draw the line between what we have to decide on jointly so that Europe is capable of acting as a democratic area under the rule of law, and what the individual states should regulate themselves in all their diversity? Christian Democrats are in the political centre here, too.

The interview was conducted by Sören Soika and Fabian Wagener – translated from German.

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