

*Under Discussion*

# “The EU’s Normative Appeal Ought Not to Be Underestimated”

An interview with Olaf Wientzek, European Policy Coordinator at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung



Illustration: © racken.

*Ai: Mr. Wientzek, the US's withdrawal from international agreements, the advance of authoritarian influences, and divisive tendencies within Europe – some see this as the end of the liberal world order. Are their fears justified?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** We are indeed experiencing a gradual change in the balance of international power.

It is possible that we are in a kind of transition period towards a new world order. Regarding the examples you cited, three comments: Firstly, we must distinguish between temporary and structural changes. For instance, US withdrawal from international agreements is not insignificantly related to the current leadership; as such, it is not necessarily a permanent condition. On the other hand, the US demand for stronger security policy commitment on the part of its European allies is well-known, and will likely intensify. Secondly, the resilience of existing structures should not be underestimated. The coming withdrawal of a member state from the EU – namely, the United Kingdom –, has not triggered a domino effect on other member states thus far. If anything, the experience has acted as a deterrent. Since then, the determination to hold the EU together has generally increased among key actors. And thirdly, a change in the existing world order is not to say a collapse of existing structures and alliances. Despite all the crises, the collapse of the EU in the coming years remains an improbable scenario.

*Ai: You mentioned the call for greater European commitment to security policy, which is an important point. Many parties, not just the Americans, accuse the EU of willingly ceding the role of “global policeman” to the US, and thereby having little to offer when it comes to countering the erosion of the liberal fabric. Given its many internal problems, is the EU even capable of filling the gap left by the US's retreat?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Fully filling that gap, is - at least in the short term - highly difficult. The response must

vary according to the policy area. In the area of trade policy, the EU has performed well ever since the TTIP was put on hold: Free trade agreements have been concluded with Canada and Japan, amongst others, and an agreement with Mexico is close to completion. This area is simpler, however, because EU trade policy is a Community policy - i.e., supranational, and not subject to the principle of unanimity. I am a bit more sceptical regarding security policy: Much has been done in the last two years, but the EU is miles away from “strategic autonomy”. Here, the backlog is still considerable. This issue should therefore be one of the priorities during the next European legislative period. Efforts here are impaired by the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign and security policy, as EU member states must approve decisions unanimously.

*Ai: The disagreement between heads of government is one thing, the unwillingness of the population to support such decisions is another. EU-scepticism has increased significantly across the continent. Isn't that the much bigger problem?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Framed in such broad terms, I do not see that to be true. On the one hand, in many

(but not all) EU countries, populist and EU-critical forces are gaining in importance. On the other, support for the EU has increased significantly since the Brexit referendum. As recent Eurobarometer surveys have shown, the majority of EU citizens are not opposed to European integration per se, although there are significant differences between countries. What many citizens object to, however, are the priorities the EU has set. The impression is that the EU – which is a well-oiled legislative machine – regulates many details that EU citizens care little about. In areas in which there has been broad support for “more Europe” for years, such as internal and external security, the EU’s offer has been but modest. Both legislative and enforcement powers are lacking. Accordingly, a stronger role for the EU in these issues would be important. However, this cannot be achieved without a further transfer of national sovereignty.

*Ai: Stronger EU commitment requires, as you say, reliable partners in other parts of the world. Who do you consider to be potential partners?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Even after Brexit, the EU has great interest in maintaining a close partnership with the United Kingdom. And, despite all the current difficulties, the US remains an indispensable partner. Additionally, of course, there are the countries that identify with the value canon of the liberal world, such as Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, and the Mercosur states. The liberal-democratic model, as represented by the EU, will be increasingly challenged by alternative authoritarian models in the future. If we want our values to influence future international norms, we will seek to forge partnerships with those countries sharing not only our interests, but also our values. Such partnerships should be proactively and urgently forged with key sub-Saharan African countries that fulfil these criteria. In addition, depending on the policy field, all countries that support an international rule-based order, international institutions, and multilateral solutions to global challenges should be considered. This would, for instance, include China in the area of climate policy, although I am much more sceptical in some other policy areas. What is important is to support fora – such as the ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting) – that seek to maintain this order. If we move from the global level to the immediate European neighbourhood, Ukraine and Turkey must certainly be included. Further escalation of the economic or political crises in Turkey would have severe consequences for the EU. A successful political and economic transformation process in Ukraine, on the other hand, could contribute to the stabilisation and development of the EU’s entire eastern neighbourhood.

*Ai: Let’s dwell a little longer on the issue of authoritarianism, which is challenging the EU both from outside, and from within. If I understand you correctly, the current cooperation with authoritarian systems is a pragmatic decision and indispensable in certain policy areas. Nevertheless, the question remains as to how the EU should deal with authoritarian tendencies and regimes if it wishes to succeed in the competition between systems, and thus in the struggle for a liberal world*

*order. A satisfactory answer does not yet seem to have been found, especially since authoritarian tendencies seem to be on the rise even in some member states.*

**Olaf Wientzek:** You mention two different aspects here: The first is dealing with authoritarian external partners; the second is dealing with authoritarian tendencies within the EU. Perhaps we should first concentrate on the external dimension. It is difficult to formulate a universally valid rule here. In some regions, the EU can only choose between competing authoritarian states. In such cases, the balance between interests and values is often invoked, or that between reform and resilience. In the long run, I see no conflict between them. If we consider our immediate neighbours, I believe there will be no long-term stability without the democratic political and economic transformation of these countries. It is therefore in the EU's best interest to give its full support to efforts by Ukraine, Morocco, Georgia, and Tunisia towards economic and political reform. Much more should be done here, especially towards the countries in the EU's southern neighbourhood. I consider the narrative of stability through authoritarianism to be no more than a fairy-tale in the long run. In short, wherever we have a choice, such as in our immediate neighbourhood, we should promote democratic aspirations.

*Ai: From your point of view, what is the best way to achieve this? How can the EU convince its immediate neighbours, when these are faced with difficult circumstances, that democratic reforms are preferable to, for instance, a shift towards authoritarianism?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Despite legitimate concerns about the spread of autocratic rhetoric, the appeal of the EU should not be underestimated. The EU's positive track record is clear. This is often more clearly recognised from outside the EU than from within it. Merely consider the long period of peace in the countries of the EU. This may be an overused example, but it makes it no less true. The successful political and economic transformation process in the post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the Baltic States also demonstrates the strength of the European model. Of course there are also defensive reactions and problematic developments in these countries. Nevertheless, democracy in these countries is far more firmly established than in other regions of the world that are undergoing transformation – one has but to look at the post-Soviet space beyond the Baltic States.

We in the EU, and in the Western world generally, have a tendency towards exaggerated self-doubt in the face of serious problems. Ironically, this is even a good sign, since it shows that critical voices are not being silenced. In authoritarian countries, this does not happen, or hardly happens at all. I have doubts as to whether alternative models would be considered this successful. In any case, none of the countries of the Western Balkans or of Eastern Europe has yet voluntarily abandoned their European ambitions in order to instead join other trade blocs, such as the Eurasian Economic Union. Even Belarus and Armenia – which had to take this step under enormous political pressure – are sending strong signals of rapprochement towards the EU.



After every rain: The EU's success rate looks quite respectable despite drawbacks. Source: © Dylan Martinez, Reuters.

*Ai: Nevertheless, we are witnessing authoritarian powers celebrating unforeseen successes in Eastern Europe, gradually undermining the democratic nature and prevalence of the rule of law in certain countries. While these developments do not necessarily entail the departure of these countries from the EU, they do signal a dangerous retreat from common European values, which, in turn, may impact the EU's normative influence on the outside world. This is especially true if the EU appears to have no effective means at its disposal to counteract such dangerous internal tendencies.*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Your concern is justified. However the EU has not been idle: With the support of most member states, the Commission has responded to the worrying assault on the rule of law made by the current Polish government. Moreover, much attention is

currently focussed on Poland and Hungary. In my view, there are alarming developments in Romania, which are getting far too little attention. I also don't believe that the "old" member states are immune to such developments. In fact, the existing EU instruments for such cases have so far shown themselves insufficient. This includes the Copenhagen Criteria, within the framework of the accession process. Then there is the Article 7 procedure, which is being initiated against Poland and Hungary for violations of the rule of law. This can lead to the suspension of the country's voting rights, although such an outcome is unlikely. These instruments are not enough. First of all, the EU needs to address more regularly the rule of law situation in its member states, and not to wait until a crisis has already arisen. I therefore believe that we need, first, an annual review of the state of the rule of law in all member states. Secondly, we need the possibility of reducing EU funds if and when it can no longer be assumed that the courts are independent. The EU is also a legal community, not just an economic and solidary community. This fact is often forgotten.

*Ai: In your opinion, therefore, expanding the existing EU toolbox is a matter of urgency. Which member states do you think would be most capable of pushing for such reforms?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** Support from Germany and France would be indispensable. But it would not

be enough: Time and time again, we see that in a 27-state EU, a functioning German-French tandem is a necessary but insufficient condition for a functioning EU. Support from other EU states is therefore required. Belgium, Sweden, and the Netherlands, amongst others, have in recent months expressed support for some of these ideas, or for similar proposals. Especially when dealing with sensitive matters, the broadest possible alliance should be sought out. Some member states – not just Poland and Hungary – oppose such ideas. Interestingly, however, their reservations are not shared by all Central and Eastern European countries. As a general rule, broader alliances are necessary. In Berlin, we sometimes tend to focus solely on France. Certainly, France remains Germany's most important partner in the EU. But exchanges with and involvement of partners such as Italy, Poland, Spain, the Netherlands, and the Nordic countries must be intensified.

*Ai: Germany should thus play a more active role. What would that look like, in concrete terms? And do you currently see any willingness in Germany to make a more active contribution?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** First of all, as the largest member state and a founding member, Germany has a duty

to lead and to give fresh impetus to the EU – in a spirit of partnership. It is in Germany's interest to ensure the cohesion of the EU as a whole and also to resist calls for a rapid encapsulation of an avant-garde core.

Second, there are duties that derive from this leadership role. Germany should feel itself particularly committed to upholding the fundamental values of the EU. It is, moreover, of comparatively greater importance for Germany to comply with the rules than it is for other countries. Given Germany's relative size and power, any violation of the rules would lead to disastrous effects.

Third, Germany should further involve itself in the area of foreign policy. The other member states expect it. This means providing the necessary financial resources in the area of defence, but also mustering the political will to become more involved, also on a military level, with the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, for instance. This is a requirement that is not particularly popular in Germany, but there is no way around it if we wish to build more trust on the part of France and other EU allies. And without more mutual trust, there can be no viable Common Security and Defence Policy.

Fourth, Germany must become more aware that even domestic policy decisions have a considerable impact on our neighbours. German domestic policy is followed with close attention abroad. This awareness must give rise to the reflex of always considering the implications of domestic decisions on the EU as a whole, on European partners, and even on the Western world. This reflex is still partly lacking. For instance, the political upheaval caused by a project such as Nord Stream 2 can hardly be underestimated – no matter how often it is stressed that the project is primarily an economic one.

*Ai: And, in your opinion, is Germany really prepared for all of this?*

**Olaf Wientzek:** I absolutely see a willingness to assume more responsibility in several areas. There

has been a great deal of progress in foreign and defence policy, although even more could certainly have been achieved. The fact that Germany is prepared to pay more into the EU budget - in return for strengthening conditionality - is another positive example. What is sometimes lacking is the ability to better understand the perspectives of other countries. In addition, there are still a few isolationist reflexes to be found from time to time. This is apparent both from the debates about CETA and about the increase in defence spending, but it has also been observed in other policy areas. To put it bluntly, many people still dream that Germany could be a kind of large version of Switzerland, but from my point of view that would be very dangerous. To return to your opening question, if Germany assumes a responsible, value-based, partnership-based leadership role in the EU, I think there is a good chance that Western and European norms will also shape the world of tomorrow. However if Germany were to shirk this responsibility, it would not only substantially weaken the EU, but also greatly exacerbate the crisis of the liberal world order.

*The interview was conducted by Dr. Anja Schnabel.*

*–translated from German–*