

# European Pretense, Democratic Backsliding and A Decline in Soft Power

How exposed European double standards on democratic freedoms and its treatment of various crises, is both an act of self-harm and is one exploited by foreign agitators, crippling Europe's credibility as a bastion of democratic freedoms and integrity.

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**REVITALISING MULTILATERAL PERSPECTIVE AND POLICY SERIES –  
ANALYSIS**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, 2022 was a year of political tragedy, given the return of war in Europe. Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in February has killed thousands<sup>1</sup>, and displaced thousands more Ukrainian refugees across Europe and the world. Russia has become a political pariah in the West<sup>2</sup>, with economic sanctions and reductions in diplomatic relations from several countries. European countries, meanwhile, have seemingly returned to foreign policy favouring defence; Finland and Sweden have finally applied to NATO to join its membership<sup>3</sup>, while other countries such as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/11/17/the-ukraine-war-in-data-more-than-100000-russian-casualties-and-almost-as-many-on-the-ukrainian-side/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nato-pa.int/content/finland-sweden-accession>

Germany have pledged to completely revitalise<sup>4</sup> their otherwise inert defence expenditure, despite the fact that this pledge has yet to be met<sup>5</sup>.

On other challenges such as an inability to find a compromise between European countries and others including China at the COP27<sup>6</sup> rendered limited progress on climate change. And several allegations of hypocrisy have dogged European criticism of human rights abuses in other nations, notably with Qatar; for example, European countries regularly criticised<sup>7</sup> Qatar during the 2022 FIFA World Cup for its treatment of both migrant workers and the LGBTQ+ community, yet very quickly the EU itself was embroiled in a corruption scandal<sup>8</sup> that ruminated through the European Parliament aptly known as “Qatargate”.

## 2. THE DECLINE OF EUROPEAN SOFT POWER

In reality, the ability of European nations to exert soft-power diplomatic pressure on other countries has been decreasing for several years. Nations seem more and more willing to upset their European counterparts; for instance, neighbouring Turkey at one time sought EU-status<sup>9</sup>, yet now continues to have strained and hostile rhetoric with Cyprus and Greece<sup>10</sup>, has threatened to weaponize its migrant population upon Europe<sup>11</sup>, and most recently continues to object<sup>12</sup> to Sweden’s inclusion with NATO due to its domestic political concerns. The EU-African Union Summit last year also revealed how willing Europe’s African neighbours are to criticise European exploitation<sup>13</sup>, especially in the realm of patented vaccines and healthcare in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, while countries such as South Africa are still

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2022/explainer-proposed-hike-german-military-spending>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-backtracks-on-defense-spending-promise-warns-about-delays-ukraine-war/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bic-rhr.com/index.php/research/decoding-achievements-and-failures-cop27-way-forward-more-effective-global-climate-policy>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-lawmakers-adopt-resolution-on-human-rights-in-qatar-and-call-for-compensation-of-workers-families-as-world-cup-2022-kicks-in/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/4663bc9e-eaa5-485f-baaf-2a85dc0eac07>

<sup>9</sup> [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/turkiye\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/turkiye_en)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/6770231.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/03/05/turkey-threatens-to-let-asylum-seekers-flood-into-europe>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/why-is-turkey-blocking-swedish-finnish-nato-membership-2023-01-25/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/priorities-perpetuating-subjugation-sixth-eu-african-union-summit>

aggrieved<sup>14</sup> at their treatment by Europe for their honest monitoring of the virus variant.

Yet Europe continues to act as it always has, holding itself as a bastion of democracy and excellent governance whilst criticising others. Take the EU's High Representative Josep Borell's infamous speech<sup>15</sup> about how "Europe is a garden" and the rest of the world is a "jungle". How damning an indictment on European elitism are these words? How can you pretend to exert diplomatic pressure on neighbours that you call "valued partners" to their faces during a Summit, yet a "jungle" to other Europeans? Frankly, the core issue is that European diplomacy and foreign policy has largely remained the same for several years now. The tools may have different names, but largely relate to verbal resolutions and economic measures, both pressure and incentives. But the world is changing. Do countries need to rely on Europe when alternatives such as the US or China can step-in instead?

Beyond this rhetorical self-harm, agitators are actively undermining the status of the EU and European countries abroad through disinformation campaigns and propaganda. Russia has capitalised on deep-seated grievances against particular European powers in Africa, such as the development of the Russosphere social network<sup>16</sup> in French-speaking Africa that accuses France of modern-colonialism whilst repeating the official Russian propaganda position on Ukraine.

The complication for European policymakers is that the image that Europe is portraying, especially given that the language used by key European policymakers is becoming increasingly counter-productive, also undermines protestations of European integrity and honesty. What has changed here is that over several years, accountability procedures have caught up to expose double standards including corruption, such as the aforementioned Qatargate scandal, and doing business with oppressive regimes, see for example the allegations<sup>17</sup> of French-Italian arms being used against protesters in Iran.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8SKblpc7kY>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64451376>

<sup>17</sup> <https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20221125-iran-protests-eu-shotgun-cartridges-cheddite-sanctions>

### 3. DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN EUROPE

There are other trends that are also undermining European diplomatic soft power. Democratic backsliding, that is a decline in civil liberties and democratic markers such as the right to protest and distrust in the legitimacy of elections, has been reported in half of all European countries by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (IDEA) annual Global State of Democracy Report 2022 report<sup>18</sup>, with the some of the most severe declines reported in EU Member States Hungary and Poland.

These trends are not new. During 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 outbreak, under the premise of preventing the spread of the virus, EU Member States in addition to neighbouring Norway and the UK restricted political freedoms beyond what was necessary. Carnegie Europe summarised these reported<sup>19</sup> violations of civil liberties within EU Member States, that included detentions, intimidation, excessive use of force, and harassment. Occasionally measures were implemented in defiance of legal opinion. For example, in France<sup>20</sup>, protests remained banned despite allowing cultural gatherings, a contradiction that was classed as unjustifiable on legal grounds by the Council of State. In other contexts, such as Poland and the UK, excessive force and measures were used against protesters that would have encouraged spreading of the virus, such as kettling and detentions against anti-abortion protesters in Poland<sup>21</sup>, and the removal of facemasks by police in the UK<sup>22</sup> during Black Lives Matter protests. How can Europe be seen as the democratic ideal, when on one hand French police are using tear gas against feminist protesters on International Women's Day<sup>23</sup>, and on the other Finnish police were pepper spraying climate protesters at close range<sup>24</sup>? The global reach of the internet, and the access that a global audience has to videos and images of political violations, has never been higher, and with each new outrage, the credibility of democratic advocates in governmental positions is weakened.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://idea.int/democracytracker/gsod-report-2022>

<sup>19</sup> <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/01/27/europeans-right-to-protest-under-threat-pub-83735>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

#### 4. INCONSISTENCY IN RESPONSE TO CRISES

Frankly, democracy is under attack, both from outside sources such as Russian aggression, but from these internal, self-inflicted contradictions. The legitimacy of both national governments and the European institutions themselves is consequently being challenged repeatedly. There is no reason to presume that these trends will not continue into 2023 and beyond. Russia's war will continue and will continually require robust responses from Europe to challenge this aggression. In terms of providing weapons and arms, Europe has been successful. In fact, Europe's response<sup>25</sup> to the refugee influx from Ukraine was unprecedented in terms of how many people European nations were willing to accommodate, and this is laudable and justified.

The problem is that the European response to Russia and Ukraine in terms of arms provision, economic sanctions and refugee accommodation is the exception, and not the rule in terms of European foreign policy. Europe has not responded to successive crises in its other neighbouring regions, such as Sudan or Libya, with the same robustness<sup>26</sup>. And there is a clear distinction<sup>27</sup> between the treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to those that arrive from Africa and the Middle East. Additionally, further afield in Afghanistan, a context in which many European countries were heavily invested for several years, with the return of the Taliban, Europe has largely been unable to react. The promises of the Taliban to uphold certain women's rights, for instance, have been systematically broken and restricted<sup>28</sup> and Europe has failed to hold them accountable for this.

#### 5. CONCLUSION: A WORRYING PROGNOSIS

In sum, several trends paint a difficult picture for European foreign policy. Flagrant hypocrisy between rhetoric and practice, as well as selective treatment of crises and neighbours, will continue to undermine attempts to exert European soft power to ease conflict and tensions. In order to remedy this, European nations as well as the EU itself, will need to use 2023 to take a hard look at their approach in conducting foreign policy. Words are insufficient, and direct actions need to happen.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2022/10/14/ukrainian-refugees-challenges-in-a-welcoming-europe/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/darfur-europe-systematic-persecution-journey-safe-harbour>

<sup>27</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-crisis-double-standards-has-europe-s-response-refugees-changed>

<sup>28</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/23/asia/taliban-women-freedoms-intl/index.html>

If not militarily, then through greater exertion of economic pressure such as sanctions and the like. Europe also needs to rapidly account for its own inconsistent domestic practices and ensure that social and political freedoms for its own citizens are not only preserved, but strengthened. To be able to regain global credibility on such issues, Europe will need to genuinely lead the way on advancing practices to give people space and opportunity to exert their political freedoms, and not just advocate for such things in a rhetorical manner. Until then, we can expect that the rest of the world will continue to turn from such European expectations, and seek alliances and support from elsewhere.

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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This project assesses multilateral measures being implemented by institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union and aims to find more effective policy to end conflict and foster sustainable political solutions.



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