**Europe at the crossroads**

On **Aug 26, 2022** [Atle Hetland](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/atle-hetland/)

As the world changes, politics and thinking must change, at home and abroad, in practical ways and in the way we think. We are today at the crossroads in so many fields, especially in Europe, where there is a broad existential crisis and a need for a renewal in politics, culture, economics, environment, social life, belief, moral issues, and more. We who have the microphones and ability to analyse and formulate issues have a special duty to contribute. Disarmament and peace are key issues in the future of Europe and the world. The Russian war in Ukraine has made this at the top of the agenda, with broad implications.
But let me begin with the corona pandemic, which froze our lives for some two. It made us rethink many issues about how we were living. Hardly had the main pandemic ended when we were unexpectedly thrust into energy, electricity, petrol and price crises. On top of that, the war in Europe erupted, notably Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a conflict that could and should have been avoided. As a counter-response to the EU’s massive sanctions against Russia, President Putin responded by reducing and ending its supply of gas to Germany and the rest of Europe. It should be noted that the success of Germany’s industrial and economic development in the recent decade and more, was built on cheap Russian gas. Most EU member countries and people believe that the sanctions are right, but they also affect themselves and in the long run, they also lead to Russia being isolated from Europe, whereas it should have been integrated into its economic and democratic culture since the fall of the Soviet Union (1989/90). We talk as if all the economic, cultural, political and other development and social problems started with Russia’s terrible invasion of Ukraine. But it all started much earlier, and the war is a sad scar on the West’s and Russia’s hearts and minds, their entire foundation.
The war is not ‘just’ war between Russia and Ukraine; it is a war about the soul of the West—and its economic and military might. Russia says it is about the Russian language and culture; the West says it is about democracy and values. Hence, the West supplies weapons and ammunition to Ukraine, making the West at least indirectly a party to the war. If the West had not given Ukraine and Russia the understanding that it would support Ukraine before the war started, the war would likely have been over quickly, or not have erupted at all, but this week it has raged for six months. It is late to say now, yet, when we draw lessons from it all, it must be given major focus.
Furthermore, I would like to underline that the West, notably NATO, the US, and the EU, should have done much more before the war began to avoid it happening. US intelligence had information indicating Russia’s imminent attack several weeks before it invaded Ukraine. However, the West slumbered in disbelief, or maybe it was deliberate, misleading their people, wanting a war as a visible showdown with Russia.
The current war in Europe is not as much a surprise as we claim it to be. A different approach between the West and Russia should have been applied since the 1990s, which would also have restricted President Putin’s geopolitical line since he came to power as president in 2000; first, it was more self-defensive, then more expansionistic. The West should have tried to understand his line about a Russian cultural and political sphere of influence, on the one hand, and Europe’s and the West’s, on the other.
Presidents Putin and Medvedev are both deeply Russian as well as European in their values and thinking, inter alia, because they hail from the city of Saint Petersburg in the west of Russia, close to Finland. A sincere dialogue that time, and onwards, would most likely have led to a development in the interest of both ‘world outlooks’, remembering, too, that they stood on the same side during WWII, and had many similar social development goals during the Soviet Area, a time when Western Europe developed its welfare states, often borrowing ideas, sometimes even ideology, from the Soviet Union. I came of age in Norway at a time when we still drew lessons from the Soviet Union, yet, also critical of its implementation of communism and the Marxist ideology.
Unfortunately, Europe reduced its efforts of an active dialogue with the Soviet Union and Russia, probably pushed especially by the heavy-handed Americans and their world leadership thinking. Some countries in Europe, such as Finland and the other Nordic countries were open to a dialogue. It would have been better for peace in Europe—and the world—if a dialogue between the West and Russia, and between the Global West and the Global East, had been given much more focus during the Cold War era
In my more youthful years, we thought that there was true dialogue and cooperation between the rich Global West, the Global East and the Global South. It took a while, well, at least until the collapse of the initiatives for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in the early 1980s, before we realized that the West kept using its upper hand and untrue international diplomacy, not being in favour of a more equal world after all. In recent decades, not only has development aid been reduced, but the multinational companies have been allowed to take enormous profits, not paying back to the people on whose labour, sweat, tears and sacrifices it was all built. Alas, we still seem not to address these basic global issues.
While it is true that politics is about economics and money, it is also true that it is about values, ideologies and superstructures. Politicians who talk about change and equality, a ‘wider sky’, as we sometimes say, are listening more than those who just talk about bread-and-butter issues, such as better houses, better pay, better health and better education, yes, the possibility of buying a Suzuki Mehran, a Honda City, or a Yamaha bike.
The world is at a crossroads in its thinking about growing inequalities, disarmament and peace issues. Much of this is evidence related to the Russian war in Ukraine and the West’s response. We must soon address these issues directly, not let them drift away and be talked about dishonestly. In future, the West, NATO, the US and EU, with the UN and all good organizations and people, must focus on disarmament and peace issues.
We are at a crossroads. It is not as much about Russia’s soul, lack of democracy and expansionist thinking. It is about the West’s soul and its moral leadership; the West must make sure it is on the right side of history, and that is not quite the case today. Peace and equality are values that must be defended. Again, we must make sure they are created and kept in the minds of people. They cannot be made on the battlefields, and not just through words against Russia. We need new, open and honest debates about what future world we want, in Europe and everywhere else, so that we can indeed live in peace and prosperity—and save our souls.