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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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# New Europe - defender of old EU values

There is a significant chance that the big jubilee, 20 years since the EU's largest expansion to the east, which is coming up in a year, will pass not with fireworks and champagne, but in a family quarrel.

The so-called "new Europe", which joined the "old" one in 2004, is angry with the pan-European leadership pretender Emmanuel Macron because of his attitudes towards China, and particularly because of the perception that he represents the entire EU.

Macron's advocacy that the EU should not look back at China's aggressive pressure on Taiwan or blindly follow the US in that dispute was the last straw in the long-term strategic disagreement between Eastern and Western Europe regarding strategic alliances and threats.

"When the Council of the EU agreed last year on the need for strategic autonomy, it had in mind strengthening our independence from Russia and China", said Czech senator David Smoljak, criticising Macron's conciliatory policy towards China.

The intra-European turmoil over the concept of 'strategic autonomy', launched a few years ago by Macron's France, revolves around the question: in relation to whom should the EU be autonomous?

The French president, in an effort to ensure informal leadership within the EU, after Brexit and the departure of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, considers the Union more independent when it comes to its traditional transatlantic relations and obligations.

## Ukraine as a turning point

Eastern Europeans have never been enthusiastic about such a concept. They believed a full partnership with the US was essential for the security of the EU but also for its economic prosperity, and that it was a necessary condition.

Russian aggression against Ukraine has become a cornerstone for building the future European security and political structure. In this respect, Eastern Europe, the "new" one, has no dilemma that the continent depends on a partnership with the US.

"Russia will not stop at Ukraine", Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said in Washington last Tuesday during a conversation with US Vice President Kamala Harris, and added that "all free nations must jointly prevent the escalation into a global conflict".

His visit to Washington, just a few days after Macron's return from a pompous visit to China, has been a demonstration of the disagreement of Eastern Europe with the policy of liberation from American influence, of which the French president is the protagonist.

Until just a few years ago, this voice would have been much weaker, even underestimated, given that Eastern European EU members were not considered equal in "big" and strategic European policies. That privilege was reserved for natives in the EU.

They were often considered an area that still needs special attention from "old Europe", particularly when it concerns the functioning of democratic institutions, but also the economy and security. Russia's attack on Ukraine fundamentally changed that relationship.

## Post-war expectations

For Poland, the Czech Republic, the Baltic countries, Romania, Bulgaria and others from the eastern part of the EU, the relationship with Russia has always been a first-class security issue. For their cousins in the West, it was an economic issue.

The reluctance of Germany and France, along with the US, the UK, and Eastern Europe, to respond sharply from the first day of Russian aggression against Ukraine with massive aid to Kyiv pushed their strategic expectations for the post-war period to the fore.

While the East of Europe sees an unequivocal and complete victory for Ukraine, along with Russia's withdrawal from all occupied zones, the big ones in the West of the continent called for Russia "not to be humiliated" by future solutions, as Macron said.

Everyone in the East enthusiastically accepted the multi-year strengthening of NATO's eastern wing led by the US. The experience of living together with the Soviet Union in the same bloc has taught them that aggression by the big neighbour is just waiting for a favourable moment to strike again.

The US has tried to strengthen its real partners at certain global points so that it would not have to "cover" all zones of security interest by itself. They found a common language with the Eastern Europeans.

## Big differences in relation to China

Based on the attitude towards Russia, the attitude towards China, as a competitor and threat, and not a first-class partner, as it is often viewed in Western Europe, was formulated in Eastern Europe.

Eastern Europe has been gradually emerging from the dead project of China and (once) 17 countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which has been reduced to 14+1, with a tendency to further decline.

First Lithuania, and then Baltic neighbours Latvia and Estonia, abandoned this ambitious initiative of Xi Jinping, considering it irrelevant to their strategic interests, which have been oriented towards the West.

The Baltic resistance has a deeper root in dissatisfaction with a certain "hegemony" of the big Europeans, above all France and Germany, in the formation of the EU's common policy towards China.

Therefore, even in times of peace, without the Ukrainian and Taiwan crises, the EU was burdened by differences between East and West, between old and new members, and in relation to Russia and China.

They only escalated with China's aggressive pressure on Taiwan and Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The division follows a clear line of matching the security interests of Eastern Europe with the security and economic strategies of the US and, on the other hand, the expectations of the "old" members to maintain strong business ties with the Eastern autocracies for the period after the end of the conflict.

In this sense, Emmanuel Macron's Chinese tour has marked a dividing line where an intra-EU conflict would flare up.

This has also been shown by the quick visit of Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki to Washington as a counterweight on behalf of the economically and increasingly politically stronger Eastern European bloc.

At the same time, the head of German diplomacy, Annalena Baerbock, is in China, and in her first statements after arriving, she announced that she would support Macron's position, as common in the EU, and would try to reduce the gap that the French president made towards the US.

Upon returning to their capitals, they will face a difficult family debate over values and alliances that were once the same for everyone.