

European interview
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“Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a moment of truth for Europe”

We are witnessing a conflict in Ukraine that is unprecedented since 1945. Do you also see an existential threat to democracies and the European Union?

The Ukrainians are fighting to defend their freedom and their lives, but also to defend democracy and the values we all share in the European Union.

We are deeply shocked by this war. Russia is clearly a threat and in the latest polls a majority of Finns and a growing number of Swedes now want to join NATO. Technically, this would not be a huge step, as our two countries have already been cooperating closely with NATO for years, through military partnerships, participation in crisis management exercises and peacekeeping operations. Moreover, our military equipment is perfectly compatible with NATO's. Until now, however, there has been a lack of will to join, because the leaders and the population have not thought of Russia as a security risk for Finland. But no outside influence, Russian or otherwise, has any chance of influencing a decision that is ours to make as a sovereign country.

There is talk of «Finnish neutrality», and even of «Finlandisation». But what is the reality?

A distinction must be made between Finland's situation during the Cold War and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Finland has been a sovereign and independent country for more than 100 years and we never belonged to the Soviet Union (USSR). But remaining neutral while sharing a 1300-kilometre border with Russia meant that we had to be careful in our policies, and the West began to talk about 'Finlandisation'. Things changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finland and Sweden immediately started the process of joining the European Union, which was completed

in 1995. So we have always been part of the West, even if we are not, to this day, full members of NATO.

Do you think, in view of the progress of the troops on the ground, that Ukraine could come under Russian control?

I don't think so. The Russians may succeed in occupying part of the country, which would be terrible, but they will have a lot of trouble keeping control over these regions because the people are not Russians. They want to be Ukrainians, they are used to their freedom, they are used to being a sovereign country, they are used to democracy, and I really don't see how Russia could succeed in controlling them, in the long term and even in the short term; it just seems impossible.

The threat had been looming for several weeks. How can we explain Putin's decision to invade Ukraine?

It is very difficult to understand how someone can be so brutal and cross such a line. Putin is acting against all international agreements, against humanity. There is a lot of speculation about what he wants to achieve, but I don't think it is possible to know what he really has in mind. He published a very long article a few months ago in which he basically said that Ukraine should be returned to the motherland, Russia; and he has in the past called the collapse of the Soviet Union «the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century». He therefore seems to think that he has the right to force former members of the Soviet Union back into the Russian fold, which of course is not permissible or even possible.

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has just signed his country’s application to join the European Union. What do you think about it?

I am very much in favour of opening up the right for Ukraine to become a member of the European Union. Of course, this will not happen overnight, not next month, and probably not even in the next few years, but these people need a hope they can believe in. But it is not just that: in the long term, Ukraine would be a good member and the European Union can help it to rebuild itself, to adapt to the market economy, to strengthen its democracy, to align itself with the rules of the Internal Market and, more broadly, to meet all the requirements for membership, including our common values and the rule of law. It is very important to offer this perspective to the Ukrainians, especially now, in the midst of war. And, in the long run, I think it will be mutually beneficial, for them and for the European Union.

The European Union is regularly criticised. But Ukraine’s application for membership is indicative of its appeal to third countries ...

It shows how attractive Western values, such as human rights, the rule of law and democracy, are to the rest of the world, even if the European Union is not perfect, even if there are still many problems to be solved, even if we sometimes argue about «small» issues, which seem even more incidental now, but which are part of the normal functioning of democracy and plurality of opinions. In times of crisis, such as during the pandemic and at the present time, the European Union rallies around fundamental values that the majority of Europeans share. In recent days, Europeans have seen the unity and firmness of the European Union, but also of the entire West, on the sanctions against Russia and on the assistance to be given to Ukraine in economic, humanitarian and political terms and in terms of military equipment.

Indeed, we are witnessing an unprecedented mobilisation of the European Union in the face of the Russian invasion: arms deliveries to Ukraine, financial and economic sanctions

against Russia, the fight against disinformation, the strengthening of cyber defence. Is this also the beginning of a new era, a «change of era»?

This is indeed a moment of truth for Europe. Again, it is a very sad situation, but I hope that it will help us to develop the European Union in the right direction, much faster than we have been able to do in previous years, because we have to tackle the most important issues and do it together. This is a key moment to take further steps towards integration in areas of European added value, to give a greater role to European citizens and to strengthen their sense of belonging, to find a way to strengthen European citizenship. In the last seven days in particular, people have realised how good it is to live in Europe and how good it is to be a member and citizen of the European Union. Indeed, I believe that the conference on the future of Europe will provide a strong mandate for the European Union to take further steps towards integration in the months and years to come.

According to the United States, Europeans must do more to ensure their security. Is Europe ready to speak the language of power, to act as a geopolitical power?

The last few weeks have shown that the European Union can definitely speak the language of power. Within the framework of the strategic compass, the idea is to give more flesh to Article 42.7 TEU, which stipulates that in the event of a member state being attacked on its territory, the other member states shall render aid and assistance by all means in their power. This mutual defence clause has only been used once, following the attacks in Paris in 2015, and fortunately it has never been used in the context of a war. To ensure that no European country is ever attacked, we must also assert our strategic autonomy and establish a common defence union. On this point, Finland has been on the same wavelength as France for many years. Germany has just made a 180-degree turn by deciding to increase its defence spending beyond what is required by NATO and to establish a defence fund that will also be written into the Constitution. I think this is an excellent decision.

Europeans must also increase their self-sufficiency in the energy sector; Finland has rightly relied heavily on nuclear energy, as has France. Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, by exposing the gas dependency of some European countries, including Germany, could open a new page for the future of the Energy Union. Finally, we want to step up our fight against climate change: this goes hand in hand with greater energy autonomy, thanks of course to renewable energies but also to nuclear power, because renewable energies alone will not be enough to achieve our CO2 reduction targets.

You have been the chairperson of the Digital Transformation Working Group of the Conference on the Future of Europe. You propose a model to transform the welfare state into a digital sharing economy. How do you see the future of the European project?

I was happily surprised by the coalition agreement of the new German government, especially on European issues. I also think that we should start taking steps towards transforming the EU into a proper European Federation. This would mean pooling resources and increasing the EU budget in areas that need to be dealt with at European level, such as defence, the fight against climate change, innovation, education or lifelong learning. I myself have drawn up a proposal to set up a «life account» at European level, a sort of portable personal social security account, which would facilitate mobility within the European Union and strengthen incentives for employment, for improving skills and for the mobility of human capital. This will not happen overnight, but I think it is important to lay the groundwork now for a new European instrument, interfacing with the national authorities concerned, which can respond to new needs. I see no reason why we should not have a social security system in the future that is directly financed by the European Union, at least in part. Every European citizen should be able to choose whether to pay his or her unemployment contributions at national or European level. A personal social security account would have another advantage: it would allow the European Union to provide direct funding to citizens and thus bypass national governments to some extent, thus

strengthening the concept of European citizenship and providing tools to defend democracy. We must also apply the new rules on conditionality of European funds with the utmost rigour; these funds must not be allowed to finance governments that do not respect the rule of law.

Another project remains to be completed, that of economic and monetary union.

We must indeed improve the functioning of the monetary union, for example by introducing flexibility into the Maastricht criteria on deficit and debt levels. The debt criteria must give way to an individual assessment. But why leave this task to the central authorities and not give more room to the market? The purpose of an efficient and fluid capital market is to be real-time. Moreover, what Europe still lacks are harmonisation mechanisms that effectively counterbalance the different economic situations between countries and regions. In these areas, Europe could take inspiration from the United States, where there is greater mobility of monetary and human capital. It should also reduce the weight and risk of the banking sector and strengthen the Capital Markets Union by introducing risk weights for sovereign debt holdings.

Finland joined the European Union in 1995. What did this mean for your country?

Despite its difficult history with its eastern neighbour, the Finns have always felt very Western, very European. If you want to make comparisons with other countries, you can say for example that for the United Kingdom the decision to join the European Union was very economic, whereas for Finland it was very much related to security. Of course, it is important to be in the single market, but many people also see the EU as a kind of umbrella for security issues. Joining the European Union was therefore first and foremost a decision in this sense and it still is, especially because we are still not part of NATO even though we cooperate very closely. In return, Finland also contributes a lot to the European Union. On the one hand, it has been a net contributor since its accession, unlike the Central

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European countries which were very poor after the collapse of the Soviet Union; on the other hand, it has always fought hard for common values, human rights, the rule of law, which are very important issues in the minds of Scandinavians and Nordics. So, we have worked a lot on these objectives.

When the European recovery plan was being negotiated, the Finnish government shared the reluctance of the so-called «frugal club» - Sweden, the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark. What is the situation now?

In the early years of EU membership, Finns felt closer to Germany, especially on issues related to economic and monetary union. In the last decade or so, the Finns also feel close to France on many important issues such as energy, nuclear, defence and security issues, as they very much appreciate French efforts for a more integrated defence in the European Union: a policy area where Germany has so far been more restrained. But as far as the «frugal» club is concerned, it is important to recall some points. Finland is a small country, it is a net contributor to the EU budget, it is contributing €6 billion to the European recovery plan and only receiving €2 billion! and it is funding its share of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the rescue fund that was created to support countries

that are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing serious financing problems. But the Finnish economy has not been doing very well for the last ten years, our debt ratio has almost doubled during this period, we have not performed well, but we are financing the Italian debt! So, the Finns are asking whether this is fair. This does not mean that we were against the ESM or against the NextGenerationEU stimulus package. We just wanted to have a political reflection with the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Denmark to try to influence some of the criteria and we are keen to reform the Eurozone such that in the future, it respects the no-bailout clause and becomes less prone to crises.

8 March is Women’s Rights Day: do you have a message?

We must support diversity at all levels by strengthening European citizenship through our common values.

Interview by Isabelle Marchais.

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