National Interests Over Slogans

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published by Caliber.az

Summary

The European Union is once again talking about the need to engage countries of the "Global South" to put pressure on Moscow in order to hasten an end to the Russia–Ukraine war. In practice, such appeals are meaningless, as they are based on the false premise that it is possible to convince sovereign states that they misunderstand their own national interests. Both the EU and many other international actors would be better off not wasting time on such PR campaigns and instead focusing more effort on real diplomacy.

Contents

1 "The failed summit"
2 "Outside the box" solutions
3 "Dubious neutrality"

Against the backdrop of U.S. diplomatic efforts to bring Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table, calls have once again emerged within the European Union for more active engagement with BRICS nations and the broader so-called "Global South" in order to pressure Moscow. For instance, Austria's Foreign Ministry has sent an open letter to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, proposing to engage "global partners" in forming "a global alliance for a ceasefire" aimed at compelling the Russian authorities to halt military operations. The letter emphasises that "many countries maintain close ties with Moscow, which could and should be leveraged to increase diplomatic pressure on Moscow." Vienna believes that these countries "can convince Moscow to stop its assault on Ukraine."

The news outlet Politico, reporting on Austria's initiative, added the following commentary: "After three years of war and a failed peace summit in Turkey, some EU countries want to think outside the box to end Russia's war on Ukraine, even if that means engaging with countries that have either sided with Moscow or proclaimed dubious neutrality."

The desire to accelerate the search for a resolution to the military conflict is, of course, welcome. However, both the letter initiated by Vienna and, even more so, the way it is framed in journalistic coverage vividly illustrate the problems that prevent the EU not only from helping to end the war or mitigate the associated risks, but also from fulfilling its broader potential as a key geopolitical actor. Let's take a closer look at the quote from Politico, which clearly reflects the mainstream views of EU politicians and officials.

"The failed summit"

Let's start with the "failed peace summit in Turkey." This obviously refers to the direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine that resumed in Istanbul after a three-year pause. Amidst widespread speculation about the composition of the delegations and the agenda, their first round, held on 16 May, took place at roughly the same level as in spring 2022. This fact alone, combined with the absence of an agreement on a ceasefire without preconditions—which the EU countries insisted upon—automatically predetermined a negative reaction from Brussels and other European capitals. Moreover, the leaders of key EU countries, who actively sought to participate in the negotiations, were denied direct access. This, understandably, also negatively influenced their perception of the event.

> Nevertheless, by categorically labelling the meeting (which was certainly not a summit) as a failure, the European Union effectively distances itself even further from the prospect of playing any meaningful role in the negotiation process.

Firstly, after three years of such large-scale and intense fighting, it would have been strange to expect that the very first meeting would immediately lead to any breakthrough results—especially since the situation on the front lines does not favour progress at the negotiating table. Usually, relatively quick agreements can be expected when either one side is clearly close to defeating the other, or both sides recognise a stalemate on the battlefield. Neither of these conditions applies now, making an "all or nothing" approach simply unrealistic.

Secondly, it is unclear how such an unequivocal and uninitiated stance from European capitals actually enhances the EU's status and capabilities in these complex dynamics.

Therefore, if the EU truly wants to move away from the inherently unrealistic (if not outright Hollywood-like) formula of Kaja Kallas's predecessor, Josep Borrell—that Ukraine will resolve the situation in its favour on the battlefield—it should, on the contrary, cling to even hypothetically emerging diplomatic opportunities. No matter

how unimpressive the results of the 16 May meeting were, it would be logical for the EU not to block the entire negotiation process, but rather to try to steer it in a direction most favourable to itself and Ukraine.

Instead, it all looks like European politicians are simply trying to sabotage the process and shape public opinion in their countries accordingly, which only adds fuel to the fire for critics of the EU in Russia and the United States.

"Outside the box" solutions

Now, regarding the characterisation of Austria's proposal to activate cooperation with BRICS countries as a search for "outside the box" solutions — it's hard to call "outside the box" what the EU and the entire West have been unsuccessfully trying to do throughout these three years since the war began. From day one, Western politicians have been repeating the slogan of the need to persuade the "Global South" not only to condemn Moscow's actions but also to cease all interaction, trade, and communication with it. Or to convince, for example, China to demand something from Russia. One can recall how Emmanuel Macron grandly called on Xi Jinping to bring Vladimir Putin "to his senses" and force him to sit at the negotiating table.

> But naturally, all these calls have produced no results and could not have done so. That's because international relations and state actions within them are not built on slogans and persuasion, but on interests.

It's not a question of whether the governments of the "Global South" support Russia's actions or not. Rather, they do not see the Russia-Ukraine or Russia-West conflicts as their own, have no intention of participating in them, or taking sides.

Questions of justice in international affairs do interest them, of course, but for them (as for everyone else, really), justice is primarily linked to their ability to secure their own needs, not to abstract ideals of a "rules-based world" that the West itself has discarded many times over recent decades. Therefore, whenever Western leaders have called on their colleagues in the "Global South" to cease cooperation with Moscow or do something else to be "on the right side of history," those countries either silently ignored the appeals or outright accused the West of hypocrisy and cheap PR.

At some point, it even seemed that, faced with the obvious futility of persuading non-Western countries to act against their own interests, politicians in Europe and North America had come to terms with reality and stopped wasting their own and others' time.

But apparently, that is not quite the case. Now, deceiving themselves that they are searching for “outside the box” solutions, European officials and journalists have suddenly returned to the same old slogans.

True, the Austrian Foreign Minister now deliberately highlights the need to consider the interests of BRICS countries and the “Global South.” But it remains unclear how, in practice, these interests can be taken into account in the context of the newly voiced calls. How does this align with the still categorical and unequivocal stance demanding pressure on Moscow—a pressure that BRICS countries are expected, by definition, to accept? In other words, it all still looks like little more than a rather unrefined PR campaign rather than serious diplomacy aimed at genuinely seeking resolutions that take into account the complex intertwining of various interests.

“Dubious neutrality”

The lack of serious and respectful consideration for the interests of BRICS countries and the entire “Global South” is also evident in phrases like “dubious neutrality.” Yes, this wording comes from Politico journalists, not the governments of EU member states. But it only takes a bit of off-camera conversation with European officials to notice that such assessments reflect the worldview of most of them.

Unfortunately, the very idea that someone’s neutrality can be deemed “dubious” simply because it doesn’t align with your own notion of what is appropriate says a lot. Substantively, this idea is completely meaningless, yet it accurately reflects the political mindset of those who hold it and explains their behaviour.

> In most EU countries, the legitimacy of non-Western (and Western too!) nations to define their own national interests and consistently pursue them—especially when these contradict the dominant liberal mainstream—has still not been accepted.

And this is the main problem—without solving it, there will be no progress, neither for the EU nor for the entire West, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. It is also a key existential challenge for the European Union itself. If it fails to address this issue, all talk of a united Europe as a major geopolitical actor—whose opinions and interests should be respected worldwide—will remain just talk. Because in a transforming world, which increasingly resembles less and less the “unipolar moment” of the 1990s, no one can be convinced by catchy slogans or even one-sided pressure.

Both with partners and opponents, it is necessary to relearn how to engage based on the recognition of the mutual legitimacy of interests and perceptions of threats. This, of course, applies not only to the EU. The example of Washington's relations with Latin American countries clearly shows how difficult it is for the new U.S. administration to abandon the familiar unilateral and often ultimatums-based approaches that disregard even the basic interests of counterparties. Similar examples can, of course, be found in Russia's policies as well.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations