30 YEARS AFTER THE “FALL OF THE WALL”: ASPIRATIONS, ILLUSIONS, HARSH REALITIES AND THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION’S STRATEGIC STANDING

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On December 10, 1948, shattered by the horrors of World War II, the international community adopted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Of the United Nations’ fifty-eight member states, forty-eight voted in favor of the declaration, eight abstained (the Soviet Union and its East European allies plus Saudi Arabia), and two did not vote. The world was far less liberal in 1948 than it is today, and the concept of human rights wasn’t popular with the global public. Nevertheless, it would hardly raise an eyebrow were one to speculate that if the Universal Declaration of 1948 came up for a vote in the UN tomorrow, the chances of it being approved would be very slim. The fate of the Global Compact for Migration is the most recent setback lending credence to such speculation. ¹

¹ On 19 December 2018, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed the Global Compact of Migration through a vote. 152 countries voted in favor of the resolution to endorse it, while the United States, Hungary, Israel, Czech Republic and Poland voted against it. 12 countries abstained from the vote.  https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Compact_for_Migration
In 1948, the liberal order was a normative horizon; today it is a contested hegemony. As for the European Union, how should it speak, how should it justify its policies in a world in which other global powers wield national-interest rhetoric like a cudgel and any reference to universal values is attacked and lampooned as either a front for geopolitical interests or an expression of irrelevance, is a critical question?

In Brussels’ image of itself as Luuk van Middelaar has rightly observed “two fundamental ideas have become entwined: Europe as a peace project and Europe as a power project. As a peace project its task is to dissolve the nations, to breach state sovereignty, to take the first step towards world peace, as Europe. As a power project it is to bind the nations into a single whole, to combine their capacity to act and thereby defend their common interests in the world. As a peace project, Europe is “above all a moral act”, requiring idealism and openness to reconciliation. As a power project, Europe is a political act, requiring a redefinition of self-interest, political will and decisiveness.”

History had other plans for Europe. And at the end the Europeans felt betrayed in their hope that economic interdependence could become the foundation for Europe’s security and that hard military power is something of the past.

Instead, the last decade (2009-2019) was marked by four fundamental crises: the euro crisis; the Ukrainian crisis; Brexit and the refugee crisis. These have dramatically challenged Europe both as a peace project and as a power project.

THE RISE, DECLINE AND THE BETRAYAL OF THE LIBERAL ORDER

In April 2017, nearly seventy years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the University of Toronto hosted a much-publicized debate between two prominent public intellectuals on the question, has the liberal order ended?2

The answer of the conservative history professor Niall Ferguson was an unequivocal yes, for two reasons. First, Ferguson argued, the major beneficiary of the liberal order has turned out to be communist China hardly a liberal paragon or patron. Communist China used American led globalization to built its economic and military power while preserving its authoritarian system. Second, the liberal order’s major accomplishment was the destruction of the Western middle classes, who were the major pillar of the liberal order for more than half a century. It was free trade and globalization that led to the rise of the middle classes in the Global South but they also led to de-industrialization and the squeezing of the middle classes in the West. In Ferguson’s view, the liberal order was nothing more than an intra-elite agreement to promote globalization, and the populist uprising in both the European Union and the United States that led to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump is the best demonstration that ordinary people in the West feel as victims rather than as beneficiaries of the liberal order.

The US commentator Fareed Zakaria disagreed sharply with Ferguson. The liberal order may be in crisis, Zakaria conceded, but despite its flaws, we are better off with it than without it. He went on to argue that its success in significantly reducing violence and poverty in the world shows

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2 Luuk van Middelaar “Alarums & Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage” April 2, 2019
Niall Ferguson versus Fareed Zakaria: Is the Liberal International Order Over?, Munk Debates, April 28, 2017
unequivocally that no meaningful alternative to the liberal order is on offer. For Zakaria, the failure of Brexit and the resilience of the EU are proof that while “the arc of history bends slowly and with zig-zag ways and curves,” overall “it is moving towards a greater degree of freedom.”

The majority of the predominantly young, liberal audience in Toronto found Zakaria’s argument more persuasive than Ferguson’s. In other cities in the world, however, those places where violence and poverty persist, people would have been less convinced that the world is moving towards more freedom.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the war over the political and intellectual meaning of the “liberal order” has been one of the hardest fought of our times. We must acknowledge at the very least though that during the first two post-Cold War decades, the liberal order became the means for establishing the idea of the rule of law on a global scale. The post-Cold War version of the liberal order was characterized by four basic assumptions, none of which were contested by the major powers. First, free trade is beneficial and economic interdependence is a source of security; second, individuals have rights simply by the fact of being human; third, democracy is as distinctive a feature of our world as air travel and the Internet; and fourth, existing international institutions provide a functional framework for resolving trade and political disputes without the use of force. The decreasing importance of national borders was also an element of the consensus on which the liberal order in the post-Cold War era rested.

The future of the post-Cold war liberal order was always a divisive issue. From the order’s very beginning, realists claimed it was unsustainable and would end when the US’s “unilateral moment” collapsed. For their part, liberal internationalists were persuaded by the socializing power of international liberal institutions like the UN and the WTO, and thought that the liberal order was resilient enough to weather a shift of power away from the West toward China. The middle ground preached reassurance: the maintenance of the liberal order depended on the West’s ability to preserve the rules of the game that were established after the Cold war and the strength of the liberal order depended on the absence of appealing alternatives to it.

The situation today is fundamentally different, because the four major assumptions on which the liberal order rests are being challenged intellectually and politically by states within and outside the West.

Illiberal states like China and Russia contest the West’s domination but do so by violating the rules of the liberal order rather than by offering a well articulated normative alternative. They used the fact that liberal hegemony was justified by the perceived legitimacy of certain American and European actions like the NATO war in Kosovo rather than on their legality. What is more when it serves their interests illiberal states position themselves as defenders of international institutions and global goods instead of offering alternatives to them. The support of China and Russia for the Paris Climate Agreement, for WTO and the Global Migration Compact in the face of US opposition is a case in point.

At the same time, liberal norms are being challenged within Western societies by rising populist parties and especially by the Trump administration, which has defined America’s commitment to the liberal order as the country’s major vulnerability in the modern world. It is unfair to put the entire onus of the breakdown of the liberal

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order on the unseemly character of an ill prepared President however deserving he might be of opprobrium. Post-Cold War Presidents from Bill Clinton to Barack Obama engaged in unilateralist policies and showed scant regard for rules, norms, institutions or the concerns of dissenting allies. The Bush administration in its zeal to avenge the traumatizing 9/11 attacks broke free from all multilateral constraints and disengaged from the fundamental principles of due process, prohibition on torture and respect for established norms of international behavior and cooperation. After some restoration on those scores by President Obama, the United States reverted to a staunchly unilateralist course that abused and alienated allies and undermined both the rules and the institutions of the liberal order of which it was the architect and the custodian.

Once the liberal hegemon, the US under President Trump has decided to preserve its power by overthrowing the liberal norms on which its hegemony was founded. As a result Washington has taken up the rhetoric of “America First” to justify its policies. In turn, it has redefined international politics as a zero-sum game. In Trump’s view America’s exceptionalism is at the core of America’s vulnerability. Donald Trump has made clear that he will be the first president in American history to scrap the conviction that America stands for a sacred ideal or an expendable idea. To make America great is to ensure that America stands for nothing uplifting and inspiring. Trump’s boast about putting America first is not inconsistent with his repudiation of American exceptionalism. That is because ‘America First’ means caring nothing for the welfare of other countries while angling to best them in international trade negotiations. There is nothing exceptional about that. ‘Winning’ is the opposite of ‘leading by example’. The latter, for Trump, is worse than a waste of time. It means training others to overtake you.

THE EU AS A LABORATORY FOR THE WORLD TO COME

How should the EU act and talk in such a situation, keeping in mind that the EU as a post-national political project depends on the existence of the international liberal order and that the language of liberal internationalism and multilateralism is the EU’s mother tongue? And how should the EU react to the escalating accusations of hypocrisy any time someone dares to speak about values?

In the beginning of the 21st century intoxicated by its own innovations, the EU tended to view its experience of peaceful and post-national Great Power as a laboratory for the world to come. Europeans saw themselves as the future and others as the past.

The illusion of Global European order established in the wake of the Yugoslav wars was dealt a fatal blow first in Crimea and then in Syria. Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and the West’s failure to prevent a humanitarian disaster in Syria challenged the major assumption of security based in interdependence and it promised further troubles in the EU’s relations with the new rising powers. China’s “eternal leader” type authoritarian turn after President Xi came to power and the elections of Donald Trump forced Europeans radically to re-evaluate the future of their model.

Europeans suddenly realised that although the EU’s political model was admirable, it was unlikely to become universal or even spread to many in its immediate neighbourhood. This experience is similar to that experienced by Japanese technology companies. A few years ago, these companies became aware that although Japan made the best 3G phones in the world, they could not find a global market because the rest of the world could not catch up with the technological innovations to use these “perfect”
devices. This became known as Japan’s “Galapagos Syndrome”\(^5\). Rather than being too big to fail, Japan’s phones had become too perfect to succeed. A decade ago it was Europe that was facing its “Galapagos moment”. It may be that Europe’s post-modern order has become so advanced and particular to its environment that it was impossible for others to follow. It evolved in a protective ecosystem, shielded from the more muscular, “modern” world where most people live. But after the rise of the populist parties in Europe it became clear that even the “Galapagos explanation” has lost its power. European model has lost its appeal not only outside of Europe but also for many within the European society.

What we witness in Europe today is a zeitgeist change. If till yesterday the majority of Europeans were optimistic about the impact of globalization on their lives now they fear the future of the globalized world. The initial euphoria of post-1989 born out of the fall of walls has been replaced by anxiety and demand for building new fences. Interdependence that was heralded as the source of security turned out to be the major source of insecurity.

In the current crisis of the liberal order accusations against the hypocrisy of the West plays a critical role and it has a structural importance. The West’s hypocrisy is real. Western powers do practice double standards. The US asks African leaders to accept the judgments of the International Criminal Court yet refuses to join it. Washington warns China to obey the rules of the Maritime Treaty yet won’t sign it. Similarly, it’s hard to argue with President Putin’s claim that the UN resolution on Libya hardly authorized the West to oust Gaddafi from power. But while one can be perfectly aware of the inconsistency of the West’s foreign policy practices, one can still tend to view its double standards as a tragic fact of life rather than the West’s preferred strategy of rule after the end of the Cold War. At the same time, there is room for a strong suspicion that quite often those critics of Western hypocrisy have been moved less by their devotion to truth, consistency and liberal norms than by their singular desire to undermine the latter.

Take Russia, where hypocrisy and double standards are seen as the essence of Western power, its way to rule the world, and where elites who once blamed themselves for being naïve in the 1990s now praise themselves for being masters of deception. In Russia, anti-hypocrisy rhetoric reflects the genuine disappointment of elites with the way their country was treated in the post-Cold War period; at the same time, it is also the Kremlin’s strategy for delegitimizing the liberal order.

**THE WEAPONIZATION OF ANTI-HYPOCRISY**

The widespread, growing criticism of Western hypocrisy is a distinctive characteristic of the crisis of the liberal order. “Tear off the Masks!” is a slogan with only limited appeal in most societies, writes historian Sheila Fitzpatrick, “as it operates on the assumption that civilization requires a certain amount of masking. In revolutions, however, that assumption is suspended.”\(^6\) It has been suspended in some parts of the West today. Through the increasing passion and frequency of their attacks on the West for unbearable hypocrisy, illiberal political leaders have been sending a clear signal to their populations about the revolutionary change they represent.

Tirades against the hypocrisy of the West could be heard in all corners of the world but the tar-

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gets and purposes of these tirades were distinctively different. The differences are particularly visible when it comes to the hypocrisy of the EU. Criticism of the hypocrisy of Brussels is usually popular with the proverbial person on the street, especially in the EU member states devastated by financial crisis like Greece, Italy, and Spain.

But beyond that, what are the sources of this hyper-sensitivity about hypocrisy? Is the problem power asymmetries that make relatively less powerful states and societies particularly sensitive to the big boys breaking the rules? Is it the tendency of the US and the EU, more so than any other global power, to regularly invoke universal principles to justify their conduct of foreign policy? Finding answers to these “hypocrisy questions” is critical because the accusation of hypocrisy is the most effective strategy for delegitimizing the current liberal order (bearing in mind that there is no other set of normative ideas able to challenge it at the moment).

If the British political philosopher David Runciman is right, the idea of hypocrisy has its roots in the theatre.7 The original “hypocrites” were classical stage actors, and the Greek term—hypokrisis—meant the playing of a part. The typical dictionary will define “hypocrisy” as “a pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess.” In short, a “hypocrite” is one who conceals his vices by masking them with sham virtues.

In her remarkable book Ordinary Vices, the American philosopher Judith Shklar insists that we should not be so harshly critical of hypokrisis because it is a necessary element in any liberal society, in any society that talks values. In her view it is also an unattractive but unavoidable feature of international relations. At the same time, criticizing hypocrisy is also tricky because in politics it is almost impossible to criticize hypocrisy without falling into the trap of playing the part one is also criticizing. When it comes to lying in international politics, says the University of Chicago political scientist John Mearsheimer, states lie to each other much less than we would expect.8 And when it comes to foreign policy decisions, governments lie more often to their own people than to foreign governments. Mearsheimer observes that, contrary to our usual intuitions, democratic governments tend to lie more often than their authoritarian counterparts. The basic reason is that democratic governments, much more than authoritarian ones, need to secure public support for their foreign policy.

In order to grasp the radical way that anti-hypocrisy discourse functions today, we should remember that not long ago the West was the most prominent critic of hypocrisy in international politics. Americans and Europeans severely denounced authoritarian governments for signing treaties they did not intend to respect and for proclaiming loyalty to values they resented. But while European governments were quick to blame the hypocrisy of the newly converted, they also recognized that the very fact that authoritarian governments felt obliged to deliver a “liberal dialect” was one of the major achievements of the liberal order. In his recent book The Iron Cage of Liberalism, political scientist Daniel Ritter convincingly demonstrates that the authoritarian regimes that were the most closely connected to and supported by the West and which invested the most in faking democracy are the ones where unarmed revolutions were most likely to be successful.9

The post-Cold War era was a missionary world. Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” was viewed as “an age of imitation” when the Western liberal institutions were the only model worth imitating. But for countries like Putin’s Russia, Erdogan’s Turkey or Iran, the age of imitation turned into the age of hypocrisy. In the last decade they have tended to accuse the West of the following:

• Being arrogant by imposing its social and political model as the universal norm.
• Using the language of liberal values in order to cover its hegemonic power ambitions.
• Being selective in its criticism of illiberalism depending on the economic and military interests of the West.

Turks are mostly outraged by the selective nature of the West’s interference in defense of democracy. Yet while President Erdogan gets furious almost every time a Western politician or Western media comment on the violations of the rule of law in his own country, he sees nothing wrong with instructing German citizens of Turkish origin how to vote in German elections.

The Kremlin mostly resents the West’s use of the liberal rhetoric for cover of its geopolitical interests. But with the passing of time both Moscow and Ankara have challenged the very claim of the West to present a universal norm that others should follow.

The hypocrisy of Western leaders, lecturing the world about high-minded values while actually being motivated by selfish geopolitical interests, has become one of Russia’s gnawing obsessions. The so-called “liberal international order,” in Moscow’s view, was nothing nobler than a projection of America’s will to dominate the world. Western universalism was just a false front for Western particularism. America, in particular, disguised the enlargement of its sphere of influence as an expansion of the frontiers of freedom. What the West celebrated as popular democratic revolutions were simply Western-sponsored coups d’état.

Focused on the West’s hypocrisy, Russia has fatally eroded the trust between Russia and the West. In the Kremlin’s view, hypocrisy is the skeleton key for unlocking Western foreign policy.

Alternative explanations for the West’s failures to live up to its own ideals—such as poor planning, muddling through, naivety, self-deception, and lack of coordination on the Western side—are strategically downplayed in order to underscore America’s principled bad faith. Unmasking hypocrisy implicitly attributes malicious intentions to the adversary. Distinguishing public justifications from hidden motivations is only common sense. But focusing dogmatically and obsessively on this distinction, as Russia seems to do, makes it impossible to arrive at any sensible policy directed at reducing tensions and rebuilding trust between Russia and the West.

By relying on the exposure of an enemy’s hypocrisy to justify one’s own aggressive acts, one can attack the existing world order without offering any positive alternative. But this is not a formula for a sober foreign policy based on proper understanding of the actions and motivations of the other side. Instead, it increases the risks of dangerous accidents.

The weaponization of anti-hypocrisy erodes the normative base of the liberal order not by offering an alternative normative order, which was the case in the days of the Cold War, but by hollowing out the very possibility of values-based foreign policy.

In this sense, it is interesting to compare President Putin and President Trump’s criticism of US post-Cold War foreign policy. Both of them are fierce critics of this policy, but the nature of their criticism differs. Whereas Putin accused
George W. Bush for invading Iraq for power reasons while talking democracy promotion, Trump accuses George W. Bush of invading Iraq for a self-delusional idea—liberating the Iraqi people—instead of simply grabbing Iraqi oil.

THE EU AS A MONASTERY

What should be the policy of any state actor that wants to preserve the normative power of the liberal values in a world in which illiberal great powers have weaponized “Western hypocrisy” and the current American administration considers the language of values to be a sign of stupidity and weakness? How should the EU act and speak in this new world?

The strategy most popular with European leaders today is to ignore the illiberal turn, to treat it as an aberration and wait for America to make a u-turn back to its liberal self once Trump is out of office and to bet on the exhaustion of the attractiveness of the illiberal actors. This strategy is a risky one. There are many reasons to believe that even after Trump leaves office, the US will not embrace its role as the leader of the liberal world and the guarantor of the liberal system.

What is even more important, the US would face many constraints playing this role because in the eyes of many Trump has severely damaged the American brand. As a 2019 survey commissioned by ECFR indicates, the US is perceived as a security threat rather than as an ally by a sizable part of European societies. More Germans and Austrians fear the US than Russia or China. Staying out of the Great Power competition is the secret desire of the majority of Europeans.

The problem is that the European Union is too big to be Switzerland of the global world while at the same time Europe is squeezed between its desire to preserve US’ security guarantees and its unwillingness to confront China. It is indicative that while Russia is actively demonstrating its newly established strategic partner-ship with China when it comes to Eurasia, it is doing its best not to be seen as China’s strategic ally in Asia. In a similar manner the EU is insisting in its strategic alliance with the US in Europe but Brussels wants to be seen as an autonomous power in Asia.

The EU’s strategy for adjusting to the new savage world is also doomed to fail if it tries to turn itself into an alliance of 27 sovereign national states who speak the language of national interests. The EU can’t function as an illiberal project. It can’t speak the language of national interest in the way that a traditional national state could. Liberalism is the EU’s native language. And even the big EU member states are too small in order to exercise real influence on a global level.

In such circumstances, the only way for the EU to survive as a liberal actor in an increasingly illiberal environment is by turning into to a monastery that is focused on protecting the very exceptional nature of its political project.

WHAT WOULD SUCH A STRATEGY LOOK LIKE?

When the EU raises human rights issues in its conversations with China, it should make its expectations clear: it is not trying to change China’s attitudes but instead it wishes to preserve the EU’s own exceptional nature. In this sense, China’s behavior in the first post-communist decades could be an interesting model to follow. China accommodated itself to many of the global trends that shaped the post-Cold war world, but it defended the role of Marxist language and the Communist Party as the way to preserve its state identity. In the post-communist decades, China acted with the full awareness that some of the assumptions it has believed in had turned out to be wrong, but at the same time it made Chinese communism the defining characteristic of its exceptionalism. The EU should do the same regarding liberalism. We could be destroyed if
we act as a guardian of the status quo that does not exist any more, but we should make liberalism Europe’s defining characteristic, regardless of what happens in the US.

In other words, if until now the EU was very much colored by the idea of the universality of its values and institutions, in the future it should sharply stress its exceptionalism. If before it was proud of the undefined nature of its borders, now it will have to fix its borders. The distinctive nature of a monastery is that while it hopes to influence the world beyond its door, it is aware that it lives in a different normative space than the outside world. It is insulated from the world, and there is a clear border between being inside the monastery and being outside of it. To focus on the exceptional nature of the EU is the only strategy that would sustain the internal cohesion of the union while at the same time acting as an alternative to growing illiberal trends.

THE THORN THAT IS TURKEY

In the context of such a re-definition of EU’s foreign policy the relations with Turkey are of critical importance. Turkey like Russia was a major problem for the EU not simply because of its cultural differences but also because of its size. The EU is populated mostly by small and mid-size states, so Brussels was particularly successful to deal with small states. When it comes to bigger states the EU always felt threatened by the very size of its partner. The twists in Turkey’s 21st century politics were also of no help. In the last years we not only witnessed an authoritarian turn in Turkey’s domestic politics but we also observed a gradual but steadily moving strategic re-orientation of Turkey’s foreign policy. President Erdogan has radically revisited Turkey’s geopolitical role.

Ankara’s growing and deepening rapprochement with Russia and the crisis in Turkish-American relations as a result of Ankara’s decision to buy Russia’s S 400 missiles are widely interpreted as clear signs that Ankara is on its way to leave the Western alliance. The move also accentuates its desire to be an autonomous regional power. Turkey’s run away from the Western alliance and the EU’s preoccupation with not being transformed by its neighbors rather than transforming them as used to be the case, makes us expect that Europe will be ready to use its leverage over Turkey. Mainly this will be in the form of its economic leverage in cases when its interests are threatened rather than in cases its values are challenged. For example Europe will be ready to impose economic sanctions on Turkey if Ankara tries to weaponize the migrants living on its territory but it will only criticize Erdogan’s undemocratic practices and be reluctant to sanction Turkey.

The EU and in particular Turkey’s neighbors will do their best to avoid a confrontation with Ankara but at the same time European publics are becoming extremely sensitive to President Erdogan’s attempts to use Turks living in European democracies as a secret weapon to put pressure on them. For Brussels it is critically important to demonstrate that it respects Turkey’s legitimate interests but it does not view Erdogan’s government as the representative of Turkey’s eternal interests. In this sense intensifying relations not so much with the opposition but with the centers of power held by opposition/relations with the mayors of the opposition controlled big cities/ is a critical element of the EU’s future Turkey strategy. Many Europeans fear that Turkey has simply turned its back on Europe but this should not be the assumption that will shape Brussels’ policies.

IN CONCLUSION

The EU should define itself as a monastery within the world of sin, a monastery that is economically and even militarily powerful enough to preserve its autonomous role and way of life, but
one that tries to transform others only through the example of its very existence. But we should also not forget that a monastery is a missionary waiting for its time to come. The climate policy and EU’s determination to become a global leader when it comes to it could be crucial in Brussels’ effort not only to preserve but also to re-define its soft power.