European Soft Power after Gaza

17 NOVEMBER 2024
Jonas Pfeufer

After the war is estimated to have killed over 40.000 People and counting, many European Countries still fail to criticise Israel and call for a ceasefire. The Director of the Global Public Policy Institute, Thorsten Benner, once said that European Soft Power will be weakened through it's selectiveness and incoherence in the positions taken in this conflict and will lead to a loss in reputation in big parts of the local population. This brief argues that the incoherences in EU countries' foreign policy will hinder Europe's ability to wage the tool of diplomacy in the future.

1. The concept of Soft Power

Political Scientists distinguish between soft and hard power. Soft power describes achieving your aims by co-opting foreigners or foreign countries by the attractiveness of your values, practices or ideas. The EU is an example for the use of soft power, since the European Union attracts people and countries through European Values and a common European Identity. Josep Borell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, argued that the main influence of the European Union lies in it's soft power.

One example for loss of soft power was the Iraq war. The reputation of the US and the UK took a hit after the decision to invade Iraq. Because of the negative perception due to the decision of going to war, the US and UK suffered in public opinion polls and it became harder to influence events in that region.

2. Europe and the war on Gaza

As it is known, during the terrorist attack on October 7th 2023, Hamas murdered over 1000 Israelis and taking dozens of hostages. Subsequently, European Countries came together and condemned Hamas for it's unjustifiable act. Across the EU, many leaders offered solidarity to Israel. For example, Emmanuel Macron of France condemned the attack after talking with Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas and offered Israel his Solidarity. Other European leaders issued similar statements. At one point, the leadership of Israel and Hamas had arrest warrants issued against them by Karim Kahn, the ICC Prosecutor. The charges against Israel included Starvation of civilians as a method of warfare and Extermination and/or murder. In

Europe, some countries remained silent, while France or Spain confirmed their support for an independent ICC.

No states beyond Spain, Norway and Ireland chose to take concrete actions towards recognizing an independent Palestine. Accusations of double standards are coming from the UN Human Rights Chief, emerging states. In February 2024, more than 800 Western Officials criticised their governments in a statement for ignoring their advice regarding Gaza and one of the arguments was that governments should stop : "[...] asserting to the public that there is a strategic and defensible rationale behind the Israeli operation and that supporting it is in our countries interests."

3. Conclusion

To conclude this article, the Division between Member States is also unhelpful for the vision of a "geopolitical Europe". Countries like Hungary, Austria and Germany basically gave Israel a carte blanche, with Germany still supplying weapons for one the most destructive military campaigns in history, while Spain, Belgium and France criticised Israel in many aspects and called for a ceasefire. Therefore, not only the standing of member states is damaged but also the standing of the European Union will suffer in a time when the situation calls for unity.