

Rutte's Apology or Borrell's Analogy Europe's Choices For 21st Century

An apology issued by the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, for Netherlands' involvement in trans-Atlantic slave trade has brought back the issue of Europe's imperial past into discussion. Speaking at the National Archives in Hague on 19th December, he said, "For centuries under Dutch state authority, human dignity was violated in the most horrific way possible [...] For that I offer the apologies of the Dutch government."^[1]

Contrast his statement with one made by another European leader, Josep Borrell – the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. On 13th October, 2022, he said, "Europe is a garden [of political freedom, economic prosperity, and social cohesion] [...] Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden."^[2] He was addressing a cohort of 40 young diplomats at the European Diplomatic Academy.

The two statements signify two separate and opposite views of how Europe sees itself with respect to the world at large. These contrasting positions also show the younger generation of Europeans two different ways to interact with the people from erstwhile colonised territories. While the choice to pursue either of the opinion is that for the Europeans to make, there is one thing for sure – the path taken will determine European government's ability to garner cooperation and support from the governments and people of global South in dealing with the challenges they face.

The Problem with Garden-Jungle Analogy

The October speech is not the first time when Borrell used the garden-jungle analogy, nor is he the first person to do so. In an earlier press statement, issued on 25 Feb, 2022, he asserted, "If the United Nations does not condemn what Russia is doing then it is the law of the jungle."^[3] Writing for the *WION* later that month he argued, "With his [Putin's] choice to bring war back to Europe, we see the return of the "law of the jungle" where might makes right."^[4] In September this year at the UN Security Council, while discussing the issue of peace and security in Ukraine he said, "Do we want the global rule of law, or do we want the law of the jungle?"^[5]

In his address at the European Diplomatic Academy, Borrell invoked Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the EU — "People matter, institutions matter much more." Borrell wants to impress upon his audience that the "most important thing for the quality of life of the people is institutions." He is also explicit in his desire to finish his mandate as an institution builder, especially as he steers the EU during a "moment of creation." Drawing upon his decades of experience in public service, he posits that identity, rather than economy, is the "real battlefield" in the "post-Cold War [period that] has ended with the Ukrainian war." He ended his speech with the advice – "Keep the garden, be good gardeners. But your duty will not be to take care of the garden itself but [of] the jungle outside."

Borrell deserves credit for his pragmatic and prudent advice to the first lot of EU diplomats in dealing with a post-Cold War international system. He is right in cautioning that the European "gardeners" will not be able to "protect the garden by building walls;" in alerting the younger generation from becoming neo-colonial in their engagement with the world; in encouraging

them to engage more with the rest of the world and support “others (emerging countries) facing the big challenges of our time.”

However, his garden-jungle analogy is deeply rooted in Europe’s imperial and colonial history that continues to plague Europe. How is this analogy any different from colonial distinction between a civilized and its barbarian other? The civilized who own, tend, sustain a garden, and the barbaric, who are still in the darkness of the jungle. Borrell’s analogy brings out the most horrific memories of racial injustice, plunder, depravation, subjugation, and being stripped of all dignity that the people of erstwhile colonies were forced to endure for centuries. Such an analogy segregates the world in terms of ‘us’ and the ‘other’ and hierarchizes Europe as superior to the rest, who are rendered inferior. This mindset, however, disadvantages the West from garnering support from erstwhile colonies to tackle the challenges it faces.

Apology Cleans the Slate?

Rutte’s apology adds to a very short list of apologies issued by governments or monarchs of the West for their nation’s role in slavery. In 2008, the US House of Representatives issued an unprecedented apology for the institution of slavery and subsequent Jim Crow laws that discriminated against the people of African origin as second-class citizens in American society.^[6] The government of Denmark is another country to issue an apology in 2017. A Danish delegation, led by Queen Margrethe II, on their visit to Ghana officially apologized to the people of Ghana for their country’s role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the then Gold Coast.^[7]

The acknowledgement of centuries of injustices committed by the Europeans onto the people of global South followed by a sincere apology does not clean the slate. However, it is the first and an important step towards reconciling with past injustices and addressing present discriminations. As the Dutch Prime Minister said, “We are doing this, *not* to wipe the slate clean. *Not* to close the book on the past and leave it behind us. We are doing this – and doing it now – so that... we can find a way forward together.” Such apologies will further pave the path to carry out the difficult conversations around responsibility, accountability, recovery, reparation etc.

Europe’s Choices Going Forward

Peace, freedom, and prosperity cannot be achieved in isolation nor can it be preserved by secluding others. The views, language, and actions that suit one are not necessarily the views, language, and actions appropriate for the rest. This would only undermine the various institutions meant to better the lives of many. Reforming international institutions of governance to make them more inclusive, consultative, and equitable in their decision-making processes is acutely needed to address a series of crises – climate, conflict, public health etc. Only then the international institutions, that the EU’s foreign and security policy chief so proudly champions, would be able to address the challenges of today and tomorrow.

The path that Europe will take in its engagements, both in their personal as well as professional capacity, with the countries and people of the global South origin will determine the future of Europe. One path leads to healing old wounds, other paves way for keeping racism alive. The first path leads to combining efforts towards a better tomorrow for everyone, the second segregates the world in silos and makes it difficult to address conflicts and crises. The former helps gain support of several non-Western governments in Europe’s moment of crisis, while the latter condemns Europe to isolation and alienate most of the global South.

Europe must choose how it wants to engage with the rest of the world in the 21st century. One can only hope that the choice is prudent and while keeping in mind that it no longer remains the centre of the world today. The choice Europe makes will determine whether it moves closer to the dream of perpetual peace or towards the nightmare of total war.

Endnotes

[1] “Video & Full English text of Prime Minister Rutte’s speech with apologies for slavery,” Mark Rutte, accessed December 26, 2022. <https://nltimes.nl/2022/12/19/video-full-english-text-prime-minister-ruttes-speech-apologies-slavery>

[2] “European Diplomatic Academy: Opening remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the inauguration of the pilot programme,” Josep Borrell, accessed December 26, 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration_en

[3] “HR/VP doorstep ahead of the Foreign Affairs Council on 25 February 2022.” Josep Borrell, accessed December 26, 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/hrvp-doorstep-ahead-foreign-affairs-council-25-february-2022_en

[4] Fontelles, Josep Borrell, “Might makes not right, unjust wars are doomed to be lost : EU foreign minister writes for WION,” *WION*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.wionews.com/opinions-blogs/might-makes-not-right-unjust-wars-are-doomed-to-be-lost-eu-foreign-minister-writes-for-wion-457325>.

[5] “Ukraine: Speech by High Representative Josep Borrell at the UN Security Council,” Josep Borrell, accessed December 26, 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ukraine-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell-un-security-council_en.

[6] NPR, “Congress Apologizes for Slavery, Jim Crow,” *NPR*, July 30, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/2008/07/30/93059465/congress-apologizes-for-slavery-jim-crow>.

[7] GBC, “Danish Government apologises to Ghana for slave trade,” *Ghana Broadcasting Corporation*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DF5xBsITFMg>.

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