

END OF YEAR EDITORIAL ON THE EU, ORBÁN AND ... TEPSA

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EDITORIAL



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2023 ends on a positive note: the European Council has confounded critics by reaching agreement on the Commission proposals concerning enlargement. The opening of negotiations with Ukraine, which one Member State had threatened to veto, sends a message of hope to the Ukrainians fighting for their freedom and a message of resolve to the man in the Kremlin plotting the collapse of Ukraine and the undermining of the EU. The geostrategic decision of June 2022 to award candidacy status to Ukraine was not just a nice political signal of support but heralded a significant change. The challenge to make it happen remains daunting. But the political resolve of the leaders is unwavering: their message reminds us of Draghi's famous 'whatever it takes' words during the euro crisis. They clearly believe that the cost of not going ahead with enlargement to the Western Balkans and the East far exceeds the costs of doing it.

A word in this context about Orbán. Once again, at the last minute, he pulled back from the abyss of causing irreversible damage. He did block the MFF review, but in view of the firm agreement of twenty-six Heads of State or Government on the final text proposed by the President of the European Council, the chances are high that this will be solved at the beginning of 2024. Ukraine will get the promised money, either as part of such a deal or via an intergovernmental agreement between the twenty-six. In the end, Orbán knows that Hungary is a small country and that it needs the EU more than the EU needs Hungary.

Critics often lambast the EU for being weak in the face of difficult Member States. The truth is that there are no simple solutions to obstreperous behaviour of individual countries. The idea of solving all problems by punishing countries into submission or steamrolling them in votes on sensitive issues may look appealing, but it would go

against what we are. This can be frustrating, but it is to the credit of the EU. Showing patience, arguing cases, working tirelessly for solutions both behind the scenes and in official meetings, using the European Court of Justice to ensure the protection of the rule of law, all this is part of the appeal of the EU. One other comment in this context, concerning the decision to unfreeze part of the blocked funds for Hungary. The Commission concluded, based on a detailed analysis, that Hungary had fulfilled the conditions for the release of that money, and the Council agreed with the assessment. This decision has been criticised for being a way of "bribing" Hungary. But one cannot at the same time insist on the respect of the rule of law and reject its application when it plays in favour of Hungary.

'Brussels' is the exact opposite of what Moscow was to the satellites at the time of the USSR. It is sad to see a Hungarian Prime Minister compare the two. This is insulting to the memories of the Hungarians who died in 1956 fighting for the freedom of their country. It is also sad to see the government of an EU country run a poster campaign, replete with lies and half-truths, against an EU institution. Winston Churchill once famously remarked: "There are lies, damned lies, and statistics." Today, we seem to have "lies, damned lies and Hungarian propaganda". Stooping to such undignified behaviour is silly. It is also dangerous. Mr. Orbán would do well to heed the lesson of BREXIT: irresponsible rhetoric by political leaders can provoke a cataclysm and undermine the core interests of their own country.

The EU is slowly but surely growing into a new geopolitical role, and this fact should make us more optimistic about its capacity to manage the huge challenges it faces in 2024 and beyond. The EU may be on a path towards remedying the situation described by Henry Kissinger in his last book on "Leadership":

"Though Europe cumulatively was powerful, it was not a powerful unity." There remains a long way to go. We cannot afford complacency in view of the magnitude of the challenges: wars in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine, uncertainties about political developments in the US, questions about the social impact of the digital and green revolutions, a permanent migration crisis, burgeoning financial needs, and an EU governance that is underdeveloped and in need of repair. But there are reasons for cautious optimism, too. In each of the crises that have struck Europe over the past fifteen years, the EU adopted measures that we thought impossible before and that have led to more integration. In June next year, the European Council will adopt a new Strategic Agenda for the years 2024-29. It should build on the progress made in the past years and mobilise all energies in favour of a more systematic and voluntarist reform of our policies, with the overall objective of increasing Europe's resilience, its capacity to act and its autonomy.

This was the key message coming from our recent Pre-Presidency Conference organised by TEPSA and its Belgian member, the Royal Institute of EGMONT. We had outstanding panelists and more than four hundred participants to discuss the TEPSA recommendations addressed to the Belgian Presidency of the Council and to the European Council meeting of June. TEPSA has had a good year 2023. Our network is expanding, and we now have forty-nine members and associate members across the EU and in wider Europe. We are constantly developing new products to better explain how Europe functions and reflect on how it could move forward. In 2023 we continued with our regular EuropeChats, covering a wide range of themes. We increasingly use this forum to invite prominent personalities and experts to talk about policies and institutions. Over this year, we have issued four major European Council Experts' Debriefs where

experts reflect on a major theme that is high on the agenda of the European Council: the economic situation, the migration challenge, our relations with China and the all-important enlargement file. We have also continued circulating pedagogic videos on the history of the EU and on democracy in and of the EU and comments of specific policies and institutional developments. Last, but not least, we have revamped and modernised our TEPSA website and adopted a new logo and presentation. It is against this promising background that I accepted at our last General Assembly to serve another three years as Secretary General of our association, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2024, as will the ... European Council!

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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Jim Cloos is a high-ranking European official of longstanding esteem. Having taken on a key role in drafting the Maastricht Treaty during the Luxembourgish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 1991, Mr. Cloos has an intricate expertise on EU Affairs and the internal functioning of the European institutions. In the 1990s he served at the European Commission, first as Head of the Cabinet of the Commissioner for Agriculture, and subsequently as Head of Cabinet to the President of the European Commission and his G7/8 Sherpa. Mr. Cloos has been a close collaborator of High Representative Javier Solana in shaping the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. For many years he played a key role in preparing European Council meetings. Before his election as TEPSA Secretary-General, he served as Deputy Director General for General and Institutional Policy at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union.

