

2024: THREE ANNIVERSARIES, THREE LESSONS

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Twenty years ago to the day, ten new Member States from Central and Eastern Europe, plus Cyprus and Malta, joined the European Union (EU). Fifty years ago, in 1974, the leaders of the Member States created the European Council. And in the same year, a new network of institutes and universities across Europe came into being: TEPSA, the Trans European Policy Studies Association. Each of these very different anniversaries conveys an important message about the EU. That is why, on 28 May, TEPSA is hosting a public conference on ["Forging the Future of Europe"](#) in Brussels to mark the occasion.

The big bang enlargement in 2004 reunified the two halves of Europe separated by the Cold War. The EU added 20% to its territory and took in seventy-five million new citizens. In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania joined the family, as did Croatia in 2013. This was the expression of a *vision*: the vision of a Europe whole and united, of peaceful cooperation, of prosperity, and of values. Twenty years later, it is fair to say that, overall, enlargement has been a success. The "new" countries have integrated remarkably well and are no longer newcomers, they are normal members of the Union. They took part in the negotiation of the Lisbon Treaty that entered into force at the end of 2009. The economic progress since 2004 is staggering: while the average GDP of the entrants compared to the average GDP of all EU members was around 50% at the time, it now hovers around 80%. It is seldom acknowledged that Central and Eastern Europe has been one of the fastest growing regions in the world over the past twenty years.

Of course, this major development has not been smooth sailing all the time. Issues such as the rule of law and democracy remain problematic even today. Integrating so many different countries at the same time was

bound to create difficulties. But fears that their accession would jeopardise the Union's institutional functioning, fundamentally alter its DNA or put at risk policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy have not materialised. This should be borne in mind today when we talk about the accession of the Western Balkan countries and of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. There is no denying that the challenge here is even more daunting than the one in 2004. Negotiations with the Western Balkans have been slow moving; this is a region with a heavy historical baggage, complicated nation-building processes and relatively low economic development levels. It is also true that a certain "enlargement fatigue" in the older Member States has not made things any easier. Surprisingly, in a major geopolitical turn around, the Russian aggression against Ukraine has rekindled the interest in enlargement. The EU responded by offering the membership perspective not only to Ukraine but also to Moldova and Georgia, while at the same time recognising the need to re-inject dynamism into the flagging Western Balkans accession process. There are fears that the EU may have acted precipitously and without weighing all the consequences of this move. No one knows how the present war in Ukraine will end. The difficulties between Poland and Ukraine on agriculture give a foretaste of what may be in store as Ukrainian accession comes nearer. Making a success out of the new policy will require imagination, innovation and political courage. But the dice are cast, and it is vital for the future of the EU and our neighbourhood to make it happen under the best possible auspices. It is time to replace fear and doubts by a positive vision and to highlight the rewards more unified Europe can bring for the future of the continent. The Union has in its long history shown a resilience that few had anticipated. It has

mastered the successive existential crises encountered since 2008 much more successfully than feared. Today, the Union is more integrated and more capable of action than fifteen years ago. This is not a reason for complacency, but it is a reason for confidence.

The second anniversary brings another lesson: you can only realise your vision if you have *leadership*. This was the primary motivation behind the creation in December 1974 of the European Council, the body gathering the Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States and the President of the Commission. At the time, the leaders decided that they needed to be fully involved in the running of the Community. They also believed that Europe needed a forum where the Member States could discuss foreign policy and defence, which the Community had no competence or mandate to deal with, after the failure of the European Defence Community in 1954. Finally, some of them, especially the French, wanted to have a forum where the Member States were represented at the highest political level and that could act as a political counterpart to the supranational European Commission.

Ever since its creation, the European Council has provided this leadership. The Lisbon Treaty recognised this by formally transforming it into an institution and confirming its role in Article 50 TEU: "The European Council shall provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political directions and priorities thereof." Since 1974, there has been no major development in the EU without the active involvement of the European Council: it launches new ideas, tasks the other institutions to work out legislation, arbitrates disputes within the Council and endorses measures decided in the classical institutional

framework. As we have seen over the past 15 years, it is also at the centre of crisis management in the EU. The European Council provides collective political leadership at the top of the EU's governance framework. It has the advantage of being both an EU institution and a club of national leaders, which means that it can decide on the use both of EU and national resources and instruments.

Finally a word about the TEPSA anniversary. It also says something important about European integration; the latter is not just about institutions and governments, it also calls out for *commitment* by and involvement of civil society, including the academic and think tank world. The four research institutes (from France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom) that co-founded TEPSA shared this intuition. Today, we have 49 members spread over the whole of Europe, including all current Member States, most of the candidate countries, and neighboring countries like Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and the UK. Every six months, we hold a Pre-Presidency Conference with our respective member institute in the country of the incoming Presidency of the Council of the EU. We carry out projects on all major aspects of European unification, via our members and the TEPSA Secretariat based in Brussels. We organise a high number of well-attended seminars and conferences. TEPSA has over the last years ramped up its work in the European affairs space; we have created new written and audio-visual formats, such as [EuropeChats](#) (to discuss, often with outside guests, the major European themes), [European Council Experts' Debrief](#) papers following the work of the European Council, and [pedagogical videos](#) and [podcasts](#) about the history and functioning of the EU. Each year, TEPSA produces a [TEPSA book](#) coordinated by a group of editors on the 'Future of Europe', with contributions from

our members about the national views in their home country on a particular theme. One of our key objectives is to help bridge the gap that exists in Europe between the practitioners and the think tankers and academics. And through all of our activities we pay particular attention to addressing the general European public, spreading knowledge, encouraging discussion and gathering feedback.

European integration is an ongoing process with no end in sight. It requires vision, leadership, and commitment. The anniversaries of the big bang enlargement, the creation of the European Council, and of

TEPSA are useful reminders of this. They coincide with the European Parliament elections and the start of a new institutional cycle. 2024 is a pivotal year, against the background of geopolitical tensions, vicious wars on our doorstep, and multiple challenges for the EU and the world. We count on the European Council to show true leadership with the adoption of a new Strategic Agenda for the years 2024-29. We call for a fully-functioning institutional system. We want Member States to remember that they are an integral part of this system. At TEPSA, we will continue connecting all parts of society in building a strong, confident and prosperous Union.

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 TEPSA Secretary-General and a former 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.

