

A PRE-ELECTION MESSAGE TO EUROPEAN LEADERS: BE BOLD!

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EDITORIAL



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A recent public [opinion poll by IPSOS commissioned by Fondapol](#) (Fondation pour l'innovation politique) in the 27 Member States and the UK has produced some surprising (or maybe not that surprising) results: European citizens have more confidence in the EU institutions (the European Commission and European Parliament (EP) are at 57%) than in the national ones (national governments on average 44%, national parliaments 51%). It is also noteworthy that a staggering 77% of the respondents want the UK to rejoin the EU. These figures are interesting because we often hear complaints against "the democratic deficit" of the EU. It looks as though citizens are more alert to the fact that the European level, with its system of checks and balances and its dual legitimacy based on States and peoples, usefully complements the national levels, and that it brings added value. Commenting on the poll, Philippe Gélié writes in *Le Figaro* of 29 May: *"Big news: Europe no longer scares, it inspires. Far from being seen as this bottomless pit of technocracy in which States lose their sovereignty, it is becoming, thanks to the financial, health and security crises, the relevant political level on which citizens rely."*

This statement points to the underlying reason for the findings over the last years, namely that the EU has helped confront the major crises that have hit Europe and the world. Of course, it has struggled: it has made errors, been too slow at times and chaotic; but there is no denying that when it had its back against the wall it produced innovative solutions. This in turn puts paid to another one of those negative myths often propagated by the European bubble itself, i.e. that the functioning of the European Council by consensus and the requirement of unanimity in CFSP/CSDP as well as in some other areas like taxation prevent the EU from acting effectively.

The list of major policy measures over the last years is impressive: the creation of the European Stability mechanism (a kind of European IMF) and the adoption of a treaty on economic coordination (the "fiscal compact treaty") during the subprime crisis, the strengthening of the external border controls and the rapid development of Frontex in the migration crisis, the concerted reaction to Brexit, the adoption of a revolutionary Resilience and Recovery Facility (EUR 750 billion) and the recourse to joint procurement for vaccines during the COVID-19 crisis, the 13 sanctions packages against Russia, the massive financial aid to Ukraine and the use of European money to buy weapons for UA; and then of course there is the bold geopolitical decision to offer accession perspectives to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. At an event I was the other day one of my interlocutors complained that the EU lacked any vision. My answer was that if the positions taken in the Ukraine context did not demonstrate a vision, then I do not understand the meaning of the term 'vision'.

But that is not all. If we look at the legislative system of the EU, we see a system that functions well. It is worth briefly recalling how it functions. The Commission, defending the common interest and providing a high level of expertise, has the sole right of legislative initiative, makes proposals that go to the Council and to the European Parliament. These co-decision powers must agree for any legislation to be adopted. The ordinary legislative procedure foresees Qualified Majority Voting in the Council. Let us now turn to the Belgian presidency of the Council in the first half of 2024, the last one before the June 24 elections, where delivery was particularly important. In just four months, from January to early April, it managed, together with the colleagues from the European Parliament, to adopt seventy legislative texts, including in complicated

areas like the Green Deal, the thirteenth sanctions package against Russia or a new framework for macroeconomic policy coordination. One may object that producing a lot of legislation can lead to red tape, bureaucracy, and cumbersome rules; this is a valid concern and both the EU, and national authorities are well advised to fight excesses of this type. But any functioning society requires legislation and rules, and my point here is that the EU level delivers.

There is another noteworthy aspect. The study of Fondapol took place against the backdrop of growing populist trends in Europe and the rise of extreme right formations that traditionally oppose the EU. The Director General of Fondapol, Dominique Reynié, notes this apparent contradiction in his summary of the study. His conclusion is that the findings in no way contradict the thesis of a rising populist wave, *"but it appears that as the European elections approach, the majority of the 360 million voters are clearly in favour both of democratic values and the European idea."* He asks the legitimate question whether people have not misread the reasons behind the voting for the populists. Could it be that their voters express protest and dissatisfaction but do not overwhelmingly call for a radical break with democracy or the European integration process? This thesis can certainly find support in the trajectory so far of Prime Minister Meloni in Italy, who, at least on the Brussels scene, has not at all rocked the boat, quite to the contrary; and this explains of course the temptation for the EPP to seek some form of alliance with her ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) group in the EP. It would be naïve and rash to assume that all will be fine and that the populists will all rejoin the European fold and become shining democrats and defenders of the rule of law. It is too early to tell where Mrs Meloni is headed, and her actions in Italy do raise concerns. Secondly, what will happen if

there is both a strong extreme right-wing contingent in the EP and an increase of extreme right-wing governments represented in the Council and the European Council? One should not be complacent; and I do hope that the citizens will vote massively for the parties that have always defended the European Union, not only out of expediency, but also out of conviction.

But I want to finish this editorial on a different note. When I look at the opinion poll, I ask myself whether the European people are not in fact ahead of politicians as far as Europe is concerned. This again looks paradoxical because in the past there has always been a theory that the European integration is an élite project shoved down the throats of helpless peoples; a theory that has, of course, always been peddled by the Eurosceptics. But it is striking to see that when the EU took radical steps towards further integration during the recent crises, its popularity increased considerably. So, the message to our politicians is: be bold, lead, and the people will follow. It is more than time to remedy the weaknesses of Europe and the EU. Whatever our (true) achievements, we are losing the competitiveness battle not just with China but also the US. We are not courageous enough in taking a strong autonomous European stand on issues like Gaza. We are timid in drawing the necessary lessons from shifting views in America on support to European defence.

So, the message to politicians is simple. Do create a true European defence industry and work towards a European defence; few people in Europe will go out on the streets to demonstrate against you if you do. Finish the work on the single market in services, because if you do not, Europe will not be the economic power we want it to be. Bold moves here may elicit more opposition, but people will understand the need for it if you explain

it and ensure the protection of the weaker parts of society. Use and implement the excellent Letta report ("Much more than a market"). Or the upcoming Draghi report on competitiveness. Concerning the Green Deal: adapt its methods where necessary, but stay firm on the principles. Sectoral protests should not cloud the view of the widespread support for climate measures across Europe. And make sure that the Strategic Agenda that the European Council will adopt in June or July will be strong, bold, and courageous. One very last word. It is also high time to have a fresh look at European governance. Not at this stage in the shape of a massive overhaul of the treaties and the institutions. That may

come, but later. For now, there are so many other things one could do to strengthen our governance. The starting point is the EU's political and administrative machinery as it is, not as we might like it to be. It needs adjusting and re-booting. In a world so hugely different to that which first shaped the EU, huge demographic shifts and fast-changing geo-politics require a different mindset within the EU institutions and in their relations with Member States. We need to look at issues like prioritisation and strategy, institutional structures, working methods, simplification, and communication. Visions are good and necessary. Linking them to concrete and operational measures is even better.

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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