

THE STRATEGIC AGENDA 2024-29: A BEGINNING, NOT AN END

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EDITORIAL



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The June European Council has delivered. It has reached agreement on the top jobs, thus avoiding a protracted and divisive process. Confirmation by the European Parliament (EP) of the Commission President and the whole college, including the High Representative (HR), is not a foregone conclusion but the chances are very good now. The new team should seize the opportunity to create the right working relations between themselves from the start. They have different responsibilities but must work as a team. The battle between the Presidents of the European Council and the Commission for a job that does not exist in the European Union (EU) system, i.e. that of 'President of the EU', must stop. The HR should be the right-hand of the President of the European Council for CFSP and CSDP matters and the right hand of the President of the Commission within the college, with a coordinating role on external relations.

The European Council has pledged continued and comprehensive support for Ukraine, including by signing a security agreement with President Zelenskyy. Following the launch of the enlargement negotiations, this sends a very strong message to the world and to Russia. It has also adopted firm conclusions on the Middle East, calling a spade a spade.

Finally, the European Council has succeeded in finding consensus on the Strategic Agenda for 2024-29. This is not a minor feat at a time when the challenges are piling up. It is on the nature of such documents negotiated at 27 that it reads like a wish list catering for all constituencies. In our TEPSA recommendations to the Belgian Presidency of the Council and to the European Council, we suggested building not just a list of topics, but one that would identify and address the main vulnerabilities of the Union. We suggested spelling out also what the EU should do *differently* in the next five years, in

order to shift from a fire-fighting mode towards longer-term proactive thinking. One would therefore have liked to have an even stronger recognition of the urgency of changing gear at a time of mounting dangers and maybe a more acute highlighting of the need to set priorities and find the right balances between conflicting objectives.

But the Strategic Agenda is part of a process, not the end of it; it was preceded by the Granada Declaration a few months ago that set out important guidelines. Many of the questions we raise above will be addressed over time; we should not judge the Strategic Agenda merely on the basis of this one document. Its broad objectives will have to be developed and fine-tuned, and choices will have to be made between conflicting demands. Above all, the question of linking policy objectives to financing and resources will require a lot more work. Interestingly the Strategic Agenda mentions the issue of new own resources.

The question of the "How" is of course more for the new Commission which will elaborate a more detailed legislative programme on the basis of the Strategic Agenda. The interaction between the European Council and the other institutions is key. All the actors are important, be they the Commission, the Council or the EP. The system works, as again shown by the incredible number of legislative deals reached by a very dynamic and skilful Belgian Presidency of the Council and a constructive and inventive EP eager to end its term on a positive note.

It will be important for the European Council to continue providing political guidance via its regular conclusions. After Brexit, the informal European Council of Bratislava adopted a very significant document to frame the response and allow the 27 to move forward. In the wake of this declaration,

President Tusk then launched a process of a "Leaders' Agenda" with regular in-depth strategic exchanges on the basis of a short discussion paper prepared under the authority of the President of the European Council. In order to ensure an open debate, no written conclusions were adopted after these exchanges, but the President's oral conclusions would guide the preparation process for the following meetings. This initiative worked well, and it also became a very useful communication tool. It was unfortunately abandoned after Tusk's tenure, but maybe President Costa could resuscitate it in some form or other.

The regular June conclusions are encouraging. We have already mentioned Ukraine and the Middle East, but the leaders have also adopted a short roadmap for work on internal reform. At this stage, this is not about Treaty change, but more about improving EU governance. There are many things that can be done even within the existing framework that would greatly improve the functioning of the EU. The leaders gave important indications on what requires doing in the key areas of defence and competitiveness, together with clear tasking. The conclusions provide more indications on why the challenges of the day can only be addressed by more determined action at the EU level. During the heated and often polarised political debates at the national level this fact is sometimes forgotten or overlooked. But recent public opinion polls like the one carried out by the French "Fondation pour l'Innovation Politique" show that many European citizens are increasingly aware of this. In fact, in areas like security and defence it may even be argued that in an interesting reversal of roles the citizens are in advance of the élites.

Finally a word on two important reports that could play a major part in the reinvention of the EU over the next years. The first one,

published a few weeks ago, by Enrico Letta deals with the Single Market in the broad sense of the word ("Much more than a Market"). It is a remarkable piece of work, with a profound political vision allied to very operational and concrete suggestions. TEPSA will next week issue an episode of EuropeChats with Enrico Letta about his experience as a member of the European Council in 2013 and 2014, but also about his report. In July, Mario Draghi will issue his long-awaited report on European competitiveness. There is every reason to believe that this will be a hard-hitting and very ambitious text with many suggestions on how to at last tackle the rather dramatic back-sliding of Europe in this area. It is to be hoped that the leaders who commissioned these two reports will give instructions to the institutions to work on that basis and to implement many of the recommendations. The first indications are encouraging. The European Council invited Enrico Letta to one of its meetings for an extended exchange. The issues that Letta and no doubt Draghi raises are echoed in the European Council conclusions. The incoming Hungarian Presidency has invited Letta to Budapest for a discussion on how the rotating Presidency can mobilise the various Council formations in the analysis and implementation of his report.

At a time when the world is rapidly changing and the political landscape is shifting in many European countries strong leadership is needed in Brussels. The EU must not be a problem but the answer to our problems. It must adapt without losing its DNA. It must show the way without arrogance and preaching. It must nurture this very peculiar mix of national sovereignty and European sharing of sovereignty that characterises it. With the EU, Europe has a fighting chance to be the global player we want it to be; without it, it has none. This week overall has been a good one. Let the real work now begin.

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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