

TEPSA'S READING CORNER

a reading list to stimulate debate



In this edition, **Jim Cloos** discusses:

‘Die Welt von morgen’ (The World of Tomorrow) by Robert Menasse

Since his award-winning novel ‘Die Hauptstadt’ (The Capital), Robert Menasse has been considered one of the most prominent European authors who openly and passionately advocates the idea of a united Europe. With ‘Die Welt von morgen’ (The World of Tomorrow), he attempts to build on this success – in a work that is literary, essayistic, and political at the same time. The result is a book that sees itself as a “concrete utopia of a European world of tomorrow,” as [J. Erdmenger praised it in the AIACE](#) (International Association of Former European Officials) magazine A PROPOS (July–September 2025). But upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Menasse’s “utopia” is less a blueprint for the future than a reflection of his own convictions – and these are based on a misunderstanding of what Europe is today.

From novelist to explainer of Europe

Menasse is undoubtedly an eloquent writer. His earlier work on the European Union, especially ‘Die Hauptstadt’ (The Capital), was funny and struck a chord. The Brussels bureaucracy appeared there as a

mixture of Kafkaesque labyrinth and humanistic longing for meaning. But literary success does not automatically translate into political expertise. The fact that Menasse now sees himself as Europe’s chronicler and reformer is more a consequence of his popularity than his knowledge of European treaties or institutions.

‘Die Welt von Morgen’ attempts to achieve nothing less than formulating a moral, political, and cultural vision for Europe. The author draws on Stefan Zweig’s humanistic idea of a borderless Europe, on the notion of a “European soul” that transcends national interests. This is a noble aspiration, but Menasse’s implementation remains unclear and contradictory.

Structure without structure

The book consists of 38 sections that reveal little internal logic. Instead of a coherent argument, Menasse offers a mosaic of essays, aphorisms, observations, and polemical exclamations. The topics range from criticism of the European Council and the “democratic deficit” to cultural-historical observations on Central Europe. But the abundance of

buzzwords is no substitute for analysis.

Quotes such as "The black hole of Brussels" or "administration of stagnation" are headlines, not insights. Behind many of these formulations lies a deep mistrust of the Member States, which Menasse sees as obstacles to European unification. The European Council (EUCO), i.e., the institution bringing together the Heads of State or government of the 27, plus the President of EUCO and the President of the Commission, becomes the enemy: "Every plan of the European Commission that would further the development of the EU is overturned by a Council decision."

This view is one-sided and simply wrong. The EU Treaty explicitly recognises the role of the EUCO in shaping the EU's political direction. And without the EUCO, the EU would never have become what it is today: a democratic union of democratic states, based on the dual democratic legitimacy of the Council and the directly elected European Parliament. Far from being stagnant, this Union has created peace, brought the peoples of Europe closer together, created its own currency, invented European citizenship, united the continent, and much more.

Menasse fails to recognise that the EU is not a federal state, but a union of sovereign states and peoples - and that it is precisely this balance between national self-determination and common rule-making that forms its foundation. The federalism that Menasse invokes may be an interesting perspective, but it remains a minority position in Europe that has never been enshrined in a treaty.

The old refrain of the "democratic deficit"

Menasse repeatedly refers to Europe's "democratic deficit." He fails to understand that the governments of the Member States are also democratically legitimate. He calls for

a "democratisation" of the Union, which would effectively amount to the abolition of the sovereignty of the Member States. His demand to "ensure the primacy of the Commission over the Council, ... as was planned" shows a misunderstanding of the European constitutional situation. That was never the case. The Commission is not an executive body in the national sense, but the guardian of EU law, which makes proposals and moderates compromises. Its "primacy" would not be democratisation, but rather the technocratisation of Europe.

A central problem with Menasse's argument is his understanding of the nation-state. He confuses it with nationalism – a gross simplification. The nation-state is not per se an obstacle to European integration, but rather the historical foundation on which the EU was built in the first place. Delegitimising it as the "enemy of Europe" is a distortion of political reality. These demands are neither practicable nor desirable. They stand in stark contrast to what the EU stands for. Menasse overlooks the important role that the European treaties explicitly assign to the Member States. They are not merely relics of a bygone order, but the bearers of democratic legitimacy.

Between cliché and insight

Despite this one-sidedness, the book also contains passages that provoke thought. When Menasse declares the blanket condemnation of the Habsburg monarchy as a "dungeon of nations" to be absurd, he is right. His reference to Milan Kundera's famous essay 'Un Occident kidnappé. Ou la tragédie de l'Europe centrale' is interesting – even if he reinterprets Kundera's diagnosis of a "return of Central Europe" to Western culture in his own idiosyncratic way.

His remark that the eastward expansion was "in reality a westward expansion in the East" shows analytical acuity: it refers to the power imbalance between old and

new Member States, which continues to have an impact today. Equally apt is his observation that "Ukraine's heroism is fuelling nationalism to immeasurable heights" – an uncomfortable but necessary reminder that even morally justified resistance can fuel national myths.

But time and again, Menasse's insight tips over into polemic. When he describes German reunification as a "national rebirth" that "led to the AfD," it seems simplistic and analytically weak. This shows how quickly Menasse constructs political blame from historical phenomena.

Good intentions, wrong means

Menasse is not a cynic. His book is driven by an honest, even passionate desire to improve Europe. He does not want revolution, but reform, a moral rebirth of Europe. His diagnosis that the Union is blocked on many issues – from foreign policy to social policy – is not wrong. But his proposed solutions are contradictory. When he calls for "harmonisation of social systems" or "qualified majority voting in foreign policy," he is moving within the realm of real reform debates. But by simultaneously delegitimising the nation-state, he undermines the trust on which such reforms are based.

Ultimately, Menasse advocates a kind of new European nationalism - a supranational patriotism that is supposed to overcome old borders, but in doing so creates new divisions. It is a fascinating but dangerous idea: a utopia that contradicts itself.

Between pathos and paradox

"I am no *Hellseher* (clairvoyant), I see black," Menasse writes at one point – and thus unintentionally speaks a truth. His "world of tomorrow" is a reflection of the disappointment of an intellectual who loves Europe but has lost patience with reality. His language is often dramatic, his arguments apodictic.

The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung wrote about Menasse: "No one in contemporary German literature writes as passionately about the EU as Robert Menasse." That's true. But passion alone is no substitute for expertise. 'Die Welt von morgen' is a book full of commitment, but also full of contradictions. It wants to shake things up, but it gets tangled up in clichés.

Menasse sees the EU as a drama between ideal and reality - but he confuses his own vision with reality. Readers should not take the book as an analysis, but as the literary manifesto of a staunch European who suffers from his love.

His "concrete utopia" ultimately remains an abstract hope: a projection of the desire that Europe finally become what it has long been in the hearts of its idealists. "It's that simple: why isn't the simple thing simple?" Yes, why indeed?

Worth reading? Yes. But only with critical distance – and the awareness that tomorrow's world cannot be understood without today's world.

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Editing and formatting: Ana Leladze, Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA)

Jim Cloos is TEPSA Secretary-General. In February 2021, after a long European career, he retired from his job as Director General in the General Secretariat of the Council. He has been an avid reader in many languages since his childhood (his father was a schoolteacher, and the family lived in an apartment above the school and the library!). He is known for having told his staff that reading a good novel was sometimes more useful for understanding society and the world than struggling through tons of bureaucratic jargon. He has eclectic tastes and reads all kinds of books, except poetry, alas. As an adolescent he read 'Huckleberry Finn' four times (in German); later, he did the same with 'War and Peace' (in Russian).

