

## *What Future for the European Union?*

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The second half of 20th century witnessed a dramatic turnaround in European history. From the ashes of a long European civil war which spread throughout the globe, an unprecedented period of democracy and prosperity ensued in Europe.

It is hard to dispel the belief that such successes would not be possible without the soothing impact of European integration. Citizens were allowed to benefit from collective added-value without fear of jeopardising sovereignty or identity and consequently embraced the European project.

With time EU became more attractive as evidenced by successive waves of enlargement: MEPs from most of the Continent assemble today in the European Parliament, an event without parallel in Europe's long war-tormented history.

More than half of laws going through national Parliaments today are Europe-related. National administrations are trained to look at the wider picture rather than the strictly national one. Whilst this seems evident enough for environment, transport or R&D, it is remarkable that it is increasingly the case for foreign policy and defense. Aspiring to EU membership has been, and still is, a strong motivation for reform in candidate states.

Ironically, these are also times that EU member states reconsider integration doctrines. Some of the reasons are exogenous but others are symptomatic of a Continent hesitant to adjust to new global challenges. Demographically Europe is ageing and the consequences for competitiveness and welfare systems weigh heavily on national budgets burdened with tough disciplinary measures.

Enlargement is also a case in point. Initial support for the "big bang" which almost doubled EU member states was soon followed by suspicion amongst those who were ready to blame newcomers as the cause of their malaise. To the outside observer it should come as no surprise that voters were influenced by the same suspicion when faced with the dilemma of approving a new EU treaty, or Constitution. The side-effect of negative ballots in two founding member states was that integration halted and with it perished an opportunity to

modernise European society. It seems that an inward-looking Europe, arguably the by-product of European integration itself, needed a pause to reflect.

Meanwhile the world has been on the move. New dynamism fuelled by ambition and technology and undeterred by old boundaries is evident in countries such as China and India, to mention but the biggest amongst fast-growing economies. The US is reevaluating upwards its growth amid a reach for global ambition whilst Russia reconsiders the potency of energy as a tool for modernisation and security. How can Europe face up to the new challenges?

It would be misleading to discount Europe's role as global player. Achievements of EU are recognised. EU defends core values such as the rule of law and equal rights and citizens expect it to bring solutions in terms of security in the widest sense of the word as well as peace and democracy. Europe has been a pioneer in addressing issues such as governance, citizens society, environment and health, development aid and collective security. Crucially such issues are likely to come up in other parts of the world as countries strive for growth.

One of Europe's important achievements is therefore EU-related: working collectively remains a key parameter in world politics and EU has accumulated experience in discussing, and compromising on, contentious issues for solving crises.

Whilst uncertain about their future in the light of challenges such as globalisation, changes in labour market or social systems, European citizens want Europe strong and there is a widespread need for common solutions.

Europe's future depends on EU's ability to win back the hearts and minds of people who need to put their trust in it for facing up to the Continent's present and future challenges.