



Pat Cox (Dublín, 1952), qui fou president del Parlament Europeu entre 2002-2004 i eurodiputat durant tres legislatures (1989-2004), va pronunciar el següent discurs a l'auditori de La Pedrera el 21 de març de 2024 amb motiu de l'acte de commemoració del 25è aniversari de l'Oficina del Parlament Europeu a Barcelona.

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The growing external and internal complexity of EU Decision making

Introduction

I am very pleased to join you this evening in Barcelona and I wish to thank the European Parliament Office for the invitation to do so. The EU office in Barcelona was inaugurated in 1999, twenty five years ago. Three years later, on the eve of the Barcelona Summit of the Spanish Presidency of the EU in March 2002, I had the pleasure, together with Romano Prodi, Jordi Pujol, and Josep Piqué, to recognise and salute the strong pro-European tradition of Barcelona and Catalonia. We stood on an upper floor balcony of the office and marvelled at the Catalanian Castell forming before us, as the human pyramid rose upwards. Finally a young boy on top, with a European flag in hand, was lifted onto the balcony by Romano Prodi. It is a striking image that still remains fresh in my memory today.

As the 10th direct elections for the European Parliament are scheduled to take place in three months' time, between the 6th and 9th of June, this evening affords me the opportunity both to look back and to look forward. We meet as our continent is shook by the realisation after Russia's invasion of Ukraine that we no longer can take peace for granted, as we had the good fortune to do for the entirety of my adult until 24 February 2022. And at a time when our consciences' are assaulted by images of the worst days of the worst year of a whole people in Gaza. These conflicts are a backdrop to but not the substance of this address.

I propose to step back briefly to 1999 and in retrospect to observe some missed opportunities and false dawns then on the EU's and the West's

policy agenda. The essence of my remarks will go on to explore the increasingly complex multilateral environment facing the EU and what I expect to be an emerging internal counterpart, an increasingly complicated decision making process after the European Parliament elections.

A look back to 1999

First, a glance backwards to 1999, the year the EU institutions established their presence in Barcelona, and also the year of the fifth direct elections to the European Parliament.

Jacques Chirac was president of France. Gerhard Schroeder was chancellor of Germany. Massimo D'Alema was prime minister of Italy. José María Aznar was prime minister of Spain, relying on the support of Convergència i Unió and its Catalan leader, Jordi Pujol. The Jacques Santer led European Commission was forced to resign in March of that year, having lost the confidence of the European Parliament on the issue of executive accountability to parliament.

In Serbia Slobodan Milošević and four others were indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Kosovo. When Milošević agreed to withdraw from Kosovo NATO suspended its short lived but controversial bombing campaign in Serbia.

As regards South Eastern Europe, the Cologne European Council conclusions of the German presidency of the EU in 1999 declared that: 'The European Council reaffirms the readiness of the European Union to draw the countries of this region closer to the prospect of full integration ... on the basis of the Amsterdam Treaty,' and fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria – a missed opportunity.

The European Council also wholeheartedly endorsed the efforts then being made by China and Russia to accede to full membership of the WTO.

Sensitivities about the influence of the far right in government surfaced in October when the Austrian People's Party formed a government with the far right Freedom Party leading to their being sanctioned by other EU governments led by France and Germany.



The Finnish Presidency of the EU at Tampere agreed EU guidelines on immigration and justice issues and on procedures for drafting a Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Beyond Europe, Bill Clinton, serving his second term as president of the United States, was acquitted of charges of perjury and obstruction of justice ending his impeachment trial.

Jiang Zemin was President of China. While a rising star, Xi Jinping, was promoted to the post of vice governor of Fujian province.

Boris Yeltsin presided over an increasingly chaotic administration in Moscow and appointed his FSB chief, Vladimir Putin, to the post of prime minister, the third Russian prime minister of that year. By year's end Putin was acting President.

In September 99, in line with the Oslo Accords, at Sharm el-Sheik in Egypt, after weeks of detailed and acrimonious negotiation Ehud Barak, prime minister of Israel, and Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, signed a peace agreement setting the stage for final talks on the future of Palestine – a false dawn.

The Global mean land and ocean combined temperature for 1999 was the 5th warmest on record since 1880. Global population reached 6 billion.

Today

Today global population is 8 billion plus. Global warming continues to break records year after year with devastating consequences in terms of the frequency and intensity of severe weather events. The bet on democratising Russia and China by integrating them fully into world trade has not paid off. The Middle East is in the worst shape it has been in for decades. Immigration is a more sensitive political issue than it was 25 years ago. The rise of right wing influence in government and politics is no longer marginal but is increasingly becoming mainstream. The countries of South Eastern Europe remain in the EU's waiting room. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jing Ping, at the height of their autocratic power,

and others challenge the post war world order underwritten by American leadership and Pax Americana. Neo-imperial war for territory has returned to Europe through Putin's war of aggression in Ukraine. Liberal democracy which was on the rise 25 years ago is now in recession with a growing number of autocracies, dictatorships, and illiberal democracies.

Westlessness

The West itself is stressed by political, social and economic cleavages following multiple consecutive crises. Anti-elite, illiberal, anti-system political candidates and philosophies abound. This poses a question as to whether the West in terms of inherited normative standards such as liberal democracy, open markets, and international cooperation is becoming less western, a phenomenon labelled by the Munich Security Conference 2020 as 'Westlessness'. In short, the world order as we have known it in the West is threatened both from without and within. This is not a pretty picture but it is the challenging context against which to evaluate what next for Europe. It is hard to discern whether we stand on the threshold of a new normal or a never normal.

External Perspective

Part of this may be a cyclical phase in the tide of national affairs but concerning international affairs it has a more structural feel. What is clear is that we have entered a new age of uncertainty. This is at a time of spreading nuclear proliferation with diminished and contested strategic weapons safeguards. The world we live in shares both deep interdependence and deep vulnerability. China joined the WTO in December 2001, became the manufacturer to the world, lifted hundreds of millions of its citizens out of poverty, and through a steady flow of affordable goods lowered inflationary tendencies in the West. Russia became a full member of the WTO in 2012.

The link between open markets, democracy, and international cooperation is a key normative aspect of the liberal world order. Back in 2000 the West's expectation on China was captured by Bill Clinton's final State of the Union address to Congress where in essence he argued that China's admission to the WTO would enrich Americans and

help convert China to freedom. Less than two decades later Donald Trump in his inaugural presidential address blamed trade with China for creating 'American carnage.'

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping was tightening the grip of the Chinese Communist Party behind the Great Firewall of China. The gamble that enhanced access to global markets would democratise China did not pay off. The ground has shifted from economic embrace to geopolitical great power tension and rivalry. The fate of Taiwan could be its ultimate testing ground, but the fate of multilateralism as we have known it is where the geopolitical stresses and strains currently are most evident. As the 2024 Munich Security Conference (MSC) Report notes: 'cooperation inside the existing order has been crowded out by competition about the order itself.'

The EU is heavily invested in the post war norms and institutions and from the outset its values and interests have been well served by them. The defence, reform, and promotion of effective multilateralism is central to the EU's strategic goals but is set to be more challenging in future than it traditionally has been. An era of multipolarity but with contested multilateralism has arrived.

The multipolar world is transforming into a multi-order world which counts among its key influencers the leaders of the BRICS¹ and what more loosely is described as the Global South. They challenge the global West and its post war settlement, its values and institutions. These are not a homogenous bloc. Different states have different histories, different levels of development, and face different strategic challenges. They are non-West but not all are anti-West, thus adding to the increasingly complex tapestry of forging effective multilateral relations. As the Indian Foreign Minister remarked recently in Munich: 'good partners provide choices, smart partners make choices', suggesting a more transactionalist à la carte approach compared to the set menu of the past.

The EU and the West in general can seek to influence others. We cannot choose what they do.

De-risking

¹ BRICS is an intergovernmental organisation comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.



Public opinion, politics, and governments in the West today, with the exception of combatting climate change, are more focused on the vulnerabilities than the benefits associated with interdependence than in the early decades of the 21st century. The EU is no exception. Throughout this century EU-China trade has witnessed explosive growth with the net balance of trade decidedly in China's favour. The Covid 19 pandemic and the heightened global demand for personal protective equipment was a lesson for the EU of the risks of high dependency on single-origin supply chains. This has been amplified by the shift away from excessive energy dependency on Russia following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and a growing appreciation of the need for diverse critical raw material supplies, whether for electric vehicle batteries or semiconductor chips.

Wishing simultaneously to promote free trade and to achieve more self-sufficiency has led to some linguistic and policy dexterity on the part of the European Commission which now promotes 'open strategic autonomy' and 'de-risking', the latter phrase now adopted by the US and the G7 also. What precisely this will mean remains to be seen in practice. The EU has characterised China as a cooperation partner, a negotiation partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival. For its part China has declared a 'no limits' friendship with Russia and accuses the United States in particular, and to a lesser degree the EU, of a policy of containment and suppression.

US politics

Across the Atlantic there is much that divides US politics today. Politically it is increasingly polarised, frequently gridlocked, and often dysfunctional, but there is one major issue on which all are united, and that is the great power competition with China. This poses a very sensitive positioning problem for the EU, between a major trading partner, China, and its closest ally historically, politically and economically, the USA. An early victim of the pressure to take sides was the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment between the EU and China, negotiated as a last act of Angela Merkel's German led EU Presidency in 2020. This was frozen a few months later, overtaken by a Biden-led allied action sanctioning four Chinese officials leading Beijing's policies in Xinjiang.

President Biden's rhetoric has been softer than Trump's but his policy stance has been tougher, banning all Chinese access to high end



semiconductors that could be used to upgrade Chinese military, AI, and Quantum computing ambitions. Japan has followed this lead. Fears of Chinese illicit state access to data has seen the progressive banning of Huawei 5G telecom products in multiple states and even has extended to current sensitivities about the Tik Tok app.

In truth the United States was and remains the indispensable anchor of the normative West, and as the war in Ukraine confirms, yet again, it still is the arsenal of democracy. What the USA does matters. This year's Presidential election is likely to be the most consequential of our lifetimes, not just for the USA but for the idea of the West itself, its values, norms, aspirations, and choices. In a compelling essay in the Washington Post Robert Kagan argued that Donald Trump is running against the system, if he wins he will face the fewest constraints ever on a US President, and that the rights of his perceived enemies will be conditional and not guaranteed. Kagan's message is that the United States is drifting towards dictatorship. A US administration combining vengeful narcissism, arbitrary transnationalism, and hostility to traditional alliances, staffed by insurrectionist conservatives, risks not only to be disruptive but actually destructive of the inherited post Second World War idea of the West.

This is a scenario and not a prediction. Politics is volatile and such a scenario is by no means certain. Barring accidents it is now clear that November's US presidential election will be a rerun of the 2020 contest between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Commentary suggests that it may end up being a contest to see who is the least unpopular of the two candidates. A Biden win would be a source of relief for most Europeans but this should not be presumed to be a win for the status quo ex ante. NATO's future would be more assured. But a determined drive to reindustrialise and re-shore US industry, aggressive anti-monopoly policy to curb corporate power different to EU competition policy norms, fighting climate change through industrial policy and not carbon pricing, and pressurising allies, in particular the EU, to join joint actions to confront Chinese mercantilism and its growing technological ambitions will not be painless for Europe. The comfort blanket of US security guarantees for a continent unsettled by the war in Ukraine, if it remains in place, will not be cost free in terms of policy choices.

Of course, the alternative of a Trump victory additionally would add to the EU's angst over its strategic security. The fate of a \$60 billion US aid package for Ukraine hangs in the balance, supported by a bipartisan Senate majority, but threatened by MAGA hard core resistance in Congress at the bidding of candidate Trump who already is exercising persuasive influence on the Republican party even before being nominated at a convention.

NATO and Defence Spending

A recent opinion piece, written by Republican Senator, J.D. Vance, in the Financial Times offered a more sophisticated Trumpist message than inviting Russia to do 'whatever the hell they want'. He began by insisting that: 'The United States has provided a blanket security for Europe for far too long.' He pointed to an \$8.6 trillion additional defence spending European nations would have spent on defence if deep cuts had not been made to their defence budgets over the past three decades. He characterised this non spend as: 'an implied tax on the American people to allow for the security of Europe' and asked: 'whether our support has made it easier for Europe to ignore its own security'.

Of the 32 NATO member states, including Finland and Sweden, 18 are expected to meet the target of 2% of GDP expenditure on defence this year. Putin's imperial ambitions already have resulted in war and undermined any prospect for a cooperative security order for the foreseeable future. The long post-Cold War European peace dividend has run its course. European states need to up their defence expenditure in their own collective security interests and in order to support Ukraine. Collective security and defence inevitably will receive more EU focus in the immediate future. What is yet to be agreed is whether that will be at member state level or more collectivised at EU level, and where the balance will lie. Moreover, the dedication of more resources to defence expenditure raises other sensitive questions such as - whether it is European money for its own defence industry or for spending also in the USA - to what extent more spending on defence will come at the cost of other public expenditure policies - and how already heavily indebted states can afford to do this while being subject to strict EU budgetary rules.

European Parliament Elections

As I mentioned earlier with regard to the West, we cannot choose for others, but we can choose for ourselves. The same is true for us as Europeans, we cannot choose what happens in the USA but we can choose for ourselves. A significant moment of choice beckons with the upcoming European Parliament elections. These are described by political scientists as second order elections, perceived as less important than national legislative elections by voters, parties and media. Experience teaches that Europe often struggles to find self-expression during European Parliament elections which have been characterised by many as 27 national elections. This time, wherever one places the European elections in the political hierarchy, the outcome is likely to be strategically significant, with implications for policy making at European and national levels, as expressed by heads of state and government at the level of the European Council, and in probable voting alliances in the European Parliament.

Shift to the Right

A European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR, ecfr.eu) study published earlier this year predicts what it called a sharp turn right, suggesting, based on a poll of polls that anti-elite and populist parties on the right are likely to top the polls in eight member states, Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland and Slovakia, and to be second placed in a further nine states, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden. Polls are not outcomes but they are indicative of the public mood and voter intentions. The two main political groups – the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) – lost seats in the last two EP elections. This trend is set to continue, reflecting a long-term slow decline in voter support for mainstream parties and a growing level of party political fragmentation at both national and European levels. Predictions suggest that the EPP and S&D combined, who first lost a majority in parliament in 2019, winning 45% of the seats, are set to decline further to 42% of seats on this occasion.

The EPP looks set to remain the largest group and is primed therefore to retain the capacity to propose the next Commission President. Their nominee is the outgoing President, Ursula von der Leyen. This will give

them a leading agenda setting role but in a more complex and challenging parliamentary environment where the chemistry of consent will be more diverse and contested. The indications are that the Renew and Greens/European Free Alliance groups will lose seats. The left is expected to add some seats but the winners will be on the right, the radical right in the Identity and Democracy Group (ID), and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). These two groups ID and the ECR, could account for a quarter of MEPs, making their combined strength larger than either the expected post-election size of the EPP or the S&D.

At this stage it is important to stress a number of caveats. The obvious one is that polls are not results. Which group newly elected populist parties will join is not yet settled. It is possible that some parties already on the right may switch political groups. All these potential options, in the ECR, the ID and non-attached MEPs, sit to the right of the EPP. Subject to their political and policy coherence they could exercise growing influence on EU policy, particularly on asylum, migration and climate change policies. Given their participation in member state governments some of these parties will nominate European Commissioners. Some already are members of the European Council. Populist electoral success also is likely to influence the margins of manoeuvre of mainstream parties and their leaders anxious to protect their political flanks.

Coalition Options

The EP effectively operates through de facto coalitions even where no formal coalition agreements exist. These are essential since every group in the parliament is and always has been a minority. The grand coalition of the EPP, S&D, and Renew has 60% of the votes today but is predicted to decline to 54% next time, a slim guarantee for producing regular winning majorities. A left coalition of the S&D, Greens/EFA and the Left will lose seats. Even if they could add Renew their combined strength is likely to be just 45% versus 50% today. The European Council on Foreign Relations study, referred to earlier, suggests that a populist right coalition of the EPP, ECR, the ID could be able to mobilise up to 49% of predicted future MEPs, and if combined with extreme right non-attached MEPs could constitute an historic majority to the right of the Renew group for the first time ever. Statistically this is likely to be true,

but politically I do not see this as a realistic scenario. I concur with the study's conclusion that the 'pivotal MEP' in the next parliament for the first time is likely to be in the EPP group, rather than in the centrist Renew (former Liberal) group.

The EU's positioning externally in a more uncertain and contested multipolar world will be mirrored internally by a more complicated deal making process between its major political forces. Gaming the numbers offers a useful but incomplete insight into future power political coalition building. This is likely to be a variable mix depending on the issues to be addressed, all passing through the EPP but needing constant negotiation to accommodate a more diverse and contested political landscape. Policy preferences will play a vital role in potentially shifting power permutations. In terms of coherence the political forces to the right of the EPP are themselves such a mixed bag that their capacity to coalesce or conflict with each other post-election is at best conjectural. Some like Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS) are strongly Atlanticist, pro NATO, and Russophobic. Others like Hungary's Fidesz are pro-Russian, pro Trump, and spoilers inside the Western alliance. Currently Orban's Fidesz is affiliated to no group in the European Parliament. After the elections he has two options, to join the ECR Group with Georgia Meloni, or the Identity and Democracy with Marine Le Pen. From July 1 this year Hungary will assume the six month rotating presidency of the EU. Winning votes in the European election will not be the same as winning power. The instinct of mainstream pro-European groups, even with a diminished Renew group, will be to make deals that optimise their influence while minimising the impact of the stronger populist right to the extent they can.

Commission President

Ursula von der Leyen's status as frontrunner to be the next Commission President is reinforced by her nomination as the lead candidate for the EPP, her legacy as incumbent, and wide support at the level of the European Council. She describes this as a defining moment in a Europe 'challenged like never before by populists, nationalists, and demagogues.' She name checked Germany's AfD and Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement, National both members of the ID group, calling them 'Putin's friends,' among those wanting to 'trample our values, and destroy our Europe.' Meanwhile faced with growing discontent and



farmer revolts across the EU her signature Green Deal, aspects of which are proving toxic at grassroots level, is slipping towards the backburner. Covering its exposed electoral flank and revealing the growing influence of the far right and populists before the elections, the EPP, stealing their clothes, is proposing to triple the size of the EU's border force, Frontex, and to send asylum seekers to 'safe third countries' for processing. Promising 'always to be by the side of farmers' von der Leyen declared to the EPP Convention that farmers hard work has to pay off and the system must be put back on a sustainable footing. Her signature policy is a promise to do more on European defence, to turbo charge defence industrial capacity in the next five years, and to designate a Defence Commissioner for the next mandate. In a signal of times and things to come the Commission President asserted 'we stand for pragmatic solutions, not ideological ones.' How all this is to be paid for and who pays is a battle for the future, primarily for the next EU Medium Term Financial Framework.

Summary

In this address I have argued that the world order as we have known it in the West is threatened both from without and within, that we have entered a new age of uncertainty, and live in an era of multipolarity but with contested multilateralism. It is hard to discern whether we stand on the threshold of a new normal or a never normal. Public opinion, politics, and governments in the West today are more focused on the vulnerabilities than the benefits associated with interdependence than in the early decades of the 21st century. In the USA there is one major issue on which all are united, and that is the great power competition with China. This poses a very sensitive positioning problem for the EU, between a major trading partner, China, and its closest ally historically, politically and economically, the USA. The comfort blanket of US security guarantees for a continent unsettled by the war in Ukraine, if it remains in place, will not be cost free in terms of policy choices. The long post-Cold War European peace dividend has run its course. European states need to up their defence expenditure in their own collective security interests and in order to support Ukraine.

As regards the forthcoming European Parliament elections the long-term slow decline in voter support for mainstream parties and a growing



level of party political fragmentation at both national and European levels is set to continue. The winners will be on the right, the radical right in the Identity and Democracy Group (ID), and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). These two groups ID and the ECR, could account for a quarter of MEPs and, subject to their political and policy coherence, they are set to exercise growing influence on EU policy. The EP effectively operates through de facto coalitions even where no formal coalition agreements exist since every group in the parliament is and always has been a minority. The EPP looks set to remain the largest group and is primed therefore to retain the capacity to propose the next Commission President. The EU's positioning externally in a more uncertain and contested multipolar world will be mirrored internally by a more complicated deal making process between its major political forces. The political forces to the right of the EPP are themselves such a mixed bag that their capacity to coalesce or conflict with each other post-election is conjectural and remains to be seen. The instinct of mainstream pro-European groups will be to make deals that optimise their influence while minimising the impact of the stronger populist right to the extent they can. Ursula von der Leyen's status as frontrunner to be the next Commission President is reinforced by her nomination as the lead candidate for the EPP, her legacy as incumbent, and wide support at the level of the European Council.

Conclusion

Positioning the European Union and promoting its values and interests are set to be more complicated in future than in the past in a contested global multilateral environment. Generating internal consensus on the boundaries of what the EU should or should not do, and on its future budgetary capacity, also look set to be increasingly contested. Nationalist, populist, and identity politics are on the rise, too large to be ignored, not yet at a scale in sufficient member states to be decisive, but big enough to be influential in shaping aspects of public policy. The slow decline of the political centre continues but in the aggregate the centre continues to hold, constrained but not sidelined by the impact of political party fragmentation, willing and determined to defend a Europe of values. The elections, the real test, have yet to take place. Where the balance of influence will settle lies ultimately with voters, not with the pollsters, and not with the politicians.



Parlament Europeu
Oficina a Barcelona

Thank you for the opportunity to share this perspective with you here in Barcelona this evening.

And thank you for your invitation and for your attention.

Pat Cox

Barcelona

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