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2024: Europe once again at a turning point

Auteur

Sébastien Treyer

Executive Director

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In the run-up to the June 2024 elections, Europe and its project for the future are likely to be the focus of unprecedented media and public attention, and hence politicisation. The results and prospects of the Green Deal could either be used as a partisan tool, or as a basis for public understanding of the need to continue building Europe. The tumultuous geopolitical, economic and climatic context requires us to reflect on the meaning of the changes that will be decided in Europe, even for citizens who would prefer nothing to change. Now is the time to structure a clear political debate on strategic options for Europe.

Further anchoring European integration in national political debates

Five years ago, the Green Deal was the result of a massive mobilisation of young Europeans in favor of the climate, and of votes in favor of ecologist parties. An unprecedented project to transform the continent and restore its economic and geopolitical place in globalisation, it was supposed to translate into a very dense set of regulations,

and to engage and mobilise citizens; yet it remains little known and little understood, just as how the European institutions work is also obscure. In the meantime, health crises, wars and their socio-economic consequences have made the indispensable role of the European Union in preserving the ability of individual Member States to make strategic choices and protect their citizens, whether in terms of access to vaccines or funding for economic recovery, much more tangible. Sovereignist parties defending their national independence have been forced to admit that, without supranational cooperation on a European scale, their countries would count for nothing amid systemic rivalries between great powers.

While party leaders, and particularly those in government coalitions, have a clear understanding of the issues at stake, it is not certain that the political debate in the various countries offers such clarity to the citizens themselves. And while the politicisation of the debate on the future of Europe and the ecological transition within it seems guaranteed by these recent developments, it can still give rise to deleterious polarisation and manipulation. This makes it all the more important to structure the political debate on the results of the last mandate and on the possible options for a European project for the future. Almost forty years after the start of Jacques Delors' presidency of the Commission of the European Communities, which had been built on a program and a very clear ambition to renew European construction, his death reminds us that it is a program of the same type of vision that Europe needs.

Protection and outward projection?

Faced with the scale of the political, economic and environmental crises, the clearest message to the citizens of the various Member States is probably that Europe is the scale of governance that is essential to protect them. Over the past five years, this has been demonstrated by our ability to finance the recovery and coordinate our response to the energy crisis. But we still need to make progress on two points in this debate. Firstly, we need to assert even more clearly how the ecological transition, which has been at the heart of the Green Deal for the past five years, is a clear choice for the strategic securing of energy supplies, thanks to the end of dependence on fossil fuels that it enables (reduction in energy demand, substitution by renewable energies); and demonstrate that new dependence on critical materials for renewable energy equipment or batteries is not of the same strategic order of magnitude as direct importations of fuels managed as a cartel. Secondly, it has to be admitted that Europe is not up to its economic weight in geopolitical and defense matters, and is therefore struggling to convince people that it is not dependent on the protection of the great American power, even though this is uncertain given the elections scheduled in the US for the end of 2024. The inability of Member States to agree on a common security strategy will therefore be at the heart of the debates during next June's elections.

Above all, a Europe that protects itself will only ever be stronger if it is also capable of projecting itself, rather than trying to isolate itself from the world. It is in this spirit that the Green Deal was a project for the future, designed to restore Europe's place in globalisation. Here too, an honest assessment must be made.

As soon as it was announced by Commission President Von der Leyen in 2019, the Green Deal for Europe was presented as a gamble on the long-term competitiveness of the continent's economy: in other words, a major transformation of the industrial and economic apparatus, to stay in the race with the major innovative economies, but above all to gain the long-term competitive edge, by being the pioneers of the low-carbon economy and the champions of environmental, social and digital standards and regulations, standards that promote both the common good and innovation. This particularly bold and risky gamble continues to be necessary, given the rapid global changes taking place in all sectors of the economy. After five years of implementing ambitious regulations, it is clear that the horizon indicated as a guide by the Commission in the face of the various crises and for the different recovery plans is robust, with the exception of the food and agricultural sector, where severe short-term economic

difficulties seem to be blocking discussions on the transition to greater long-term economic viability.

A new industrial policy under construction, for greater cohesion?

This economic gamble was visionary, and in its wake, in 2019, set off the announcements by other major economies such as Japan, China and South Korea of their ambition to become carbon neutral. It has also led the United States to implement a massive new industrial policy also aimed at the decarbonised economy, which for the moment far exceeds the resources, albeit substantial, that the European Union had decided to equip itself with. The European response in the form of the [Net Zero Industry Act \(NZIA\)](#) is no more than a test phase for defining the contours of the policies needed in this global race towards a low-carbon economy. This is only the beginning of a far-reaching industrial transformation, and many economic players are urging their governments not to change course midstream. Whatever the political orientation of the next European Commission, the definition of a new European industrial policy should therefore be the subject of negotiations that are fundamental to the continent's future, and essential to the ecological transition.

It is indeed a question of projecting the entire European common market into the future and into the world, with all the economic power that this market still enjoys in international trade. The definition of European standards and intervention policy tools is therefore closely scrutinised both internally and externally. In both respects, Europe's ambitions for economic leadership must focus on strengthening, rather than undermining, the major but fragile economic and strategic partnerships on which the European construction project is based.

Firstly, internally, without the coordination of public policy instruments and the capacity to support this new industrial policy, there is a risk that the most financially endowed Member States, whose economic players have the greatest capital capacity, will be the only ones able to invest on a par with what China and the United States are doing with their own economic players, to the detriment of weaker countries and economic players. Cohesion between European territories, already fragile, is now at a key moment: either these choices of new industrial policies will reinforce inequalities between territories, or, if they are well designed, they could on the contrary reinforce equal opportunities within Europe.

The prospect of enlargement in the medium term to include several countries complicates the equation, but it is also exactly the right time to ask ourselves what these acceding countries are looking for in Europe: what kind of project are they joining, and what are we offering them? An area of security, an area of freedom, but also a common economic project for the future beyond membership to the single market? Reaffirming or reformulating the ambition of the Green Deal would be a clear reference point to which to adhere, and clarifying the conditions of the new European industrial policy would guarantee the means to ensure that accession is not experienced in the East as economic domination by the West of the continent, and in the West as a new risk of outsourcing.

A geopolitical Europe: structural and multiple strategic partnerships

In the face of wars on Europe's doorstep, security and geopolitical issues call for a geostrategic approach to economic partnership relations with all the world's regions and emerging regional powers, and not just in alignment with or against one of the two great rival powers, China and the United States. Medium-sized emerging powers have long lived in such a complex universe of strategic interdependence, forcing them to multiply their partners and alliances. The European Union must also [cultivate strategic partnerships](#) that are as important in political and security terms as they are in economic terms: partners in value chains, diversified suppliers, new future markets, and so on.

Value chains are being reconfigured, not only under the deliberate pressure of achieving carbon neutrality, but above all with the impetus of major technological changes and strategies to secure supplies. Against this backdrop, Europe must focus on building tomorrow's value chains by supporting an ecosystem in which partners outside Europe are not just suppliers of raw materials whose value and industrial jobs would be captured exclusively on our continent. This is the project that "[solidarity and sustainable investment partnerships](#)"? a new concept replacing development aid? are supposed to support, but it goes far beyond traditional aid tools, and must also be embodied in the way Europe demonstrates much more clearly how the standards of tomorrow's economy, for which it wants to establish itself as the leader, are built in consultation and not imposed on economic partners. At COP28 in Dubai, many countries criticised the European Union's "unilateral trade measures", in particular the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and the strategy to combat imported deforestation. With its new mandate, will the European Union be able to demonstrate a new method, in which internal negotiations among the 27 Member States on these regulations and standards do not constitute an obstacle to consultation with partner countries?

Justice and fairness in these partnerships are not only a moral obligation, but also a strategic imperative: the promise of fairness must be embodied in transparency about the interests pursued by European players, and the possibility of a mutually beneficial negotiated agreement. This is also the case in the major reforms, underway or to come, of the multilateral institutions of Bretton Woods or the United Nations, where agreeing to a better distribution of power with other regions of the world can go hand in hand with a very assertive strategy of influence on the vision and values carried out by these institutions. This is an important learning process for Europe, which still too often sees itself as the dominant partner, imposing the terms of debate and apologising by trying to show the benefits that the other partner could gain from them, rather than negotiating on the basis of its own well-understood interests.

A strategic dialogue between Member States?

More than ever, the Union needs a strategic dialogue between Member States on the economic project that brings them together, on the political, social and environmental ambitions that their citizens have a right to expect from the transformations that Europe will help to bring about, and on Europe's place and role in the world. Also worth noting is that the [Granada Declaration of October 2023¹](#) is only a very first outline of the next strategic agenda for 2024-2029, as the terms of consensus in this declaration remain extremely weak in relation to all the questions and issues mentioned above. Time is running out, but the problem is also that governments seem to be finding it increasingly difficult to talk to each other, as demonstrated by the difficulties encountered in the dialogue between French and German authorities, particularly on energy policy.

Equally crucial is the dialogue with Europe's citizens, for whom the issues of protection, freedom of choice, individual strategic autonomy and fairness in the consequences of political choices are not just empty words, but rather the issues at stake in their fears about Europe and even their national political processes.

The challenge of this key year for European democracy is to get people talking about why certain changes are inevitable, but also how they can be part of a wider project.

¹ The European Council intends to use this document to outline a medium-term strategic project.