

Foreign Policy Association together with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offer you a newsletter on foreign policy and European integration issues of the Republic of Moldova. The newsletter is part of the "Foreign Policy Dialogue" joint Project.

# NEWSLETTER

MONTHLY BULLETIN • SEPTEMBER 2020 • NR.9 (175)

## Synthesis and Foreign Policy Debates

The newsletter is developed by Sorina Ștefăruță, editor-coordinator

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### News in brief



On September 9-11 this year, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, Oleg Tulea, paid his first visit to Brussels, delayed by about half a year due to the pandemic. He has had several meetings, including on specific topics, as part of his agenda: Philippe Goffin, his Belgian counterpart; David McAllister, Chair of the European Parliament's Foreign Policy Committee; Dragoș Tudorache, MEP and rapporteur on the EU-Moldova Association Agreement; Mircea Geoana, NATO Deputy Secretary General. Minister Tulea has also met with the European Commissioners Kadri Simson (Energy), Oliver Varhelyi (Neighbourhood and Enlargement) and Ylva Johansson (Home Affairs). During the talks, the Moldovan diplomat has expressed the gratitude of the Moldovan authorities for the EU's support in strengthening the national health system and counteracting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including in the economic field. He assured the interlocutors that the Government remains firmly committed to implementing the European agenda. He has also informed about the development by national authorities of an Action Plan focused on the country's socio-economic recovery, noting that the EU sectoral assistance is an important catalyst for the reform process.



From Brussels, the Foreign Minister left for Kassel, where he participated, together with German and Moldovan officials, in the inauguration ceremony of the Honorary Consulate of the Republic of Moldova in this city. In his speech on this occasion, Oleg Tulea highlighted the importance of strengthening the cooperation with the German Länder, in particular in the field of trade, economy and investment, Hesse being one of the largest and most prosperous Länder, with a population of 6,5 mln. and a GDP of USD 330 billion. The Minister welcomed the appointment as Honorary Consul of Dr. Christopher Posch, a lawyer and owner of the *Posch Frank Rechtsanwälte* Law Firm, known for his work in the media and real estate fields. For his part, Mark Weinmeister, Secretary of State for European Affairs, emphasized the attention paid by the Hesse authorities to boosting relations with partner countries. He noted that the presence of the Honorary Consulate will essentially contribute to the intensification of trade and economic relations, but also cultural relations with the Republic of Moldova.



More than 1,800 Moldovan companies have export activities on the European market, the Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure announced on the occasion of the sixth anniversary since the signing of the Association Agreement and the implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Moreover, the impact of DCFTA contributed to changing the configuration of the foreign trade of the Republic of Moldova, the EU becoming the main trading partner of Moldova with a share of 70 per cent in exports and 50 per cent in imports. For comparison, in 2014, only 53 per cent of exports were directed to the EU. The top EU countries where domestic companies carry out export activities are Romania, Italy, Germany, Poland and Bulgaria. The exports of Moldovan products on the EU market in January-June 2020 have reached a value of USD 742.6 million, and the imports from the EU have amounted to USD 1118.2 million.

## Germany 2020: three decades of Unity, three decades of European leadership



### Sorina Ștefăruță

The current half of 2020, between July 1<sup>st</sup> and December 31<sup>st</sup>, is taking place, at the European level, under the auspices of the German Presidency of the EU Council. For Berlin, this is the thirteenth term at the helm of the European Union, which is happening in a more than symbolic year, as Germany is celebrating three decades since the country's reunification.

A mandate that would most likely have become a triumph had it not been for the pandemic that has turned the world's life upside down. A mandate that Berlin has adapted to the new (post-) pandemic realities and which is ambitious to turn into a triumph, despite all the difficulties.

"Germany is doomed to lead Europe", headlined *The Economist* in late June,

highlighting the fact that having Chancellor Angela Merkel as leader of the country holding the EU presidency and Ursula von der Leyen at the head of the European Commission, the Germans are now running the European affairs. Europe did not revolt, on the contrary, it has relaxed at the thought it is now in safe hands. "Usually, German power in Brussels is the political equivalent

► of dark matter: invisible, difficult to measure and yet everywhere. Now the Germans are stars, shining so bright as to be impossible to ignore.... (...) Whether they want it or not, German hands now grip the EU's levers of power, just as the bloc overhauls itself to cope with the Covid -19 crisis", mentioned the same British weekly.

Germany, in fact, has taken over most of what Croatia had failed to achieve due to the outbreak of the pandemic, most importantly being the relaunch of the EU economy and the reduction of the social crisis. "Germany is the 'engine and moderator of Europe,'" said the German foreign minister, Heiko Maas, shortly before taking office, and thus officially rising to the challenge of taking the European Union's destiny into Germany's hands.

The first 'Rubicon', almost complete, was the EU Budget for the next seven years, considered the main post-crisis financial instrument, as well as one closely linked to the 'Next Generation EU' Reconstruction Fund. The negotiations have not been easy, but Berlin has managed to impose itself so that the final adoption of the EU Budget in the European Parliament is expected in December. Alongside this, Germany is working on files it considers a priority for the future of the entire European Union. Among them, the promotion of the rule of law across Europe, Berlin supporting the European Commission's proposal to link the disbursement of the EU funds to the Member States' and third countries to comply with the rule of law standards.

Thus, as 30 years ago, when the dream of European integration was becoming more tangible (already in May 2004, the European Union was expanding ten countries to the East), Germany is giving Europe today the hope of resilience and revival. Including to the Republic of Moldova, which even after 30 years is still balancing between being or not European. May success attend you, Germany! Thank you for existing and being with us!

## **We are pretty much "together", and we are already in the middle of the "relaunch"**

**Johannes Schraps, member of Bundestag, member of the Committee on European Union Affairs**



**On May 29<sup>th</sup> this year, the German Foreign Minister announced that the Presidency of the Council of the European Union that Germany took over for the thirteenth time on July 1<sup>st</sup>, will have a clear mandate – "Together for the relaunch of Europe". At an almost three-month distance, to what extent is Europe "together" and how close is the "relaunch"? These are some of the questions that I've asked Mr Johannes Schraps, member of the German Bundestag and member of the Committee on European Union Affairs.**

**■ Mr Schraps, how do you assess the first three months of the Presidency? The summer is over though quite unusual, as unusual is the entire 2020**

**– also the expectations from Germany are as high as usual, especially now that your country has been seen as a successful model in managing the coronavirus and overcoming the post-pandemic economic crisis. What has and has not been achieved in this regard?**

■ I think we are on a good track. In the last weeks we finally agreed on the budgetary framework for the coming 7 years and a fund to counter the negative effects the pandemic has caused, totalling to 1.7 trillion Euro. 360 billion Euro will go to those countries that were mostly hit by the crisis to help them restart their economy. While at the beginning of the crisis there were

some voices who were accusing the European Union of non-solidarity, they were proved wrong. We are pretty much “together”, and we are already in the middle of the “relaunch”. Of course, the expectations on Germany were high and I am happy that we were able to successfully manage the crisis so far. We all must stay on track, and we all have to stick together and learn from each other to manage what is waiting for us in the coming months.

### **The crisis is a chance to build a greener economy in Europe**

■ *Shortly before taking office at the helm of the EU, the head of German diplomacy said that Germany wants its current Presidency of the EU Council to be “in the service of the European cause”, and that “the task of overcoming the COVID-19 crisis is a unique chance for us in the EU”. How realistic are such approaches in the current global situation? Can we talk about an “unprecedented” presidency, as the media called it?*

■ This presidency is as “unprecedented” as everything in 2020. Since World War II we did not face such far-reaching crisis of the economy. Also, for the everyday life of people it is a big challenge. However, I am most certain, that we will not only overcome the COVID-19 crisis but also show how capable the European Union is. Especially for those who have their doubts after Brexit it is our chance to show that cooperation, solidarity, and compromise make everyone better off than facing those challenges on their own.

■ *What are the chances, against the background of the Covid-19 crisis that seems to last longer than initially anticipated, of the EU-China Summit or of the environmental protection initiatives promoted so intensely by Germany?*

■ Our way out of the crisis is looking forward and initiating green growth. Indeed, we can see the crisis as a chance to build up the economy again greener than it was previously. We decided to set even more ambitious aims regarding CO2 reduction and more than one third of the corona fund will go into green investment, such as charging stations for electric vehicles, a restoration programme for old and non-energy efficient buildings or future technologies such as hydrogen. Therefore, the crisis has not caused a backdrop to our green initiatives, it rather gave us a chance to build a greener economy in Europe.

■ *One of the key words of the last half of the year in the EU is ‘compromise’, and the analysts anticipated that Berlin would have to resort heavily to it during this term at the helm of the European Union. Is this a solution in the current context? How far can compromises be accepted in the EU?*

■ ‘Compromise’ is always a key word in a democratic society, not only in the EU and not only in the last six months, I would say. In a union of 27 states that are all on a par with each other, there will always be a multitude of warrantable interests. Compromise and negotiations are the only way to bring all those interests together- in a crisis even more than in regular times.

### **The EU membership contributes to the strength of the German economy**

■ *The current pandemic crisis, directly connected to the economic crisis it has generated, has produced new gaps in the EU. This, in addition to the old problems that haven’t been cancelled - for example, migration. How reconciled are the Germans to the status of the ‘European engine’, from which everyone expects a miracle, a salvation? How ‘European’ are the Germans today?*

■ We are aware of our responsibilities and of the expectations connected with them and of course we will try to do our best to fulfil them. It also reflects in our ambitious EU-presidency program. Nevertheless, we are a union of 27 states in which every single one is important to solve the ongoing problems. Also, regarding the presidency we closely cooperated with the Croatian presidency and will be cooperating with the coming Portuguese presidency. The strength of the European Union does not lie within one single country, but within the union. That is also our approach when dealing with existing problems regarding migration of foreign policy issues. Regarding the “Europeanness” of the Germans, surveys regular show that two thirds of the Germans regard themselves as Europeans, not only Germans and I think this is a good sign. We know that the membership in the EU is what strongly contributes to the strength of the German economy as well.

■ *What are your feelings on the eve of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the German Unity? Can you declare the reunification ended? How much did/ did not Germany manage to achieve from the expectations with which it set off three decades ago?*

■ In 1991, only one year after reunification, the then chancellor Kohl promised “flourishing landscapes” in the new parts of Germany within 3 to 4 years. Looking back in the 90s and early 2000s, to be honest, former Eastern Germany was far from flourishing: Wages were low, unemployment rates high, people left for West Germany until the population in some areas almost halved. Thus, de facto, Germany did not manage to meet all the expectations it set off 30 years ago. To my mind, those expectations were unrealistic from the very beginning. However, in the last three decades, in most parts, the situation improved again: wages became closer to those in West Germany but remain significantly lower. Cities in

Eastern Germany, just like Dresden and Leipzig, are booming and people do not leave their home anymore because they do not have any economic perspective there. However, most leadership positions in society and economy are still occupied largely by persons from West Germany. Only one of Germany's more than 100 universities has a director from East Germany and the situation is barely different at the leading positions of the federal ministries or the most important German companies. We must work on this unjust representation and there is still a lot to do until the differences between east and west have completely disappeared.

■ **Did the Berlin Wall fall entirely 30 years ago or is it still separating the Germans? What would be the main lesson learned in these years? And what lessons could we learn from the Germans so that we don't repeat your mistakes?**

■ As described, the differences between East and West are growing smaller. A lot has been done, but apparently not enough: The rise of right-wing populist forces did not only occur in former East Germany, but the movement has its strongholds there. This is a sign that people are dissatisfied. In recent years a vivid and critical debate has emerged about the reunification of Germany, how it has been done and what could have been done better. I think we should have listened to each other more, have appreciated the merits and acknowledged the distress the people of Eastern Germany have been through. When the Berlin Wall fell, they enjoyed an unexperienced freedom, but at the same time, from one day to another, their lives and futures were in disorder, while for most people in West Germany life went on as usual. Moreover, the problem of underrepresentation described before has barely been targeted, giving eastern Germans the feeling of not governing themselves.

### **The decision to accelerate the European integration lies in the hands of the Moldovan government**

■ **Germany is one of the states that, consistently and often in silence, has supported the Republic of Moldova in its development efforts both economically and politically. How do you assess today the Moldovan-German relations that, in the last four or five years, have gone through a period of 'frost'? Who or what can defrost them? And how do you see Chisinau from Berlin? Is it still looking toward the EU, as some government officials are trying to convey, or toward the East, as the pro-Russian President of the state? How dangerous is such a ping-pong for the Republic of Moldova and what "balancing" solutions are there?**

■ The Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) and the additional liberalisation measures adopted by the European Union to soften the blow of Russian trade restrictions have increased the interwovenness between the EU and Moldova. For example, the Republic of Moldova's exports to the European Union increased by 17% in 2018 compared to the previous year, while the country's imports from the European Union rose by 19% in the same period. Moreover, there are various cultural programs. For example, every year, a number of Moldovans take advantage of the German Bundestag's International Parliamentary Scholarships (IPS) programme. It is true that the speed of integration slowed down in the last years and it looks like the priority of the government is instead to improve relations with Russia. In principle, this is not a problem to us. We acknowledge that Moldova has historic ties to Russia and is therefore interested in good relations. Also, the unity in the position of Russia and the EU during Moldova's constitutional crisis has shown that

stability in anti-corruption reforms are our first priority. However, I would be personally happy if the integration with Moldova proceeded further. But this decision lies in the hands of the Moldovan government.

■ **How do you assess the developments in Chisinau and to what extent are you satisfied with the developments in the Transnistrian case, in which Berlin has invested both logistically and diplomatically, but which remains an internal and regional issue?**

■ The Transnistrian case, unfortunately, remains a frozen conflict with all its negative impact on the people living there. The developments during the pandemic have further shown that the wellbeing of people is put at risk by the political games.

■ **To what extent could the situation in Ukraine, and more recently, in Belarus, influence things in the Republic of Moldova, which in a few days will be entering the presidential election campaign, as people are whispering about possible destabilizations? What are Berlin's expectations from this new election?**

■ Moldova has made progress in fighting corruption throughout the last year. Still, it remains one of the major obstacles to its road to welfare. Although being both former Soviet republics, Moldova and Belarus cannot be compared to each other in this regard. Moldova faced multiple protests and changes in power in its younger history, whereas Lukashenko reigned for over 30 years and has so far beaten down every protest brutally. Berlin hopes for peaceful, fair, and free elections resulting in a government willing to fight corruption.

■ **Thank you for the interview.**

**Sorina Ștefârță**

## Editorial

# The German EU Presidency, committed to strengthening the Union's core values

**Angela Ganninger,  
German Ambassador  
to the Republic of Moldova**

**G**ermany has taken over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the 2nd half of 2020 in demanding circumstances and under the motto "Together for Europe's recovery". The challenges and the focus of Germany's Presidency of the Council are shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, but they also go beyond these.

**For a stronger  
post-crisis Europe**

Germany would like Europe to come out of the crisis stronger, fairer and more sustainable. To achieve this aim, not only do we have to put together the financial means to facilitate recovery from the crisis, but we also have to take into account the major transformative processes of our time – namely climate change, digitalisation and the changes in the world of work.

At the end of July 2020, the EU Heads of State and Government succeeded in binding these elements together in one big package: under the forward-looking title "Next Generation EU", a reconstruction package to the amount of 750 billion euro was agreed. To a large extent this will be handed out as grants, and to a smaller extent as loans. Those member states that were particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic will benefit the most. The negotiations on the recovery fund were combined with the negotiations



on the Multiannual Financial Framework of the European Union for the years 2021 to 2027. The Multiannual Financial Framework is worked out every seven years and provides an opportunity to readjust the EU's expenditure policy with regard to the upcoming annual budgets. Linking these two negotiating strands enabled the negotiators to adopt a consistent programme for the future which is acceptable to all member states.

The European Council further agreed to link the disbursements from the Multiannual Financial Framework to respect for the rule of law. In more general terms, Germany remains committed to strengthening the basic values of the EU and especially the joint, cooperative and constructive

acceptance of the rule of law.

The whole process has not reached its final stage yet. The European Parliament has to be seized and it has to approve the agreed package. We are confident, however, that, given the enormous challenges, an agreement with the Parliament will be achieved in a constructive atmosphere.

On top of this, the decisive negotiating phase on the future relations between the EU and the United Kingdom will fall within the German Presidency of the Council. Germany supports the European Commission's Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier, who is negotiating on behalf of the European Union. The EU and Germany continue to strive for a very close political and economic partnership with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Withdrawal

Agreement and the related Political Declaration form the basis for a strong future partnership – and we expect the UK Government to abide by these agreements.

### ***Eastern and Southern neighbours, close and important partners of the EU***

The German Presidency of the Council also aims to support the High Representative in strengthening the EU's ability to act in external politics. Germany supports a rules-based and human rights-based international order. Multilateral organisations like the United Nations, but also the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and many other specialised organisations, offer a framework for negotiations and exchange, especially when there are serious differences. The COVID-19 pandemic makes it more difficult at times to have the kind of exchange on the margins of multilateral meetings that often helps to facilitate a compromise. But that should not prevent us from using the existing mechanisms to the best effect possible.

Our eastern and southern neighbours are close and important partners of the EU. The Eastern Partnership with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus provides a well-established framework for cooperation. Some of these partners are going through difficult times, be it because of conflicts introduced from outside or because of domestic disputes following elections that did not meet democratic standards. In these cases too, Germany supports solutions based on the rule of law and human rights and offers or encourages mediation on that basis.

In the coming months we will jointly begin to prepare the summit of the European Union and Eastern Partners planned for March 2021. In this context we will have to agree on concrete goals for 2021 and beyond. Moreover, Germany has planned three major events devoted to the important topics of youth, civil society, environment and the economy.

The third Youth Conference of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum took place from 24 to 26 September. As a meeting of 100 to 200 people unfortunately could not be held in the city of Dresden due to the COVID-19 crisis, a virtual conference lasting several days was organised, kindly

supported by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung as a German project partner. This support was much appreciated!

### ***Support for economic recovery and free elections***

We still hope that an exchange of EU Environment Ministers with their counterparts from the Eastern Partnership countries will be able to take place in the second half of October. We all know that, on this important subject impacting on our future, we will be able to achieve much more together than each of us could achieve individually.

We plan for a business forum in a virtual format in December. Hopefully, that would include an opportunity to exchange contacts for small and medium-sized enterprises which can help to assess new business opportunities following the COVID-19 crisis. This crisis might offer opportunities for those who have privileged access to the internal market via the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. Germany is assisting the Republic of Moldova in identifying these also through a cooperation programme entitled "sustainable economic development". Within this programme, some enterprises have been supported in changing their production lines during the COVID-19 crisis. They now produce protective gear and can thus maintain jobs.

For the future economic development of the Republic of Moldova, the legal and actual framework that potential investors are confronted with will remain important. Therefore, Germany and the EU will continue to watch whether the reforms that were agreed – most importantly the reform of the justice sector – are implemented in a credible way.

Together with the people of the Republic of Moldova, we strongly hope that the upcoming Presidential elections will be free, fair, correct and transparent and that the results will reflect the free will of Moldovan voters. To achieve this goal, candidates must be able to profit from a level playing field and adequate possibilities to promote their electoral platforms publicly and via the media. Elections in accordance with democratic principles are part of the rules-based approach that Germany supports as a member state of the European Union and as the Presidency of the Council.

# German ambition remains key to the political reinvention of the European Union in a new reality



**Radu Magdin, director of the „Smartlink Communications” Company, Romania**

**O**n October 3<sup>rd</sup>, Germany celebrated 30 years since the country's reunification in 1990. Though overshadowed by the pandemic, without fireworks and pompous actions, this date has still been in the public attention, with many seeing Germany as the saviour of Europe faced by more and more crises, the climax being reached by the COVID-19 pandemic ... The expectations from Germany are high also in the context of the Presidency of the EU Council, which the country has been holding for the fourth month and which takes place under the slogan “Together for the relaunch of Europe”. How realistic is this major commitment made by Berlin and what will Europe and the post-pandemic world look like? We are inviting you to read an interview about this with Radu Magdin, one of the most famous political analysts in Bucharest.

## Reunification of Germany, a symbol of the reunification of the whole Europe

■ **Mr Magdin, many people today see Germany as a rescuing engine for a confused Europe. How motivated is this perception?**

■ Germany is Europe's main driver of growth as the leading European economy, and one of the most coherent - if not the most coherent - European voices in global business. At European level, in times of pandemic and in the conditions of the impending crisis, the German ambition remains key to shaping and implementing economic recovery plans

and, ultimately, to the political reinvention of the European Union in a new reality. Separately taken, the German growth model, based on supporting strategic industries and mechanisms to fully exploit the potential of the workforce, even through the prism of pro-immigration policies, has a wide applicability at the European level. It has been taken over, in adapted variants, by many European states over the years. However, the COVID-19 crisis has the potential to hit so hard and unpredictably that the saving solutions should first and foremost be local, less imitative and then coordinated at the European level. The perception of Germany as a 'rescuing engine' is not difficult to motivate, taking into account the German influence on the European thinking and

politics as a whole, as well as its status as a world economic power, which has attracted prosperity in its vicinity. But Germany is facing a major political change together with the end of Chancellor Angela Merkel's term, a context in which it is essential that long-term solutions for Europe don't come only from Berlin or Paris, but also from Bucharest, Bratislava or Tallinn.

■ **To what extent is the German model of reunification of the country a “good one to borrow”, in the situation where in the Eastern Lands there are many Germans dissatisfied with the way their lives have changed after 1990, and in the West – people that think that too many sacrifices have been made for the Eastern Germans?**

■ The reunification of Germany was at that point in time, in 1990, a symbol of the reunification of the whole Europe, after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The transition has been extremely hard and difficult (and still is) for many European countries - but it was also acutely felt by the East Germans because of the accelerated pace at which the country proceeded, through enormous financial and political efforts, to the levelling out of the differences between its two 'halves'. Looking back, it is undeniable that Germany, as we know it today, would not have existed without the reunification process. The so-called dissatisfied are- as in the case of all countries that have gone through the transition from communism to capitalism- those who have not been able to adapt to the new system and whose dissatisfaction is, unfortunately, profitable for populist political leaders across Europe. But the German model of reunification can no longer be relevant today - Europe and the world have changed enormously, the socio-political conditions are completely different, and such an abrupt event as the fall of an entire regime is difficult to imagine. The German model of country reunification can instead show us a number of values needed to cover the current gaps - consistency and solidarity, including among the citizens of the same state.

**■ Are these grievances on both sides justified? What are Germany's biggest problems today and how do they affect the EU?**

■ Individual or group dissatisfaction with the state is always justified and motivates the sanctioning of political leaders during the polls, through democratic procedures. The problem is not the dissatisfied. The problem is those who capture the dissatisfaction, pass it through a populist filter and throw it back in the crowd in the form of slogans, for their personal gain, without real solutions. This is one of the problems facing Germany - as populism has become part of what we call "mainstream politics" or "the main political scene", the whole movement has taken root even deeper in Europe and has the potential to grow in an accelerated way against the background of the crisis. Otherwise, from any other point of view, I do not consider Germany to be the "Europe's sick", on the contrary, it remains, even against the background of the crisis, the strongest European state.

**German EU Presidency, a mandate adapted on the fly**

**■ In a recent study on the German EU Presidency, you mentioned that the expectations are higher than ever in terms of internal security, cohesion and reducing growing disparities within the Union. Can we talk about an "unprecedented" presidency, as the press called it?**

■ Each Presidency aims at differentiating itself from the previous ones - in the case of Germany, however, the vision on this mandate has adapted on the fly. While before the pandemic they have been discussing about a Presidency focused mainly on the global role of the EU, including against the background of competition between the great powers, the crisis has forced Germany to think of solutions for a Europe severely affected by the pandemic, leaving little room to laying the foundations for a long-term geopolitical construction. We can, therefore, speak of an "unprecedented" presidency in the light of the realities in which it is taking place, against the background of overlapping crises in the neighbourhood (Belarus, escalating tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean), but also under

conditions of unprecedented competition between the great powers, accelerated by the confrontation between the United States and China. That being the case, Germany's role, including at the formal level, is to think about the next steps for the EU - steps that include both the economic recovery and relaunch of Europe, and ways in which the EU bloc can regain its influence globally.

**■ How do you assess these three "German" months at the helm of the EU? How "together" is Europe and how close is the "relaunch"?**

■ The success of this Presidency cannot be analysed using the criteria we are used to - we cannot talk about the fulfilment of a programme or about a certain number of files negotiated with brio. The German presidency, as well as those that will follow, has been under a crisis situation, for which even conclusion of usual processes can count as victories - for example, the conclusion of negotiations for the Union's multiannual budget. Under the German Presidency, but also due to a wider European will, we have a record in terms of allocations and a budget construction that will allow Europe to effectively manage the relaunch efforts. Bringing the issue of the European health system resilience to the fore can also count as a success as well as the advancement of geopolitical issues, such as the European Union's relations with China. All these elements can contribute to the European "relaunch", especially if Germany succeeds, under this mandate, in rebuilding a much-needed European consensus in the years to come.

**■ The head of German diplomacy said at the end of May that "the task of overcoming the Covid-19 crisis is a unique opportunity for us in the EU". How realistic are such approaches in the current global situation?**

■ Each crisis comes with its own opportunities. For the EU, the opportunity can lie, for example, in a relaunch based on the green economy and technological advancement - for which the EU has the necessary premises and funds. Another opportunity is to strengthen the EU's capacity to respond to complex crises, from which it can benefit in the long term. For each

Member State of the Union and beyond, the COVID-19 crisis means both rethinking the dependence on global distribution chains and rethinking its own production capacity when it comes to basic needs. Thus, we can also talk about "gains" in times of crisis, which does not mean giving up solidarity or commitment to the international order based on rules.

**Some priorities will be moved to the background**

**■ Which of the priorities announced three months ago by Germany have become opportunities and which will most likely remain at the level of intention?**

■ There are a number of priorities that will most likely remain secondary. These include the Conference on the Future of Europe, which should involve as many citizens as possible in a broad debate on the future of Europe in the next decade and beyond. However, the Council ruled out the possibility that the debate would lead to changes in the EU Treaties, thus meeting the expectations of the Member States. It is not clear what this consultation process will look like in the current pandemic conditions, nor what the level of ambition at the EU level for this approach is. At the same time, sensitive issues such as Brexit, Single Market reform and migration policy will go beyond the "intention" stage, because they are elements of the European agenda that need to be moved forward - but they will certainly be more difficult to "sell" and to be kept in the public eye. However, the opportunities arise from the priorities of the European relaunch - the establishment of premises for a "green recovery", the strengthening of social cohesion and even the strengthening of the EU's digital and technological sovereignty. This category also includes the nature of the Union's external partnerships, which Germany will promote for the future - for example, a greater openness to the "like-minded" states in the Indo-Pacific region - as well as the EU's position in a multilateral context (at the level of WTO, WHO and so on).

**■ What are the chances, against the background of the recurrent corona crisis, of files such as the EU-China Summit or environmental initiatives?**

■ A European trend of recent years, promoted in particular by the Franco-German nucleus, is precisely the protection of the environment as part of future European agreements and strategies in external relations - on the basis established by the Paris Climate Agreement, denounced by the USA and, to some extent, emptied of content. However, the EU remains committed to protecting the environment, showing external powers that the promises made can become an element of common language. Including from this perspective, the regulation of relations with China and the signing of an investment agreement remain tangible priorities. Given the slower pace of negotiations due to the pandemic, as well as the unknown situation regarding a possible shift in power in the United States, the EU-China relations' objectives indicate the need for a recalibration of ambition and timing.

■ *In the study mentioned earlier, you suggested that the German Presidency of the EU should take into account the specific needs and opinions of the Eastern European countries. Meanwhile, Eastern Europe has become even more motley in terms of its relationship with the EU, and some member states are even accused of undermining the rule of law. Can we say that the European Union is heading for a new internal crisis?*

■ The EU was facing difficulties in enforcing the rule of law in the Member States also before the health crisis, but against the background of the crisis some negative phenomena tend to worsen. I would not say, however, that the EU is heading for a new crisis - after all, cleavages between Member States have always existed ... The European Commission has published recently its first report on the rule of law in the European Union. The report notes high standards of rule of law in many Member States, however, it mentions that significant challenges remain at the EU level. In this context, the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, stated that Bucharest supports the conditionality of the allocation of European funds to the observance of the rule of law - an older discussion ... -, but, at the same time, the Justice Cooperation and Verification Mechanism discriminates against Romania and Bulgaria. This is also one of the reasons why, in order to avoid overlapping crises,

the EU must also focus on the needs and opinions of the Eastern states.

### **All states are facing choices**

■ *What will post-pandemic Europe look like? The theories are quite diverse - from "the world will change" to "Europe will take advantage of the pandemic to close its borders and "forget to open them". Are these fears well-founded?*

■ The post-crisis Europe is difficult to imagine, given that this crisis will most likely be a slow, wear-and-tear one, from which only those will get out who are economically and politically skilled, make medium- and long-term plans, and addresses social, economic and political issues in a unified logic. It would be ideal to see a more united Europe. However, the negative trends that existed until recently have risen considerably in the wake of the crisis. It is not excluded to see more populism in Europe, which feeds precisely on the social divisions that appear against the background of the crisis. However, I would not listen to the alarmist messages about closing borders. On the contrary, Europe will be even more motivated to make new relationships and open new markets and channels for economic trade, which will keep European industries on the map of global competition.

■ *What will the new global order look like? Will the relation of power change? And how should the European Union play this chess game?*

■ Europe needs to go through a process of introspection and answer a few questions about its functionality and ability to respond to crises, and then analyse its sources of power in the face of fierce economic world competition. Europe is not a significant military power in the world and no economic power that cannot be defeated. But Europe is an area of values, and its power can influence the application of global standards - a so-called regulatory power. Through its regulatory power, Europe will remain a key player having the potential to shape trends in key areas such as environmental and digital protection. Moreover, Europe needs pragmatic partnerships to create global networks and to continue to exert its influence multilaterally.

■ *What can we expect this autumn, which is an electoral one, at least in Washington and Chisinau? Are we still in the cards of great powers?*

■ The entire Europe expects that in the event of a Biden victory, the United States will change its offensive approach in places, but we cannot expect major developments in vision and political thinking. The current stakes for the USA and for the world are related to economic recovery and the strengthening of positions regionally and globally. For this, the great powers will keep in cards those partners on whom they can rely in crisis conditions. It is difficult to say whether the Republic of Moldova is still in the cards of the United States, but it is certainly still on the radar of the European Union and this may mean that, based on strong commitments, the EU will be (more) willing to support Chisinau and more open to support the economic recovery and strengthen the resilience beyond its borders.

■ *How should small third countries such as the Republic of Moldova navigate and what should they count on in this round of global repositioning?*

■ The Republic of Moldova can remain on the radar of the great powers in the future, but this depends on its leaders, on the course of the country's evolution and the degree and nature of external interest for this region. Unfortunately, a country like the Republic of Moldova cannot afford political friends with everyone and cannot create East-West alliances. In the context of global repositioning, all states are faced with choices and trade-offs that they have to assume. The Republic of Moldova will be able to play a role in ensuring a degree of stability in the EU neighbourhood and will be able to attract significant funds in the context of European economic recovery efforts in the context of crisis. But the pro-European and Euro-Atlantic orientation is a serious commitment, which a country like the Republic of Moldova should demonstrate that it can fully assume.

■ *Thank you for the interview and I wish you success.*

**Sorina Ștefăruță**



## Expert opinion

# Dumitru Oprețoiu: State of the Union – between crisis and recovery

**“In a turbulent year, which has tested the solidarity between the Member States of the European Union, the speech on the State of the Union, delivered by the President of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, indicated that the strength of Europe lies in its unity. The main message coming from Brussels is that we will be able to overcome the multiple crises that have gathered throughout this year, only by turning the idea of Team Europe into reality”. It is one of the key theses defended by Dumitru Oprețoiu, project manager within Europuls - Center of European Expertise, in an [article signed for the Contributors.ro](#), where he makes a radiography of the the State of the Union speech.**

The State of the Union (also known as SOTEU) speech is a point of reference in the EU political life. Delivered annually in September by the President of the European Commission to the European Parliament (EP), this speech is a moment of reflection on the EU priorities. It offers the President of the EC the chance to make a radiography of the way the Union has evolved, but also to present the vision of the way forward and to informally introduce the legislative priorities of the Commission ... From the very beginning it was noticed that SOTEU 2020 is taking place in an atypical year. First of all, the speech took place in the EP plenary hall in Brussels and not in the one in Strasbourg, as usual. The EP President David Sassoli has decided to cancel the Parliament's trip to Strasbourg due to the fears caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has also emptied the benches of the EP plenary hall, always full in the past years. The need for social distancing took precedence over the interest of MEPs to listen live to Ursula von der Leyen.

### **A speech marked by the pandemic**

The pandemic has also marked the first part of SOTEU. Since its beginning,

more than 150,000 European citizens have lost their lives due to coronavirus. An unprecedented quarantine in Europe's history has been in place in most Member States for months, and the European economy has experienced the sharpest decline since World War II. Ursula Von der Leyen preferred to emphasize the way in which Member States regained their unity and solidarity after the first shock of the pandemic. The role of the European Commission, but also of the other European institutions, in retrieving solidarity was widely exposed: the 'green' corridors which allowed carriers to carry essential goods from one part of Europe to another, even when borders were closed; creation of strategic warehouses for medical equipment reserves - rescEU (one of them in Romania); technical unemployment benefit schemes - SURE, supported by the EU through no less than EUR 90 billion. [The examples](#) can follow.

However, von der Leyen has not sufficiently touched on the subject of the reaction of the Member States in the first months of the pandemic. The European states have closed their

borders in an uncoordinated way and [are still doing it](#). The Governments have repeatedly fought for the acquisition of medical resources during the general quarantine. Also, the European Union, whose competences in the field of health are limited, could not adequately help during a health crisis that was not limited to one Member State or a group of states, but expanded across the EU.

It may have been a good time to recall about the lessons from one of the moments in the midst of crisis in order to demand more solidarity between the European states and an increased capacity to respond to similar challenges, especially so after the European leaders, as if forgetting about [the citizens' expectations](#), have decided to cut funding for the EU4Health programme at the European Council where the EU budget was decided. It is true though that Ursula von der Leyen has called for the strengthening of the European Medicines Agency, but also of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control...

### **The European Green Deal, the digital revolution and the EU resilience**

The EU budget has been another key-issue of SOTEU. In fact, the Recovery Plan for Europe is the EU's most important response to the economic consequences of the pandemic. Von der Leyen estimates that the EU economy will shrink by 8.3 per cent in 2020 and the unemployment will rise to 9 per cent, disproportionately

affecting women, young people, and low-skilled workers or those with temporary contracts. The EU's response is appropriate. A multi-annual budget of EUR 1.82 trillion, of which EUR 750 billion as part of the NextGenerationEU package, will help the Member States start recovery. Moreover, the NextGenerationEU will be financed from loans contracted by the European Commission on the financial market, a historic step for the EU. Von der Leyen has emphasized this recovery package as an indisputable success of the European solidarity. The multiannual budget will also follow the Commission's priorities set even before the pandemic, priorities that have become more relevant than ever: the European Green Deal, the digital revolution and the resilience of the EU.

The European Commission's legislative priorities in the next period will focus on boosting the green transition and the digital transition. Ursula von der Leyen has announced a much stricter target for reducing the greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, namely a 55 per cent decrease compared to the 1990 levels, along with a 15 per cent increase compared to the previous agreed percentage. This target, part of the European Climate Law proposed by the Commission on March 4<sup>th</sup>, involves many costs for the states that depend heavily on fossil fuels to produce the energy they need, [with Romania among them](#). In addition, the Commission wants 37 per cent of the reform projects, through which the EU Recovery Package funds will be accessible, to be projects that drive the green transition. The European Green Deal has already had major implications in various sectors, such as agriculture (Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies), energy (the EU Strategy for Energy System Integration and the EU Hydrogen Strategy, in addition to the European Climate Law) and the social sector (the Just Transition Mechanism), while [the implications will](#)

[add to in the next period](#), according to the Commission's priorities.

From the point of view of the digital transition, the Commission's priorities will focus on the legislative proposal regarding digital services, the legislation on the online content moderation, but also a strategy on artificial intelligence and a strategy on digital industrial data. Although there are numerous concerns about the impact of the digital revolution on the labour market, the European Commission says, through the voice of Ursula von der Leyen, that artificial intelligence and robotics could bring more than 60 million new jobs worldwide in the coming years. Also, arguing that the restrictions caused by the coronavirus pandemic show that access to digital solutions is absolutely necessary, the Commission aims at developing the digital infrastructure across Europe, through investments that will amount to 20 per cent of the NextGenerationEU Recovery Package.

### **Global priorities**

While the EU's success in terms of the budget is clear, the European Commission aims at more historic measures to reform the European economy and turn it into a 'social market economy'. The most important item on the agenda in this area is the establishment of a *Common Framework on Minimum Wage* across the European Union, an important priority on the Commission's agenda even before the pandemic. At the same time, the crisis caused by the pandemic has had global consequences, which were recognized by Von der Leyen. She said the EU would continue to be at the forefront of the fight to provide a vaccine against COVID, accessible to all people on the planet. Moreover, the WHO reform, which has failed on several occasions since the start of the

pandemic, but also the World Trade Organization reform, are the EU's top priorities in the post-COVID-19 world.

Also on the global stage, the President of the Commission spoke about the relationship with the great global powers, the United States and China. While regarding the USA, Von der Leyen assured that, irrespectively of the decisions of the White House, the transatlantic relationship will last and strengthen, with reference to China, she has reminded that, although the Asian state is a negotiating partner, it is also a "systemic rival". Ursula Von der Leyen did not hesitate to mention also the human rights' abuses in China, in Hong Kong, or those against the Uighur minority in the Xinjiang province. In fact, in the field of human rights, the President of the Commission came up with a broader argument, referring to both the situation in China and in Belarus or Russia. She reminded the EU leaders that there is a need for greater determination in defending the European values everywhere in the world, and when abuses are widespread, they have to be punished. However, decisions in these areas of foreign policy have to be taken quickly, and the European Commission has called on state leaders to adopt the qualified majority voting when making decisions on sanctions and human rights, opting out of the unanimity voting. The need to adopt this procedure has become pressing again following Cyprus' opposition to the sanctioning of Minsk's leaders, with the Cypriot authorities insisting that the EU first adopt sanctions against the Turkish government and only then - against the Belarusian government.

A unique moment was when Von der Leyen, a former minister in the German Government, has vaguely mentioned about the problem of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, in the context of the poisoning of the Russian opponent Alexei Navalny. She said Russia's attitude was clear

and no pipeline would change that, indicating the need to reconsider the EU member states' relations with their eastern neighbour.

### ***EU between crisis and opportunities***

The Covid-19 pandemic did not remove the still unresolved old problems of the European Union. These include migration, which has had recently an unfortunate episode, namely the fire at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. Von der Leyen announced in this context that she would propose a new Migration Deal. It is a pact based on the principle of saving human lives, but also on the need to link the granting of refuge to the return capacity of the applicant. A clear distinction will also be made between those in need of asylum and those abusing the system.

At the same time, Brexit has returned to the agenda in recent weeks. The

United Kingdom has announced that it wants to pass legislation that will violate the EU Withdrawal Agreement, agreed more than a year ago. The European Union, for its part, has now protested vehemently through the voice of Ursula Von der Leyen, who called for compliance with international treaties agreed by both parties. She has reminded that a future trade agreement between the two entities will depend on this.

At the end of her speech, Ursula Von der Leyen touched on other internal issues in the Union, such as the rule of law. It announced a Report on the rule of law in the EU, which will be made public by the Commission by the end of the year and will analyse the rule of law in all the EU countries. It will be used, according to the EC President, both for preventive purposes, to stop the derailments from the democratic track, and for informing a possible mechanism of conditioning the funds from the new

recovery package with the state of the rule of law.

The State of the Union 2020 is therefore balancing between the consequences of the crisis caused by COVID-19 and the opportunities offered by the recovery plan proposed by the European Union. Although, the European unity did not excel in the first months of the pandemic crisis, the economic recovery proposals have given the true measure of the European solidarity. The decision to finance the economic recovery with money borrowed directly by the EU is perhaps as historic as the pandemic itself. And the European Commission's proposals in the field of the green transition, but also of the digital transition have the potential to change the lives of the European citizens in a spectacular way. Ursula Von der Leyen has managed, through her first speech on the State of the Union, to offer this hope for recovery, a process supported by a more united and more solidary European Union.

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