

## Not in Party Mood

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In the weekend of 9 and 10 December, the European Union celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Maastricht Treaty. But European leaders and their citizens seemed not to be in the mood to party as the celebrations went largely unnoticed by the general public. As 2016 is slowly coming to an end, the EU, confronted with its worst crisis to date, looks back at an ‘annus horribilis’. However, entering the 2017 super election year with elections in the Netherlands, France, Germany, probably Italy and potentially Austria, European leaders should take a step back and use this occasion to find inspiration in the achievements of European integration in order to reflect on the future course of the European project.

Back in 1991, the mood was very different: Europe had just emerged from a phase of ‘Eurosclerosis’ in the late 1970s and early 80s and there was a spirit of optimism as a result of the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In this context, the heads of state of what was then the European Community (EC) met in the Dutch city of Maastricht to finalise the negotiations on the new Treaty. Indeed, the Maastricht Treaty is considered to be one of the cornerstones of European integration – despite the very different interests and positions of the twelve Member States back then. The Treaty presented a qualitative jump towards the EU as the political and economic entity we know today as it designed its architecture and created its legal framework.

However, 25 years after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, disillusionment has long come to the fore. The EU is facing its worst crisis to date: it is confronted with the drastic rise of Eurosceptic forces all over Europe that challenge the values of our open and liberal society. The decision of the British people to leave the EU has set a dangerous precedent for the disintegration of the EU. Terrorist attacks, such as the one in Brussels in March 2016 have continued to erode the feeling of security Europeans used to have. While the economic and societal divisions stemming from the fallout of the European sovereign debt and economic crisis still leaves northern and southern European Member States and societies divided, the refugee crisis has opened another dividing line between the EU’s west and east. In addition, the instability in the EU’s neighbourhood due the conflicts in Ukraine and the civil war in Syria mixed with the uncertainty that comes with the new US President Trump adds another – external – layer of challenges for the EU.

Europe’s status quo reflects that the ambitious goals of the Maastricht Treaty remain incomplete even today. Indeed, the assessment of its achievements remains rather sobering. This holds particularly true for the European Monetary Union (EMU). The Treaty laid its foundation adding clear political goals to the formerly mainly economic motifs that drove European reunification until then. However, since the actual introduction of the common currency in 2002, the rules for a stable euro that came with it – the so-called Maastricht criteria – were constantly bent or broken, not only by countries of the southern periphery but also by European heavyweights like Germany and France. Today, it is widely acknowledged that the EMU has remained incomplete and insufficiently equipped to deal with economic and financial divergences among its Member States. Europe’s sovereign debt crisis has exposed the deficiencies in the governance of the EMU, highlighted the limits of its framework of policy cooperation, and exposed the imbalances between eurozone members.

Indeed, in the years before the crisis, the necessity for a robust economic and fiscal union alongside the common currency was significantly neglected. Still today, despite a general consensus, the eurozone has only insufficiently tackled these structural flaws. There has been no common ground and many missed opportunities to move towards real economic and fiscal governance entailing better economic coordination. Even worse, in the light of elections in major eurozone countries in 2017 the topic of eurozone reform has completely fallen of the radar in the political debate.

Yet, it would fall too short to deny the achievements that came with the Maastricht Treaty. The outgoing President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz rightly pointed out recently, that ‘some argue that the Maastricht Treaty left us with half-baked tools with which to meet a very ambitious new agenda. The truth is that European leaders often failed to build on the framework which the Maastricht Treaty established’<sup>1</sup>. Being far from perfect, the political motifs of the Maastricht Treaty reflect an outstanding European spirit and demonstrate the political will of European Member States to commit to a unique common project in order to overcome war and conflict on the continent and to embark on a path of seemingly unlimited opportunities. In these difficult times, the EU should be prouder of its achievements such as the common currency, the single market and the Schengen area and show more self-confidence towards those that challenge the European idea and its values. At the same time, however, intense reflection and hard work is needed to bring the EU back on track. It is logical that the European project requires permanent maintenance, but the unfinished business European leaders have accumulated over the years is overwhelming. Still, it is important to highlight that the European project is the best of all choices in the light of global trends and regarding Europe’s prosperity. Those who believe that going it alone as a single nation state will work out are completely mistaken.

Under the impression of the Brexit vote European leaders kicked off the Bratislava process making an effort ‘to offer to European citizens a vision of an attractive EU they can trust and support’<sup>2</sup>. Acknowledging that the EU is not perfect but the best instrument available to meet common challenges, they have sketched out three areas – migration and external borders, internal and external security, and economic and social development, youth – in which they deem common solutions necessary. While the ambition of the proposals is disappointing as it simply reflects the least common denominator between the Member States to ensure delivering results, it is at least a step in the right direction. The results shall be presented at the celebrations of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in March 2017 – another cornerstone of European integration. Whether the mood will be any more festive than it is now remains to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> Europe Calling! Maastricht, 25 years on: Forum asks what’s next for the European Union?, 5 December 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/sponsored-content/europe-calling-maastricht-25-years-on/>

<sup>2</sup> Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap, 16 September 2016, <http://www.eu2016.sk/en/press-releases/bratislava-summit-outcome-bratislava-declaration-and-roadmap>