



THE STATE OF THE UNION

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THE STATE OF OUR UNSETTLED UNION

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2014 will be a year of transition for the European Union according to Brigid Laffan, Director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.

May's European Parliamentary elections will be held in the shadow of the Great Recession and the re-emergence of hard geo-politics to the east. They will also be the first elections since the Lisbon Treaty changed the dynamics between Europe's institutions.

The Treaty grants more powers to the Parliament, but this is the first time the new dynamics will be tested, as all sides seek to better understand the implications.

According to Laffan this dynamic will be governed by four phenomena.

Contestation and politicization are here to stay

"The union must move beyond the politics of 'There is no alternative' because there cannot be democratic politics without voice and choice."

More Europe

Despite an anticipated increase in representation for Euro sceptic parties the EU looks likely to increase financial integration after the failures of the Eurozone crisis. "Co-responsibility within the euro area comes at the price of responsiveness at domestic level...Already the euro area has been forced into deeper integration which in turn creates tension with those outside."

Yet further differentiation

Until the 1990s membership of the EU implied agreement on a "common constitutional and legal order." This is no longer the case. The euro area has become the core of the Union; however there are countries that have opted out (UK, Denmark and Sweden) and those who have not yet joined creating tension between members of the separate groups. The Union may also wish to adjust its privileged partnership strategy to take into account the large nations on its border (Turkey, Ukraine and possibly the UK).

The return of geo-politics and hard security

During its formation the EU was insulated from geo-politics by a global bi-polar system and the protection of NATO. After the fall of the Berlin Wall the successful and peaceful unification of the continent reinforced. "The EU's self-understanding as an inward looking peace loving power built on the deployment of 'soft power'". The emergence of the Ukrainian crisis has tested "the capacity of the Union to collectively agree on core foreign policy interests."

The crisis has also reasserted the EU's energy policy in geo-political terms.

Laffan ended her speech with a message for Europe's political leaders post-election as they seek to re-build trust. "The effects of unemployment and welfare cuts on the vulnerable in society undermine a core European value, a commitment to well-being for all. Although achieving a rational macro-economic policy is problematic in the Union, mass unemployment and growing inequality should not be tolerated as a 'new normal'. At issue is the question of whether the euro area will offer a return to prosperity for all, or just constrain governments."

1. Do not be complacent.
2. Do not be tempted by big bang treaty changes.
3. Focus on the big questions.
4. Focus on the global.
5. Bite the bullet on limited fiscal federalism.
6. Recognise the trials and tribulations of reform.

"The Union has achieved an enormous amount in just 60 short years and we should have confidence as Europeans to face and find a future that builds on our values, institutions and creativity."

Professor Brigid Laffan, Director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies was speaking at the 2014 State of the Union conference, an annual conference of high-level reflection on the European Union held at the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence and organised by the European University Institute.

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