

**GROUPING SHOWS HOW SOFT POWER CAN WORK**

# EU's grand enterprise still offers much to the world

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The European Union (EU) has undergone a number of crises, leading many observers to question the grouping's supranational model, which has been largely unchanged since the 1950s. In Britain, the Tory party has mooted an EU exit referendum and it remains unclear how the long-standing controversy of the United Kingdom's membership in the EU will pan out.

However, a closer scrutiny suggests the EU has a favourable scorecard. Above all, it has brought rule of law, transparency and accountability from the national level to the international level. The EU addresses problems that economic globalisation has brought to its member states and citizens. Without the EU, political and economic uncertainties would be deeper.

The problem with the EU then could be one of perception. When it steps in to save a bank everybody hears about it, but few recognise that it may be due to financial mismanagement at Wall Street.

When the EU limits toxic substances, it is often seen as Brussels meddling in national affairs, while in fact it enhances consumer safety and opens a single market for corporations. Twenty-eight national procedures have been replaced by a single and common one. This is simplification, not bureaucracy.

Recently, the EU Commission published a plan to reduce carbon dioxide emission in 2030 to 40 per cent of the 1990-level and for renewables to provide 27 per cent of energy in 2030. The plan immediately met with opposition, but critics conveniently ignore how the US or other major countries approach the issue.

## STRENGTH IN THE COLLECTIVE

There are huge and intangible benefits to be accrued from pooling sovereignty and exercising it in common with adjacent countries to pursue analogous goals.

In this era of globalisation, sovereignty does not consist of defending yourself against what comes from the outside world. It consists of shaping international rules and avoiding the trap of being blocked from implementing domestic policies by rules and reg-

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Searching for compromises and consensus, the EU has reached a state of political maturity that, if introduced globally, would be praiseworthy. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

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analysis shows that 143,000 citizens from other EU countries pay taxes with only 39 documented cases of abuse found.

## AS A SOCIETAL MODEL

Searching for compromises and consensus, the EU has reached a state of political maturity that, if introduced globally, would be praiseworthy. The price is a sometimes cumbersome and time-consuming decision-making process — but this is a price worth paying.

In the latest treaty, Europe's identity has been defined as follows: “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the EU was instrumental in preventing confrontations of ethnic or religious nature among the central and eastern European. The follow-up is the Eastern Partnership reaching out to countries further away, including Ukraine. Politicians there oppose it because it embodies a society attractive to their citizens by attacking nepotism and other forms of power abuse.

The EU, through stating its identity, shows how soft power can work. It is a grand enterprise pushing the Europeans towards solving problems in common instead of towards self-serving measures. Some would like to keep the EU purely as a trade forum. But the EU has developed into a societal model offering its citizens, and indeed the world, much more.

ulations introduced by international organisations.

Individually, European countries cannot tackle the global economic crisis. If there were no EU, European countries would be undercutting employment in neighbouring nations, starting a wave of competitive devaluations that leave no one better off. This happened in the 1970s and early 1980s, not to forget the 1930s.

The euro is often criticised for being a political rather than an economic project. It is both. The preamble of the treaty sets the aim of “an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe”. In modern times, no one has tried so ambitious a project. Unsurprisingly, the rules were not complete. Shortcomings and flaws have appeared, but they are being repaired. Gradually, these gaps are being filled or clarified.

Some countries, in particular Britain, postulate that immigrants from other EU countries are guilty of unscrupulously collecting welfare benefits connected to the free movement of labour. It sounds good as an election slogan, especially for politicians beating the drum of populism. However, a study undertaken by a consultancy for the EU Commission suggests the truth is quite the opposite.

In most EU countries, the portion of EU migrants among welfare beneficiaries is below 5 per cent and they contribute more in taxes than they receive in benefits. In Denmark, possibly the country with the most lavish welfare system in the EU, an