

## Europe Matters

H. Werner Hess SCMP 9 May 2014 C5

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When asked about ‘the European Union’, a local manager (daily EU contact) defined it as a *‘supranational and elite body, which ordinary EU citizens would not care about except getting benefits/grants’*. Ask the average Hong Konger and the question just draws a blank face. Indeed, ‘the EU’ does not have a positive press: 28 squabbling statelets ritually trying to ‘make peace’, mired in economic problems, with little internal harmony. Add to that: over-complex decision-making structures, wasteful public expenditure and a bloated administration. These are common stereotypes. They are misleading.

Peace is not a mean achievement. The word is code for adherence to binding principles in all political and social action: Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and the respect for human rights, which alone secure long-term well-being of citizens. As the Ukraine crisis demonstrates, ignoring such ‘values’ carries a high price domestically and internationally. Aggressive ‘big power’ politics, manipulation of public opinion and the suppression of internal dissent are unlikely to be helpful. No wonder that to a majority of Ukrainians the EU still remains a beacon of hope. But by the very nature of Europe’s endlessly chattering, open societies, peaceful reconciliation and well-being cannot be had without drawn-out debate and complicated compromise. Europe’s proven long-term strength, in fact, is the very absence of harmony.

But the EU is also based on a prosperity promise. It is and remains the world’s largest economy. Defying all doomsday predictions, the Eurozone has not collapsed. Recently, its shared currency has been appreciating significantly. New common institutions like the European Stability Mechanism and the Banking Union are being shaped. All signs point to a gradual, sustainable recovery. A new pan-European study also shows that over time the EU does indeed bring benefits: Today’s GDP of the traditionally ‘euro-sceptic’ UK, for example, is 25% higher than it would be without the EU. The gains are even higher for, say, Ireland (+43%) or Latvia (+53%). Despite recent setbacks, EU membership clearly pays, as does adherence to its core principles.

Nonetheless, the EU needs to do more to address internal imbalances of structural economic change and, in particular, the current dramatic unemployment figures in some member states – a major objective, in fact, for all serious contenders in the upcoming EU Parliament elections this month. Due to treaty changes, this parliament will play a bigger role in European decision-making than before. So we can expect far greater emphasis on internal ‘social cohesion’, more joint action in fields like consumer rights and protection from global financial rip-offs, robust energy and trade policies, the preservation of data privacy and freedom of information. Moreover, the parliament will decisively influence the composition of the new European Commission later this year.



That allegedly 'bloated elite body' is in reality a shining model of parsimoniousness, with just 6% of its expenditure earmarked for its bureaucrats – whereas 94% flow back to coordinated projects in member states, from which all citizens profit. So, yes, the EU (with a budget of actually less than 1% of EU GDP) is indeed a distributor of 'benefits'. But it is money well spent: By far the biggest portion of funds until 2020 is earmarked for supporting sustainable economic growth, innovation and job creation.

It is a truism that global problems cannot be solved alone. But it makes a difference how they are tackled. The EU rightly sees 'people-to-people' contact as a main pillar of its public diplomacy. The European Union Academic Programme Hong Kong (EUAP), for example, provides a local platform for such direct exchange among professionals on all levels, in public administration and non-governmental groupings, in business, science, culture or education. Substantial sums have just been dedicated to the further expansion of a joint European Research Area (Horizon 2020). Funding for its very successful educational flagship programme Erasmus+ (from which Hong Kongers can also profit) has been raised by 40%. Solving problems of the future (such as climate change and urbanization) is a collaborative multi-level task, involving states, regions, cities and communes, citizens' action groups and private or business initiatives alike. A view of the EU as a top-down bureaucratic machinery is lopsided. Behind peremptorily announced policy targets is a constantly murmuring network of critical dialogue and a vast de-centralized laboratory of ideas and experiments on subnational 'grassroots levels'. The EU's very core 'values', in fact, support a system in which citizens constantly challenge 'elites' to rethink and revise planning. That is a good thing. In order to understand the EU better, we should perhaps re-direct attention from the sterile rhetoric of 'big power' relations to this vast and fundamentally democratic bottom-up process inside the Union. It would be wise to look at what Europeans actually do, how they live and how they innovate. It would be an eye-opener to many here in Hong Kong.

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Over 30 participants of the EUAP Summer EU Top-up Programme 2013 visited the headquarters of European Commission in Brussels.



In association with the European Union Office to Hong Kong and Macao, 43 participants of the recent EUAP Model European Union represented different EU member states to simulate the European Council decision-making process.

The European Union Academic Programme (EUAP) is a consortium of four universities in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Baptist University, The University of Hong Kong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and Lingnan University), co-financed by the European Union. It is designed to strengthen EU-Hong Kong relations through academic work and enhance the understanding of the EU.



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