

## A false dawn for Europe?

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It's only the beginning of February but can we start talking about 2024 being a good year for Europe? Despite all the dark clouds on the horizon, is Europe starting the year with a bright new dawn ushered in by the agreement on a € 50 billion aid package for Ukraine and the new post-Brexit arrangements in Northern Ireland? We journalists are often accused of only focusing on the bad news. This, surely, counts as good news?

Sorry to disappoint, but I'm going to give my *déformation professionnelle* free rein: What good news? We're talking about a, especially if the US doesn't step up, wholly inadequate aid package necessitated by a devastating and hugely dangerous and destabilising war in Europe's eastern region. And in Northern Ireland we're talking about a barely adequate, in all likelihood temporary, patch for a tiny subcategory of the huge self-inflicted wound to European unity and prosperity that is Brexit. But sure, agreement is in the main preferable to disagreement, even small signs of European unity and UK-EU *détente* are to be welcomed after the Johnson years, and Truss weeks, and both pieces of news are in themselves more good than bad.

One of many problems with looking at the bright side, though, is that we've been here before. When Europe and the US pulled together in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years ago, the self-congratulatory smokescreen in the West almost obscured the glaring shortcomings in the backing that Ukraine received. Now it looks even more as if the West is willing to confront Russia to the last Ukrainian. Maybe the response is carefully calibrated to avoid an even greater conflagration. Or, cynics might say, it is even more carefully calibrated to keep the conflict going, keep Russia bleeding steadily without giving the Ukrainians what they need in a timely fashion in order to be able to deliver Putin a knockout blow. Russia being Russia, it might be misguided to think it can actually be knocked out. But the current status quo is unlikely to be a good starting point to arrive at a ceasefire. That is much more likely to happen if the situation on the ground reverted to the status quo ante.

Often, the way things are actually going is hidden in the fine print. In the case of last week's EU announcement, that would be the Bloc's failure to meet its targets to supply Ukraine with munitions. It wasn't exactly swept under the carpet but was surely overshadowed by the giddiness in Brussels over having confronted Orban and the undeniable heft of the financial commitment. The money will keep Ukraine functioning as a state but without the shells, that could become a very big price tag for a state structure in exile. Europeans were once more urged to ramp up production but two years into the war and one year away from a quite possible second Trump presidency and its consequences for European defence, it frankly beggars belief that not more has been done in terms of developing the continent's defence industry and capacity. It's hugely unhelpful to always hark back to the last major European conflagration that enveloped the world, but at least by 1940 the RAF had been stood up to such a degree that it could win the Battle of Britain that lasted almost a year. Now the Commons' Defence committee has been told that the country's armed forces would only be able to hold out for two months. The rest of Europe is in all likelihood in even worse shape. In terms of defence, it always

is. This is not to say that war with Russia is inevitable, and it's certainly not desirable. But one of the surest ways to prevent it is to bolster Ukraine militarily and improve the continent's own defence capacity.

Northern Ireland almost seems small beer compared to the charnel house that's eastern Ukraine. But a quarter century after the Good Friday agreements mostly put a stop to it, people apparently need reminding that the conflict there has its own bloody history. A reminder is also needed, it seems, to point out that the Brexit decision eight years ago recklessly undermined the achievements of that pact. It's odd actually that this all still needs to be emphasised, after, for example, Theresa May's government fell in 2019 over one attempt to square the circle created by the incompatibility between Brexit and the Good Friday agreements. Her infamous backstop would, in case of the lack of alternative mechanisms, have kept the UK in the EU's single market, to the Brexiteers' fury. Boris Johnson's botched attempt, the Northern Ireland protocol, was the next non-solution solution to fall by the wayside when Northern Ireland's main unionist party, the DUP, withdrew from the Stormont government over Brexit checks in the Irish Sea in 2022. It refused to return later that year after the nationalists of Sinn Fein for the first time pipped it to become the largest party. Next, Rishi Sunak came up with the Windsor framework, modifying the protocol to appease the DUP. And now there's a new agreement that again modifies the modification. Does anyone really believe that this will be the end of it?

Fudges can work, but for how long? My instinct is to get worried when terms such as constructive ambiguity get bandied about. It's not just that. At the best of times, Stormont was not even an arranged marriage, let alone a marriage of convenience, but more like a forced cohabitation. The DUP's latest gambit to wring concessions from Westminster and the EU was by no means the first time that power sharing had been held ransom and certainly not every hiatus can be ascribed to unionist peccadillos. Whatever local factors were addressed in each subsequent agreement to resume it, Westminster was heavily involved with an array of carrots and sticks. What will happen when one of the current carrots, over GBP 3 billion in funds for Northern Ireland, has been largely disbursed or other encouragements have been absorbed? Or when there's more significant divergence between the UK and the EU on some of the areas that fall under the agreement? Or when either side of the divide in Stormont feels that its legitimate interests are again at stake or simply that it needs to do some grandstanding to appeal to its base? As a professional naysayer, I'd wager that this is not the end of it, just as it's clear as daylight that the EU's € 50 billion Ukraine package is not the end of that.