

# Introduction

*The Tenth International scientific conference „The State of the European Union – a need for unity and solidarity,“ organised by the European Studies Department of Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ with the kind support of Hanns Seidel Foundation and Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies took place in Sofia on 1-2 June 2023.*

*Each year the Department of European Studies and its Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence become a hub of debate as university professors and experts gather to discuss the key challenges and opportunities facing Europe and Europeans. Each year's edition of the conference is unique in its focus in order to match the changes in Europe and in the world. The Tenth conference is focused on the state of the European Union and the need for unity and solidarity.*

*Determining the current state of the Union is much more complicated than talking about its future. The story of Odysseus and his sailors, who had to steer their ship between two great dangers – Scylla and Charybdis, on their way home, is relevant to the current state of the European Union. It is clear that European Union operates in a complicated environment of many risks and challenges for the European ship – „weaponization“ of economic interdependence, heavy dependence on imports of rare metals and other strategic materials, aggressive US protectionism, assertive behaviour of China. The trade and technology war between the US and China is not without consequences for the European Union. In the current complex conditions, rivalry has become simultaneously an economic competition and a security competition.*

*How to turn dangers and risks into opportunities? How to address the challenges demanding a quick response or requiring „out of the box“ thinking? Is Europe able to ensure its own stability and security? How to keep the right balance in this new world? Do Europeans have the necessary skills to deal with the digital transition, cyber threats and disinformation?*

*These questions need not only the right answers and quick practical actions. To face the risks and challenges, the EU needs above all **unity** and **solidarity**. Herman van Rompuy – former President of the European Council openly chided euro-sceptics: „The belief to be able to survive on your own in a globalised world is not just a delusion, but a lie.“ But is it possible to be united in stressful situations without having mutual trust? Trust among the EU Member states, toward and within the EU institutions is a key ingredient for successful crisis management.*

*The need for unity is related to **solidarity**. Due to the interdependence between European states, a new sense of solidarity and responsibility toward each other is desperately needed. What we learned is that solidarity is not charity, but on the contrary, a contract: each party fulfils its obligations. Solidarity in the EU has never been an easy and uncomplicated act, but solidarity was a vehicle in the common progress of the integration process. Solidarity has never been, and cannot be, a sentimental idea of utopian dreamers. It constitutes an element of a pragmatic calculation of interests and will probably continue to do so. The solidarity among the Member States constitutes an element of the „package deal“ system relating liberalisation to redistribution. Jacques*

*Delors' triptych of „competition that encourages, cooperation that strengthens and solidarity that unites“ springs to mind as most adequate. Solidarity to achieve cohesion among all Member States should be its key element. The huge socioeconomic differences among the Member States and the regions serve no one and safeguard the interests of neither the rich, nor the poor countries. If those differences do not diminish, EU would find it difficult to remain stable and to progress along the path of integration.*

*The conference generated great interest and lively discussions on a wide variety of topics, united by a common commitment to the EU unity and solidarity. Leading European experts and academics as keynote speakers – Loukas Tsoukalis – Sciences Po, Paris, Peter Hefele – Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and Damian Tambini – London School of Economics turned the conference into a remarkable event. The participants from Belgium, Croatia, Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, UK, China, Brazil from different sectors and backgrounds and of course a lot of colleagues from Bulgarian Universities contributed to looking at Europe from different angles and hearing different points of view. The questions asked by the students who attended the conference also enlivened the discussion. Despite the diverse topics and different points of view, presented during the conference, we all agreed that preserving the EU unity and solidarity is a prerequisite for addressing the risks and the challenges.*

*I cannot but express my gratitude to everyone who helped to hold the conference – Hanns Seidel Foundation, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the members of the organising committee, the House of Europe in Sofia, the speakers, the students and all the participants in the discussions.*

*The Department of European Studies has a tradition to name every promotion of bachelor students after the name of an outstanding European. I would like to mention a truly relevant quote by the patron of 2021-2025 promotion – Erich Maria Remarque:*

*„The pale light of the Apocalypse hangs over the world again, the smell of blood and the dust of the last devastation have not yet flown away, and laboratories and factories are again working at full steam to preserve the peace by inventing weapons by which the whole globe can be thrown into the air... Peace on earth! It was never more talked about, and never less ruled about, than in our time; never have there been more false prophets, more lies and more death, never more destruction and more tears than in our twentieth century - the century of progress, technology and civilization, the century of mass culture and mass murder...“*

*To conclude, when war again rages on the European continent, when people are killed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when millions are forced to leave their homes, when destruction and devastation destroy human achievements and human lives, we need to remind the lessons of the history. We should never forget that the European Union is the most incredible and successful peace project in human history.*

*Ingrid Shikova  
President of the Scientific Committee  
of the Tenth International conference  
„The State of the European Union – a need for unity and solidarity“*