

“Our Time for Leadership” - Roberta Metsola speaks at Columbia.

By Mitchell Rutledge

Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament, urges the European Union (EU) to step up as a global leader while keeping its people’s concerns at the center of its actions. In a speech at Columbia University followed by a conversation with Minouche Shafik, President of Columbia University, during United Nations week, Metsola spoke on the changing world order, the need for Europe to take a lead and for policymakers to remain attentive to the concerns of voters.

Metsola emphasized the need for all decisions concerning the policies being passed in the EU to be “human-centric.” The Maltese politician’s insistence on the need for human-centric policies is inspired by the rising influence of the “political fringes” and geopolitical sands shifting to a multipolar world.

Throughout her speech and in a personal interview*, Metsola stressed the need to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia's illegal and brutal war. She explained that the EU has no option to reject Ukraine from joining the EU and that “we would be so much better if we flung open our door wide.” Since the war started the Union and its Member States have opened the borders to more than 4.1 million migrants from Ukraine, providing \$42 billion in financial support, and supplying weapons. Metsola attributed all of this to the transformational powers of Europe and the need to not disappoint as “the EU has disappointed in the past.”

The President of the European Parliament also mentioned the need for a new perception of security urging the EU and NATO to reinforce the pillars of their cooperation. In addition to EU-NATO cooperation Metsola would like to see “the use of budgetary resources to be more efficient in our common defense policy.” Her hope for a more efficient use of funds in the EU’s common defense policy is one that is not shared by all. As a domain that the Member States still control, it will be up to the EU politicians and national politicians to figure out. The end goal, however, is the same for Metsola: “It is about defending our values.”

Metsola stressed the importance of EU and US leadership as they are two of the strongest blocks on the planet and their relationship is vital to the global economy. “We have started to put the building blocks in place,” to remain competitive in the global market while tackling the hard challenges the EU faces, she explains citing the Chips Act, Digital Markets Act, Digital Services Act, and pro-innovation AI Act. She took pride in noting that these acts allow the EU to set the “standards the rest of the world will follow,” ensuring the distribution of EU values – which is one of the EU’s most influential geopolitical tools coined “the Brussels Effect” by Anu Bradford at Columbia Law School.

On the green transition, Metsola dismissed the criticism that it is not possible to have a green energy transition that is profitable. She explained that there needs to be investment with a human-centric approach putting in place safety nets and incentives for industry as well as citizens affected by the transition. “We will not manage to continue to embark on such unprecedented climate legislation if we don’t explain what we are doing, if we don’t cushion the impact, and we don’t listen to those who tell us I cannot afford it.” During the COVID-19 crisis the EU dispensed a number of funding schemes to help combat the pandemic and economic consequences, but it is unsure if these same funding schemes – that are being used on the green transition – will remain in place. Metsola explained that “the post-pandemic NextGenerationEU funds have an effect on improving the competitiveness of the European economy.” There will need to be a serious conversation by all parties on what the green transition in Europe will look

like – which will require coordination with the United States. “Now the world needs Europe and the US to keep stepping up... if we do not fulfill our inherited duty to lead then someone else with a very different value set to ours will.”

Looking to the future, Metsola is seeking out the youth to lead the way. “The future of the EU is in the hands of young people,” she explained in a personal interview. This hope is coupled with the fear of far-right parties gaining momentum across Europe inspiring rhetoric, actions, and legislation that go against the core values of the Union. “A few years ago, we saw a number of political forces suggesting that it would be better to leave the EU,” Metsola explained. When asked how she plans to combat the desire for people to join these movements and move to the political fringes, Metsola answered that “we need to do a better job of communicating the benefits of the EU, which are many and very relevant, to citizens... We also need the input of our citizens. Their voice counts.” The Maltese politician draws on her own experience in trying to convince the citizens of Malta to join the EU. “It was hard to convince the older generation in Malta to join the EU as they thought ‘The EU will impose things on us that are no good for us.’” In order to convince Europeans of the same Metsola wishes to “consolidate the constructive pro-European center of the political arena.” She sees the pro-European center as the driving force – and only force – behind the common project that is the EU. What this structural political change means for ordinary citizens is unclear, but Metsola is hopeful.

Stressing the importance of citizen participation, Metsola wants Europeans to go to the ballot box this coming year for the EU elections: “The 2024 European elections matter, because they will set-up the direction for Europe for the coming 5 years.” In the past two decades, the turnout for EU parliamentary elections by the EU citizenry has not reached over 51%. With Russia’s war of aggression threatening democracy in Ukraine, European power being questioned by the rise of Chinese influence, and the fear that the US is no longer a reliable partner, it will be intriguing to see the outcome of the coming EU elections. Refusing “to identify with a politics that excludes” Metsola’s hope is to see a stronger, more unified EU led by the youth as it is now the “time for leadership and we cannot be found wanting.”

** Quotes in this article have been used from Roberta Metsola’s speech and conversation with Minouche Shafik at Columbia University as well as from a personal interview conducted by Mitchell Rutledge, student in the MA program in European History, Politics, and Society at the European Institute, Columbia University.*

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