

# ARTICLE

## THREE QUESTIONS FOR PIERRE SELLAL, FORMER PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF FRANCE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION, ABOUT THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL MEETING ON FEBRUARY 9TH, 2023

| 20/02/23 | Pierre Sellal

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### 1. What was the purpose of this meeting?

This was an "special" meeting of the European Council (the ordinary spring meeting will be held on March 23rd and 24th next), which should have focused mostly on the migration situation, due to the rapid increase in the flow of migrants to Europe, especially "illegal" migrants, since the end of the health crisis.

With President Zelensky's presence in Brussels at the time, the Heads of state or government ended up dedicating a good part of their discussion to the situation in Ukraine. They reiterated their support to him and their conviction that "*Ukraine's future lies in the European Union*", but without committing to a timetable for the opening of accession negotiations, not to mention for their conclusion. In a nutshell, EU enlargement policy remains as "conditional" as ever.

They also discussed the economic situation, "*in the face of the new geopolitical reality*" which requires increased efforts on the part of the EU to ensure its long-term competitiveness and prosperity.

### 2. What are the key takeaways from the talks where migration is concerned?

For several years now the EU has been experiencing great difficulties in defining and implementing its migration policy. This situation stems from the complexity of the issues at stake, from the impact of crises outside Europe, but also from differences between the Member States arising out their geographical location or the domestic political options open to them. Three conclusions came out of the meeting on February 9th: consensus around the objective of "*reducing pressure*" on EU borders; a commitment to ensuring effective control of the EU's external borders; and the identification of a means of achieving that objective, namely a more efficient returns process. These conclusions stand out by their firmness, as reflected by the call to make use of all means available to the EU, including trade and development policies and instruments. In contrast, no progress has been made on issues on which Member States are divided, such as the definition of a common asylum policy or the distribution of protected migrants across EU countries.

### 3. What about new commitments in the economic sphere?

In the wake of the Covid pandemic, which showed up dependencies in Europe, and now with the war in Ukraine, which has shown up the vulnerabilities of the EU and of its Member States, everyone recognizes the need to strengthen the continent's economic, industrial and technological base and to accelerate its adaptation to ecological and digital transitions. Differences of opinion remain, however, as to how to go about this. Should we relax State aid rules to allow Member States to better support local manufacturing? The Commission is going down this path, but in a limited and temporary way, while recalling the requirements of unity and integrity of the Single Market. Should a collective financial effort be made of the type implemented by the post-Covid Recovery Plan, including pooled borrowing? In the absence of a common approach the question remains open, pending the proposal for a "*European Sovereignty Fund*" that the Commission plans to present by this summer.

