



The voice of Maria Dolens

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Happy 2026, Europe

It appears quite evident, if we observe the current international situation and consider the converging analyses of the leading political commentators, that Europe is undergoing perhaps the most complex phase in its recent history. By "Europe" I am deliberately referring to the continent as a whole, encompassing a broader area than the -albeit large - one represented by the European Union and its 27 member states. Taking Great Britain's presence for granted, it certainly includes the Western Balkans, which have been seeking accession to Brussels for several years, as well as to other states that are also "in the Cham-

pions League," if I may borrow a football metaphor -countries preparing, with varying and often uncertain prospects, to pursue that same path.

In the not too distant past, the European (or, more appropriately, pan-European) area was even broader, commonly described as stretching "from Lisbon to Vladivostok." This definition was no coincidence: it largely overlapped with the membership of the Council of Europe, the Strasbourg-based continental organisation tasked with promoting democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights.

IN THIS EDITION

04

One in five children in the world today lives in an area of armed conflict
The denied future

05

Storms in Gaza
Winter in the Strip: the plight of Gaza's children

06

Serious humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Nigeria and Ethiopia
Hunger and armed conflict

08

The Olympic Torch at the Bell
A symbol of Peace

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However, as is well known, since February 2022 the situation has changed radically. Even in Europe -which had remained largely free from armed conflict since the Second World War, with the tragic exception of the collapse of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s - the winds of war have begun blowing again, prompting widespread concern.

Against this backdrop, many fear that Europe may be headed toward a future of irreversible decline, as it is crushed by the increasingly assertive rise of global superpowers whose internal systems differ markedly from those enshrined in our constitutions. These systems are heavily skewed toward “strong executives” and lack effective mechanisms for overseeing and restraining their exercise of power.

It is particularly troubling, in light of the emergence of the “new American security doctrine,” that

the United States appears poised to withdraw from our continent the protective umbrella -comprised of both military assets and troops on the ground -that has effectively safeguarded Europe from 1945 to the present day. This development exposes a fundamental weakness in Europe: its inability to provide for and guarantee its own defence against potential external threats, whether conventional or even “hybrid” in nature.

Another limitation frequently highlighted in connection with today’s topic (here referring specifically to the Union), is the excessive bureaucratic rigidity that has accompanied it since its foundation. This rigidity often becomes an almost insurmountable obstacle to fostering innovation, addressing current technological challenges, competing with the United States and China in the leading economic sectors, and, ultimately, pursu-

ing its own process of integration with sufficient determination. As a result, a market of 450 million consumers and the world’s second-largest GDP are unable to fully assert their weight on the global stage, at times even finding themselves compelled, as recently occurred with their U.S. “ally”, to accept markedly unbalanced agreements on tariffs, investment, or energy purchases.

According to most observers, Europe’s structural weakness originates in, and is largely attributable to, the principle of unanimity, which, with the exception of a very limited number of policy areas, remains a true cornerstone of the Brussels institutions. On closer inspection, this principle is the exact counterpart to the right of veto granted in New York to the five permanent members of the UN. These internal “architectures” were fully acceptable in the post-Second World War period and in the years immediately thereafter, but they no longer appear suited to the demands for greater dynamism and flexibility in a constantly evolving “new world.” It is no coincidence that both the European Union and the United Nations have emerged as major losers in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict: beyond fulfilling their duty to provide humanitarian assistance, they have exerted no real influence over the parties involved and, as a result, have played no meaningful role in advancing a negotiated solution. It is also no coincidence that the substantial ‘uselessness’ of both organisations has been expressed on several occasions and in totally discordant terms by both US President Trump and his Russian counterpart Putin, who share a common design to undermine the principles of multilateralism and to create the preconditions for a global order based on relations of force, giving concrete form to the *might takes right* formula.

In order to counter this worrying authoritarian drift, I consider it essential that what Europe has achieved from 1957 to the present (summarised in the term *acquis communautaire*), be properly valued and safeguarded against any potential challenges, even if only partial.

Beyond the existing “construction errors”, some of which we have briefly touched upon and which are, moreover, inevitable in a structure of such complexity, Europe remains by far the part of the world where the values of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights (above all, the rights of all minorities), gender equality, and social solidarity find the widest affirmation, accompanied, if need be, by instruments of adequate protection. Two figures speak volumes about the privileged position our continent offers its inhabitants: just 7% of the world’s population accounts for 25% of total global welfare spending.

Speaking recently, with his customary sensitivity and political acumen, at the annual conference of Italian ambassadors, President Mattarella expressed himself with extreme clarity and equally decisive assertiveness in defence of Europe and its values. I quote below

one of the central passages of his address: “It seems, to say the least, remarkable that at a time when, on the international stage, efforts are being made to unite states and coordinate their aspirations and actions, we are witnessing a disorderly and unjustified attack on the European Union. This portrayal distorts the truth, presenting the EU not as one of history’s successful experiments in democracy and the protection of rights, developed with the support and appreciation of the wider West but rather as an oppressive institution, if not an actual enemy of freedom.”

Based on the considerations above, in the good wishes I send at the start of each year to my circle of friends and acquaintances, I will also symbolically include our Continent, extending to it wishes of “health, success, and happiness” much like those I reserve for individuals.

I would, of course, be delighted if any of my readers felt inspired to do the same, taking this occasion to express from the heart a sincere, “Happy 2026, Europe!”

Reggente Marco Marsilli, Foundation President



ONE IN FIVE CHILDREN IN THE WORLD TODAY
LIVES IN AN AREA OF ARMED CONFLICT

The denied future

More than 520 million children and adolescents are exposed to violence on a daily basis, a figure that reached its all-time peak in 2024. It is not only the number of conflicts recorded - the highest since the end of World War II - that is growing, but also their brutality. Serious violations against children increased by 30% in just one year to over 40,000 confirmed cases. More than half are concentrated in four contexts marked by prolonged wars and chronic instability: Occupied Palestinian Territory, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Somalia.

Behind these figures are broken childhoods and lives suspended among fear, mourning and deprivation. Since 2010, the number of children living in war zones has increased by 60%, while documented violations have increased by 373%. Every day, on average, almost 80 children are killed, mutilated, abducted, sexually as-

saulted, forcibly recruited or attacked in schools and hospitals. Then there is also the denial of access to humanitarian aid, which deprives entire communities of care, food and education, turning survival into a daily challenge.

Since 2005, over 400,000 serious violations have been documented in 33 countries. Almost 160,000 children have been killed or maimed and more than 100,000 recruited or used by groups and armed forces. These figures reveal how war systematically targets those who, by definition, should instead be protected. Yet, despite the evidence, the global approach to security continues to make other choices: less than 2% of the world's expenditure goes towards *peacebuilding* and *peacekeeping*, while defence budgets reach record levels.

In 2024, over 11% of the earth's surface was within 50 kilometres of a conflict and recorded armed clashes



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rose to almost 27,000. This data come from Save the Children, and the same organisation emphasises that true security is not measured in weapons or borders, but in the possibility for every child to live without fear, go to school and grow up protected.

In this context, respect for international humanitarian law is not optional—it is essential. On the contrary, the rules protecting civilians, and in particular minors, in armed conflicts are systematically violated without consequences. Ensuring safe humanitarian access, protecting schools and hospitals, preventing recruitment and ensuring justice for the violations committed are clear responsibilities of the States involved and the parties to the conflict. In many cases, however, the law exists only on paper.

What is needed is an urgent change of course, more investment in conflict prevention, peace and child protection, national strategies based on education for dialogue, and effective justice mechanisms at international and national levels. Most importantly, we need to listen to the voices of children and young people. To ignore them is to accept that war continues to steal not only the present, but also the tomorrow of entire generations. In essence, the future of us all.



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STORMS IN GAZA

Winter in the Strip: the plight of Gaza's children

Storms have hit Gaza again, aggravating a humanitarian situation already teetering on the brink. Torrential rains and freezing temperatures are bringing thousands of families to their knees, forcing them to live in makeshift tents, while children and adolescents remain cut off from crucial protection and support.

According to some humanitarian organisations, the reopening of the Rafah crossing in one direction does not meet the needs of the population trapped in the Strip. Allowing people to leave without guaranteeing the entry of aid, they warn, effectively turns survival into a tool of pressure, pushing Palestinians away from their land. This measure is described as a violation of international humanitarian law, as well as a breach of the commitments outlined in the first phase of the ceasefire plan with Israel.

In the makeshift camps, rainwater floods the tents, soaking blankets and mattresses. Many people spend sleepless nights shivering because all their belongings are drenched. They are in desperate need of tent poles, durable tarpaulins, warm clothes, shoes, and blankets. Restrictions on materials that are considered 'dual-use', i.e. that can be used to offend or to kill, also block the tools required to fix damaged shelters and to work on a sanitation system compromised by two years of bombing.

The consequences particularly affect the youngest children. During the recent storms, half of the 'child-friendly' spaces run by humanitarian organisations were forced to close due to flooding and sewage

contamination. In the areas that have remained open, attendance has dropped sharply: muddy ground and a lack of adequate clothing prevent children from leaving the tents. Services that once offered even minimal psychological support and access to learning have effectively become unreachable.

Despite the restrictions, field workers continue to intervene with locally sourced resources. When possible, families receive winter kits for their homes, protective items for children, and cash aid to cover basic necessities. At the beginning of December, hygiene and nursing kits also arrived, but in insufficient quantities to meet the needs of a population of almost two million people.

Aid workers emphasise that Israel has a legal obligation to guarantee the basic needs of the civilian population. Lifting the siege, opening the crossings in both directions and allowing full and safe humanitarian access is not only a political demand, but a duty under international law. Without these steps, winter risks turning into yet another silent emergency, a price mainly paid by the children of Gaza.





**SERIOUS HUMANITARIAN
CRISES IN AFGHANISTAN,
NIGERIA AND ETHIOPIA**

Hunger and armed conflict

World hunger is entering a critical phase, fuelled by a convergence of factors that go far beyond local emergencies. Armed conflict, climate change, economic shocks and a dramatic decline in humanitarian funding are pushing millions of people towards acute food insecurity. Afghanistan, Nigeria and Ethiopia are three epicentres of this global crisis, all with different contexts but united by the same trajectory of impoverishment and neglect.

In Afghanistan, winter traditionally marks the deadliest period, but this time the risk is unprecedented. According to data published by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) on 16 December, more than 17 million people are in IPC stage 3 or higher, i.e. in acute food

In Afghanistan, winter is the deadliest time, but this time the risk is unprecedented

crisis or emergency conditions. This is about one third of the population, an increase of 3 million compared to last year. In the coming months, 4.9 million women and children will need treatment for malnutrition. Experts point out that infant mortality always increases between December and January, but next year is likely to be devastating in much of Afghanistan.

The crisis stems from a series of overlapping shocks: the worst drought in decades has devastated crops, two major earthquakes have struck already fragile communities, and border closures have caused trade and incomes to collapse. Added to this is the forced return of millions of migrants from Pakistan and Iran: since January 2025, more than 2.5 million people have returned to Afghanistan, while in the last two years the total has reached 4.8 million, about 10% of the population. With the decrease in work abroad, remittances, often the only source of livelihood, have also disappeared.

The picture is aggravated by aid cuts. The WFP needs over 450 million dollars to assist 6 million vulnerable people during the winter, yet it has received funding for only 12% of that amount. By 2023, the shortage of funds had already excluded 10 million people from food aid. Today, most families cut off resort to destructive survival strategies: the sale of productive assets, child labour, withdrawing children from school.



More than 32 million people in Nigeria are suffering from severe food shortages due to armed insurgency

The impact on women is particularly dramatic, with an increase in forced early marriages.

Calls to the telephone lines set up by the WFP to provide psychological assistance record an increasing number of women expressing suicidal thoughts.

A similarly deep crisis is striking Nigeria. According to WFP, more than 30 million people suffer from severe food shortages due to the conflict, internal displacements and rising food prices. The north-east of the country, marked by years of armed insurgency, bears the brunt of the crisis, but food insecurity is also spreading to the north-west and other regions. The devastating floods that hit Maiduguri in September 2024 caused the temporary displacement of more than 400,000 people. WFP managed to provide hot meals to some 78,000

needy people in the first 24 hours, but resources remain insufficient. According to experts, more than two hundred million dollars would be required to assist 1.6 million people in the north-east and prevent a further deterioration of the situation, which could destabilise the entire area.

Today, Ethiopia is also considered a region where the population is at risk of starvation. Conflict, displacement, extreme weather events and economic shocks have pushed more than ten million people into severe food insecurity. These include some 3 million IDPs. The country is also home to more than one million refugees from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan, who are largely dependent on food aid. In some areas, harvests have improved, but in many others, conflict and repeated climatic shocks such as droughts, floods and landslides continue to affect access to food.

In early 2025, WFP reached 3 million people in Ethiopia. However, insecurity in the Amhara region has hampered humanitarian operations and the agency warns that without safe corridors it will not be possible to reach the most vulnerable families. This region is caught in a conflict between the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and the Fano militia coalition.

The clashes started in April 2023

In Ethiopia, insecurity in the Amhara region is hindering aid

with sporadic minor fighting. In August 2023, the Fano militias launched an offensive to take control of the region's major cities. Since then, the situation has deteriorated significantly. According to some estimates, the violence claimed the lives of more than 7,000 people between 2023 and 2025. Now this crisis is compounded by a humanitarian crisis, and international organisations have sounded a further alarm that the financial outlook is alarming. Without new funding, aid organisations warn that more than three and a half million people risk being denied life-saving care.

Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Ethiopia are, sadly, among the parts of the world most affected by hunger—a crisis driven not only by food shortages, but by political decisions, unresolved conflicts, and an international system that appears increasingly incapable of responding to emergencies. Without swift and coordinated action by the international community, the main price of inaction, as always, will mainly be paid by women and children.



THE OLYMPIC TORCH AT THE BELL

A symbol of Peace

The Olympic torch now travelling through Italy in preparation for the 'Milan Cortina 2026' games will be at the Campana dei Caduti on 18 January. This is not a mere ceremonial stop, but a recognition that Maria Dolens is a symbol of Peace, just as that flame represents the ability of nations to engage with one another within a framework of shared rules. Of course, the relay of torchbearers, each carrying the flame along a short segment of the route, which will culminate on February 6 with the inauguration, also serves as an opportunity to promote tourism. Yet the true significance of that fire lies elsewhere, rooted in ancient Greece, where the Games were inseparably linked to the ekecheiria—the sacred truce that suspended conflicts so that athletes and spectators could travel safely to Olympia. That flame embodies the idea that, at least for a time, violence should yield to fair competition, dialogue, and sportsmanship. Not by chance Pindar celebrated the Games as the highest expression of human harmony, noting that "one is the race of men and gods," united by the same light.

Plato, in the famous myth of the cave, saw in light the passage from shadow to awareness, and the Olympic flame carries with it precisely this aspiration: to make visible the idea that sport can educate, elevate and put on an equal footing individuals who differ in origin, language or social status. In ancient times, during the Games, it was the athlete's skill and merit, not his or her origin, that counted, a principle that anticipates the modern idea of equal rights.

Today, the flame that crosses several continents in the run-up to the Olympics renews this vision on a global scale: no people are excluded from its passage, just as no right should be denied. The torch relay then becomes a powerful metaphor for collective responsibility: Peace, like fire, must be guarded and passed on.

In modern times, competition is mostly seen as opposition, sometimes as confrontation. But in ancient thought, sport was thought of as an instrument of social balance. Aristotle recognised exercise as an essential element in the formation of the citizen, because it taught measure, respect for rules and recognition of others. The Olympic flame still recalls these values today, reminding us that genuine competition is not based on exclusion, but on equal starting conditions and respect for all. Only in this dimension does sport become a universal language that promotes human rights.



The rebirth of the flame in the modern Games is therefore not just a tribute to tradition, but a deeply political symbolic act. Lighting the brazier means affirming that the dignity of the person comes before national, ideological or religious divisions. The Olympic flame reminds us that we can challenge one another fairly, guided by rules we all share.

Each leg of the torchbearers' relay reaffirms that sport can be a space for inclusion. Athletes of all kinds, backgrounds and social conditions find in the flame a sign of recognition and equal value. It is a message that resonates with the modern concept of universal human rights, yet it has ancient roots: Solon already connected justice to balance and to the participation of all citizens in the life of the polis.

When the flame reaches the stadium and the brazier is lit, it will not only be inaugurating a sporting event. It will also be renewing a symbolic pact uniting equality and freedom. That fire is a reminder that sport, like democracy, thrives on common rules and mutual respect. For this reason too, the torchbearers' passage at the Colle di Miravalle will stand as one of the Bell's many powerful reminders that Peace is forged each day, in both the small gestures and the grand deeds of our lives.