



Values in freefall



CLINT FLORES

Last week, many of us were surprised with what the European Commission President announced on Twitter

I was still having my first coffee shot at the office when someone sent me a screenshot of the President of the European Commission's tweet, where she informed the public that a delegation was on its way to meet with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. The purpose of the visit relates to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding to primarily increase gas supplies from Azerbaijan to Europe through the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP).

At that point I stopped for a minute to understand whether this is a geopolitical game or a quick fix to secure gas supplies and save Europeans from a cold winter, in time, before President Putin turns off Nord Stream 1 gas flows into Europe. It is understood that President Putin might play the card of cutting down gas flows and weaponise the energy security against Europeans to hit back in retaliation of the unprecedented sanctions imposed on his country.

However, the supply of gas through the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline is dependent also on Turkey. After

the announcement of the signing of the MoU with Azerbaijan, media reports emerged that the 2012 agreement between Azerbaijan and Turkey states that priority will always be given to the latter. This means that through this deal the European Union is now dependent on both Ilham Aliyev, as well as Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Frankly, it reminded me of our childhood street games in Bormla, whereby the less streetwise lads would suffer the most by swapping a candy to lose two. In this specific case, the EU thought that it would be better for the block to ditch President Putin but surely omitted that they are gaining another two akin presidents. The question that European citizens are now asking is whether this was a correct move. Certainly, this question needs to be answered by those taking the decisions on behalf of the EU citizens.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a condemnable act because a sovereign state was invaded by a neighbour with arms aggression, and destabilised international security agreements and global-rules-based order. However, when

you think about it, Azerbaijan solved a longstanding conflict in the disputed region and surroundings of Nagorno-Karabakh by winning the territory through arms aggression supported also by Turkish military capabilities. On the other hand, Armenia was supported by Russia. Undoubtedly, Turkish superior air capabilities helped Azerbaijan to win the disputed territory in the region, by also providing unmanned military drones known as Bayraktar TB2 to completely defeat Armenia.

Logically, if Russia invaded a sovereign state, that is, Ukraine, we must also admit that it is not a false equivalence if we compare that to the arms conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh and does not make Azerbaijan a more trusted partner than Russia, at least in the eyes of Europeans. Also, if priority is given to Turkey when it comes to gas supplies, then energy supplies could still be weaponised against Europeans, especially if Turkey provokes Greece or Cyprus with their typical maritime seismic surveillance and drillings in their exclusive economic zones.

Additionally, during last week's Foreign Affairs Council, specifically under current affairs, the HRVP touted the idea of reconvening the Association Council with Israel. The Association Council did not convene since 2012. The reason of reconvening an Association Council with Israel, perhaps relates to the MoU that was signed by the President of the European Commission last June, to primarily secure gas supplies from Israel by showing Israel that the EU is a trusted partner (a confidence building exercise). Those following international affairs are cognisant of the fact that the reason why the association council did not convene since 2012 is due to the Middle East Peace Process and the Two States Solution.

Sadly, the European Union is looking weak at the international political level. The tactics are amateurish. Geopolitically, the EU is losing not gaining and I hasten to add that the West is losing. Working with likeminded partners does not guarantee stability and strength, and the problem with sanctions lies in the way they were imposed. The step-wise approach to impose sanctions, literally froze the entire economic operators, with most of them waiting until another package of sanctions is announced.

Ironically, ahead of the For-

ign Affairs Council, the European Commission proposed a relaxation of some of the restrictive measures on Russian banks, arguing that it will help easing the global flow of basic goods. With such a move, the EU is de facto admitting that some of the imposed sanctions were working against the world supplies and bought into the Russian narrative, especially in Africa that EU sanctions, even though basic goods were un-sanctionable, were affecting the global supply. Frankly, I think that the EU miscalculated the effects of the sanctions. Also, I believe that with such a move the EU helped in endorsing the Russian disinformation campaign by relaxing some of the sanctions and restrictive measures. Regrettably, it was so amateurishly handled that the EU positioned itself as a weak block when it comes to Common Foreign and Security Policy.

In all honesty I do not see how the EU can reinforce the narrative and persuade its citizens that having additional military spending can protect them and live securely in Europe, when the European Commission is sowing doubts that not even security of gas supplies is guaranteed this winter. Undeniably, this occurrence showed that the EU was unable to carry out a proper political, military and economic assessment of the situation in a crisis scenario despite the simulations that were carried out over the past years.

Au contraire, someone told me that the EU was not able to carry out an economic impact assessment because it was a dire situation of either acting or not acting. However, when you think about it, you start asking whether the EU was actually in a position to carry out an economic impact assessment in such a scenario, when they did not even consider the geopolitical context of the imposition of sanctions on Russia and how they would affect the block.

Unfortunately, the greatest losers in this ugly chapter are not those who are taking the decision on behalf of the EU but the citizens on the ground, who must bear the brunt of the miscalculated decisions and cope with the economic instability, the rapid increase in prices and the erosion of disposable income.

Clint Flores is an economist