

Danuta Hübner
**Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs in the European
Parliament**

The current state and the future of Europe

*Opening of the 119th Committee of the Regions plenary session
11th October 2016, Brussels*

For many years dominating narrative in Europe and about Europe has been “Europe in crisis”. I strongly believe that it is not justified anymore. But of course migration, security (internal and external), economy and euro-zone reform remain areas of special focus. But we must shift this focus toward long term objectives and solutions and see whether choices we make today provide a good foundation for long term change. And here I have doubts. Why?

First of all because national agendas continue to prevail. Lack of political unity at Member State level, political and ideological divisions lead to lack of solidarity. When intergovernmentalism and lack of political unity prevail, then lowest common denominator responses become the norm. Shift of balance of power toward intergovernmental Europe in the time when challenges we have to solve require European solutions is not the best option.

The decision taken in Bratislava about a road map for action between Bratislava summit and the celebration of the 60s anniversary of the Treaty of Rome was taken in the spirit and reality of intergovernmentalism based on negative emotion toward European institutions. Solutions are supposed to be found in national capitals. Where are those capitals where European long term solutions can be found? European solutions do not result either from meetings of groups of states that propose flagship initiatives, like the famous counter revolution, announced by two Central European leaders. This can bring political disruption.

Secondly, we have to take into account that our societies have changed over the decades of European integration. For years now European citizens have been subject to anti European narrative but also anti globalization one. Inspired by populists with strong vested interests, often organized citizens turn against TTIP and demonstrate lack of support for CETA. Governments do not act against this trend, far too often show lack of leadership and follow the voters. This is very dangerous for long term development and jobs in Europe, in particular for those economies that have huge unused trade - based development potential.

As leaders we do not show unity. Diverging views on further reforms of the euro area reduce the probability of progress in the so badly needed reforms. Heated controversial debates do not contribute to people's trust in the capacity of politicians and institutions to deliver stability and social fairness of

the system. This does not leave much political space for completion of euro-zone.

That leads me to my fourth observation on leadership and democracy deficits. They are again on the agenda. Space left to populism, both at national and European level, has grown. Neither national nor European narrative against jingoism, xenophobia, nationalism has been effective. This feeds into polarization of Europe.

My fifth point is that the fact of life in the EU is the differentiated integration. It has been a fact of life in Europe practically since the mid eighties when British rebate was established. Since then all Treaties have been leaving rather generous space for flexibilities accommodating specific needs of individual member states. A real champion of using these flexibilities has been the United Kingdom. It is not at all clear whether this has been a blessing or a damaging trend.

It seems rather obvious that those who share common currency will continue to share more of common policies and policy tools. Those willing to progress in integration should be not only allowed but indeed supported by legal framework to do so. This is not only about euro but also e.g. defence. Other areas could also be open for such an approach. The question arises whether we need a more precise legal framework for a differentiated Europe or continue with the approach of providing some space for some flexibility here and there? Europe à la carte might become an option. This would be a danger for Europe's future.

And that takes me to the issue of Treaty change. Should the treaty change continue to be a taboo or should we stop shying away as political class from explaining to the citizens that treaty changes are nothing more than a normal way of making the Union effective and efficient in the constantly changing global world ? This is difficult because we failed and allowed the populists to capture the territory with their policy of "facts do not matter" and of false promises.

It is not too late to recuperate this territory grabbed by populists. This is our duty toward citizens because citizens have always been at the core of the EU.

We have never forgotten citizens. The European Union has since its very inception and throughout its history had the citizens at its core. The commitment of Europe has always been to its citizens.

But, there is a long history of our, politicians' mistakes that have eroded the depth of attachment of people to the ideal of Europe. Now, the continuation of the European project as a stable and credible Union depends, more than ever on the commitment of the people, of the citizens to the values and principles that have justified its own foundation. Our duty is to be with people in this effort to bring their commitment back.

Of course citizens of the EU are different today than 60 or even 10 years ago. Citizens have never been so aware, so knowledgeable as they are nowadays.

But they can be also influenced by all kinds of populist debates, which very often instil fear and distrust. The campaign that preceded the British referendum is a glaring proof of exactly this.

And here Member States above all, but also the regions, cities and local partners, have a decisive and irreplaceable role to play in helping people to abandon populism. I assure you, there is a strong longing for more debates across Europe. People want to talk about Europe.

Next year, a number of important Member States will hold elections, in which the "enemies of Europe", encouraged by Brexit, may mobilize the disgruntlement feelings.. We are also witnessing a increasing trend of holding referenda on EU related affairs, which are used as political weapons against the EU. They are inspired by the populist politicians and ask people to make choices with far reaching consequences.

Citizens are worried about their rights as workers, about their security, about the environment, about the impact of globalisation, about energy supply security, and also about the enormous uncertainty that now surrounds the economic and financial systems - challenges, the whole extension of which cannot be tackled by any Member State on its own.

Dialogue with citizens and restoring citizens' trust requires also further transparency and more participation of citizens in the processes of decision-making.

The Parliament, just like the Committee of the Regions, has been relentlessly pursuing close monitoring and scrutiny over the implementation of policies and the institutional setup and working methods in the Union, including the monitoring of the respect for subsidiarity, proportionality and transparency.

We will continue to work with you.

We are open to improving further our cooperation modalities.

A vision and a clear direction are needed in order to mobilise people and get them involved. Without a vision it is practically impossible to get people on board, to make them enthusiastic about change. People have to know where we want to take them and through dialogue can feel owners of the future. But, in order to regain citizens' trust, we must be also pragmatic and deliver, on security, on competitiveness, on growth.

To conclude, let me go back to the need of debate. Please, talk to people. Most often, you are for them just around the corner. This debate must involve citizens. People want to discuss different policy choices, different integration paths.

We should leave our ivory towers, create networks, frameworks in which to mobilize academics, think tanks, civil society. We should move with our

debates beyond Brussels or university campuses. A participatory and inclusive approach to debates matters.
Last sentence - we must make Europe better. There is no other choice. Next generations would never forgive us.

I hope I can say that the Parliament counts on you as an invaluable partner in this effort. Without you building Europe bottom up will be impossible.