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EU@60 - Countering a regressive and illiberal Europe

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I fully share the view of President Herman van Rompuy - this is indeed an outstanding paper. And it is not only with regard to the substance. What is also of great value is that it reads like if it were written by an angry citizen. What decides about its value comes also from the fact that the authors have reached out beyond Europe to more universal processes of change to explain the European challenges. Not as justification of our helplessness but as explanation of the nature and depth of challenges.

What makes me feel uneasy, however, is the identification of our challenge as regressive and illiberal Europe. I would not stigmatize Europe in this way, I would rather talk about regressive and illiberal forces in Europe or the risk of regression and illiberality in Europe.

When following authors' story about Europe of today, Europe appears as a polynotion. It is about institutions, states, peoples, individuals, it is about mind sets and emotions. This is, indeed, the way to see Europe of today. Because challenges go across.

The option of muddling through is brought back to our thinking about possible ways to go, not as a recommendation but a scenario that can become a reality. A warning, actually. The probability of this European path is augmented by what is already the fact of life. First, there is no vision but a step by step approach. Pragmatism can be successful if steps take us toward a well defined objective. We have never chosen a path toward a very concrete finalité politique of Europe but the biggest European projects were based on a vision, followed by a road map and concrete steps. Secondly, decisions are made under immediate pressure of events. That implies short termism in thinking and acting and at best second best policy choices. And thirdly, outstanding national interests lead as a rule to the lowest common denominator for policy decisions.

These three characteristics of the European political process have a bad reputation. Choosing intergovernmentalism - as a path for problem solving machinery in the times of serious lack of political unity, when nation state mentality is back in Europe, when there is a lack of solidarity, when European solutions are the only potentially effective ones, when at national level the capacity to think and act in a proeuropean way has been weakened seriously, when the capacity to deliver on European commitments has been vanishing for years - does not seem rational. How can you build trust when

fragmentation has been growing? Do the national governments provide legitimation for Europe in action in the times when public opinion polls suggest that public support for national institutions continues to be below the one for European institutions? All institutions suffer from declining support of citizens, still European Parliament, according to a Breugel study, remains the most supported institution. National capitals continuing with its notorious blame gaming of Europe push citizens in the hands of populists. Citizens would benefit from national governments and European institutions working hand in hand. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find national capitals where European solutions would be cherished. Governments' representatives go to joint meetings with national political agenda, oppose European solutions and go back home blaming Europe for lack of solutions. Trying to build trust in Europe and strengthen Europe through policy tools dismantling European project can be compared to efforts of building democracy with non democratic policies and mechanisms. It will not work.

Report underlines the ongoing phenomenon of polarization. It is a process visible at different levels and different dimensions of European society, European politics, European economy. But it is also an outstanding feature of the national reality. Without doubt it is a dangerous process. It is also linked to the universal change toward growing inequalities. It has strong social, trust related dimension but there are also economic consequences of such a change. The more money goes to those already rich the less of it converts into new market demand. The lower the growth dynamism and the weaker the job creation. This is important for Europe when we reflect on future budgets and inclusive nature of new policy areas.

We have to look with more attention at European citizens. It is not only about the way the modern societies evolve. Nevertheless it is useful to realize how little the way European integration functions has changed over the last decades compared to very far reaching changes in the way our societies function. Europe has not acquired the capacity to be proactive in this context. Policies are reactive, come too late and, hence, too often are rather restrictive than stimulating new engines for growth and competitiveness.

But when reflecting on how our societies evolve we see that they have been for quite some time subject to strong anti European narrative but also rather unprecedented and damaging to future growth antiglobalization narrative. It has captured the area of historical negotiations of the two fundamental trade and investment agreements with Canada and the US. So, the challenge to the future of Europe is to get back the once existing commitment of our citizens to the European values and principles and to help them recreate their commitment to an open continent, to help them understand that actually Europe is the best way to make globalization work for them.

The erosion of people's in depth commitment and attachment to the Europe's ideal makes it easier for the populists to put themselves between citizens and Europe. They have also managed to make their way into some European governments. They have also managed to convince people that referendum is a good way of involving people into decisions on Europe. Through this

extremely demanding instrument of democracy they lead people to make uninformed choices damaging to next generations. So, yes, the challenge to get people away from populists demagoguery is one of the outstanding challenges Europe faces. Neither national nor European narrative against jingoism, nationalism and xenophobia is effective.

What it would be useful to note is also colateral damage emanating from lack of political cohesion demonstrated though heated debates revealing strongly diverging views on the reforms needed. This is in particular true when it comes to controversies on the ways and means to complete the architecture and functioning mechanism of the euro area. This is not only confusing to people but it undermines the confidence in the capacity of political elites to make Europe work for our future.

When we move to the recommendation part of the report, there are two major actors from whom the delivery of change is expected. This is the European Union and these are the pro European democratic forces. The conclusion I draw is that both the top down and bottom up action is what should be triggered. On the EU side the focus on the government soft method of coordination in reality contributes to dismantling the European project, especially if accompanied by anti institutional rhetoric. This must be stopped. It encourages action of some governments which suffer from euroscepticism. One would not get too far demanding from national leaders when they gather informally as heads of state and government or formally as European Council a pledge to Europe, a pledge to spare no effort to bring back peoples', their voters' commitment to Europe. To the values and principles that many years ago have become the foundation of a common Europe. Just to stop the bashing of Europe would not be enough this time around.

On democratic pro European forces let me say that we have in the Union cohorts of young people in all sorts of European movements. They should be encourage to leave their ivory towers, Erasmus students should talk to other Erasmus students, committed academics should get outside campuses, European institutions should cooperate on communication and engagement in communicating. Famous blame game cases should be deconspirated each time they occur in the public space.

With digital single market the space for pro European connections expands. We should support mushrooming pro European platforms for debates, for countering the bashing of Europe, the anti European lies and false promises of miracles that end of Europe will create.

Many small pro European currents can easily unite into powerful pro European narrative that can create space for a good change. Inclusive Europe starts with inclusive debate. We can reach a moment when from all those debates a civic European convention will emerge.