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Britain and Europe: Towards Brexit?

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I would like to raise two issues. First, to comment on what is happening to Europe. And second, to add to your today's discussions on Brexit some remarks as the chair of the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament.

Let me start with nationalism. You would probably agree with me that for the most part of its long history, Europe was a landscape marred by nationalistic impulses. Usually born in a specific place, then they tended to metastasize into open jingoism. This in turn often led to prolonged cruel wars.

Nationalism has never worked for Europe.

Then the European project has been born. It has dramatically re-wired our understanding of nationality, of community and cooperation, of European solidarity. It has made a large-scale conflict and war virtually unthinkable in Europe.

But then we somehow missed the moment, when this initial legitimization narrative of European integration, based on a common European good, on forging lasting friendship and solidarity, became more or less irrelevant to younger generations of European citizens. Rather unfortunately, it has also become less relevant to new generations of European leaders. Most of European leaders representing their citizens in European institutions do not know crisis-free Europe. They are new to Europe, Europe is new to them. Their political agenda is often purely national. This weakening of legitimacy allowed the return of virulent nationalisms out of the margins into the mainstream of the European discourse.

Today the European Union is losing its political cohesion. This is related to the expansion of intergovernmental method of decision making and growing national interests. But it is also related to the differentiated integration, and in particular euro - non euro divide. In the euro area heated debates on the future of the euro zone and disagreements among member states contribute to citizens' confusion. With UK leaving the Union, the group of member states not sharing the common currency will become weaker as a partner in shaping Europe. They have already moved in distancing themselves further on. Their economic weight is smaller. They suffer from Euroskepticism of their political elites. The political gravity of the Union will move further to the eurogroup. The idea of core Europe will continue to pop up. There are subsets of countries

that want to assert their ambitions outside of the mainstream, if not contrary to it.

This is indeed a moment when we need a renaissance of people's commitment to Europe, its common values and principles. We need a citizenry seeing the EU as a part and parcel of their own life. But the chances for this kind of a positive reappropriation are rather slim. What we see, instead, is a negative reappropriation by way of populist emotions unleashed all over Europe. This process has the most potency to change the Union, for worse, destroying cohesion at people to people level.

The perverse strength of the populist discourse comes from the fact that it refers to often legitimate grievances. At the same time it does not propose anything constructive.

Next year, some member states will enter the electoral contests which may mobilize the dissatisfied sentiment for dangerous choices. We can also see new calls for referenda on the EU related matters, which could become festivals of populisms, lies, false promises and irresponsible accusations and where uninformed people will be asked to make difficult choices on behalf of more than five hundred millions European citizens of today and of future generations.

And we continue to see too often political leaders challenging the legitimacy of Europe. This erodes the popular faith in what Europe represents, what Europe stands for.

Europe is not a project cast in stone. It has evolved through its history. There are many areas of European integration where changes should continue and we have to find solutions quickly. For this to happen, we need a long term commitment from national leaders. Europe fit for both today and the future can be built only if politicians remain committed to Europe. Do we have this commitment? I have doubts to say the least. European flags have been taken out from public spaces.

In the EU nothing changes unless there is a political will to move forward. This time, however, the challenge is more sophisticated. It is also moral and it is also intellectual.

Focusing on national interests has undermined Europe's efficacy in coping with the biggest challenges. These problems are here to stay. This is true for migration but also for globalization and trade. Russia is also here to stay, and it will continue to be just around the corner. UK and EU will stay for a while on uncharted waters with all uncertainties and risks for all of us. And euro-zone will remain an unfinished business until political will to complete it returns.

I see growing risk of an inward looking small continent, torn, lacerated by nationalisms, protectionism, jingoism, xenophobia, intolerance, identitarianism, authoritarianism, opposing globalization and trade, turning on its back on migration and open society. But this would not be Europe.

Growing appetite for simplistic rhetoric and simplistic solutions to rather complex problems and people's uncertainties and fears is dangerous. Pushing people toward making choices through referenda - which for politicians is an escape from responsibility - is not fair and it is irresponsible in times when citizens withdraw from traditional political processes or even go further against the establishment. They become angry citizens. They do not want to cooperate.

But is it indeed Europe that is falling or it is rather national egoism that is blocking needed solutions, leaving less and less room in the public space for pro-European forces?

We must see that in the global reality of tomorrow each country individually is a small boat on a big ocean. I come from Poland which means from nowhere as Alfred Jarry said in his absurd play "King Ubu". Now, in this complex situation that we face, Eastern and Central European countries would have to be quite clear about whether they want to become a part of the problem or a part of the solution to the EU's challenges. People there have to ask themselves: do we want to be at the center of Europe or do we accept to be relegated to the sidelines by irresponsible politics of the ruling majorities.

I believe that the way forward must be the one of consolidation of representative and deliberative democracy, human rights, freedom of press and thought, observance of fundamental laws, respect for independent institutions, like the courts, and the civil society. And above all, this is the moment where values matter more than ever.

Now, let me say a few words on Brexit. It does not look great on either of the two sides. It is difficult to find constructive messages or pragmatic solutions on the British side. There seems to be a rather limited understanding of how the Union functions. The logic of the famous cake continues to dominate. On both sides dangerous mantras are created. If both sides stick to them there is a risk of paralyses.

The divide is growing and it seems highly unlikely that UK will get what they want. Brexit fatigue on the continent might grow.

Brexit is seen more and more as an issue to be addressed by establishing procedures and less as a substantive challenge with serious consequences for both UK, its devolved administrations and EU. On the side of the EU one can see a defensive position, waiting for the British government to present the proposal and then reacting to it. The EU should have a clear understanding of what kind of relationship it would favor. This should go beyond the principles that have become sort of mantra. They include the refusal to negotiate without invoking article fifty, indivisibility of the four fundamental freedoms of the single market, clear unity of the twenty seven member states when it comes to negotiating position and the obvious observation that a third country cannot benefit from a more advantageous relationship with the EU than a member of the EU.

There is no visible effort to clarify all uncertainties linked to the interpretation of art.50. While main elements of the future relationship must be taken into account in the framework of withdrawal agreement, there is also the risk that too generous description of the future deal might alter the character of the withdrawal agreement, converting it into a mixed agreement. This of course would require a different approval procedure and ratification by member states. What could be helpful in this situation, is to use the European Council conclusions, the practice adopted during the February 2016 arrangements.

There is also the uncertainty related to the possibility of revoking article 50 in case the British party would change its mind. Here, there seems to be a difference in opinion of legal experts. The question here is that final clarity that could come from the ECJ has not been searched so far. In the future this can become a delaying factor.

One of the most challenging dimension of the negotiations will be the need to reach out to transitional or interim agreements. Like in case of accession, here phasing out or phasing in arrangements might become key. But for these arrangements to play adequately their role, it must be clear where both sides want to be at the end and of course the travel there must be based on the principle of minimizing the collateral damage.

What seems also rather surprising is the limited interest in the assessment of the consequences of the exit for the economy. On the British side hard choices ahead are not debated. Business sector is not openly consulted. Consequences of referendum seem not to be distinguished from the long term economic consequences of the divorce. Trade, terms of trade, non trade barriers, investment dynamics, inflation etc do not appear as issues. Hard data do not reflect yet what can be already sensed in the soft data, investment behavior, business plans, employment plans.

Business community, including CITI is not yet seen lobbying the government. But losses in FDIs might soon become visible. This in turn will also generate losses in tax flows.

And let me finish expressing my surprise with the fact that everything we hear so far from the British partner is a clear message that the government represents only the 52% of the British citizenry.