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Europe is what our thoughts make it

Panel on the Future of Europe

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I would like to start with the words written two millennia ago by Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor who wrote them in Greek in his notes on meditations. He said, “our life is what our thoughts make it”.

The European Union has never been something obvious in human history. It did not have to happen. But when it came into being following the war, it was something that arose out of the thought of responsible statesmen, who wanted to break the cycle of violence in European history and begin a new chapter of it.

Since then the European Union is a Union of change. Its only permanency is in constant adaptation to evolving circumstances, in other words, to the nature of universe, as Marcus Aurelius had said.

In its history, there were many crises that the Union has had to overcome and move forward. Luuk van Middelaar described it with fascinating details and overview in his a must-read book “The Passage to Europe”, that I very much recommend.

Thus, we would be a little bit snooty, if we thought that we live in some exceptional times and our challenges are unprecedented. Maybe not unprecedented but what is at stake is touched by times we live. Therefore, we have to deal, freshly and with open minds with what history puts as challenges for us and not complain.

Faced with centrifugal forces Europe always found the response.

Thus when we look at EU as a historical enterprise, deeply embedded in circumstances of a given moment, we have no reason to fear what the future will bring. But we have to be aware that a good future for Europe will not come by itself, it will have to be European men and women made future. Each of the most difficult moments in our history brought about new initiatives and gave a push to common undertakings. All the institutions that we treat as natural, as single market, Schengen, the Banking Union, economic governance, new institutions in the Eurozone, PESCO - they all have come as a response to some sort of crisis, one or another, or at least a feeling of crisis, or a need to push ahead to meet some challenges.

In defense matters, for example, just out of the stable is PESCO. This permanent structured cooperation in defense came about as a response to changing global environment and some turbulent weather in transatlantic relations.

The fact that PESCO is a reality now is a testimony to the fact, that even if national governments do not always look eye to eye on some issues, they nevertheless can summon up enough determination to see what can be an existing or a potential treat to all member countries of the Union. Not everybody is on board yet but the door remains open.

But we will always need political cohesion and unity as a driver of necessary change to make the Union more agile, adaptable and responsive to its external environment or centrifugality within.

Now, Brexit is the type of development, or event that is testing our level of cohesion and capacity for unity, as well as the degree of the will to remain together and to make something positive out of something that is very unfortunate in itself.

Thus far, the Union has been able to keep its forward posture, looking toward the future with renewed energy. Will it last throughout the process? That is an open question.

Looking for the broadest possible consensus as to the moves that we have to make in wake of Brexit, we have to be clear as to the fundamentals: even if somebody decides to leave, we remain a community of values and common interests that transcend it.

The European Community started without the British, and perhaps it would sound too harsh – but we will continue without them. Actually, there are others that want to join us and we in the European Parliament will keep seats for them. I can very well imagine, that perhaps 2 years from now we will have a more developed offer to the Eastern or Southern Partnership countries.

Brexit can take various forms: hard, soft – and there are still some who still hope for no Brexit scenario. I think that all those political and legal possibilities are still here. But we have to be prepared for the worst scenario, as well. That there will be no deal at all.

It would not be a preference of the most of us. For it is obvious that Brexit will make us smaller – but, on the other hand, smaller often means more determined, more focused on the goal and more alerted to threats.

The negotiations, often exhausting and sometimes circular, are also a learning process, also about damages done and also on how to avoid or reduce them in the future. There are lessons for the UK, but also for the EU, I think. The biggest discovery generated by Brexit is a better understanding of what European citizenship means and how fundamental it is for the day to day life and about the future life of generations of citizens of the 28 states. We in the EP listen to representatives of European citizens, their concerns and worries about the future after Brexit.

Even with best results of the negotiations, there will be unhappiness, disappointments and even sadness. There will certainly be some anger afterwards and litigations – turbulences for which we have to be prepared. This can be used by skillful politicians to turn people against Europe. This can influence the next parliamentary election to the European Parliament as well as any national elections.

Brexit has been driven by specifically British factors, but it also was a part of a broader, regressive trend in European politics, that I am very much concerned about.

On the one hand, we are faced with the citizens' apathy and lack of interests in the EU affairs. There is an obvious "national" turn in European politics. In national politics, we have witnessed all sorts of cleavages, here and there breaking old systems of political parties and new forms of engagement in public sphere. A by – product of that is that nationalist, populist and separatist movements seem to be on

the rise almost everywhere in Europe. It is a toxic brew for the future of liberal, compassionate, learning and advancing Europe. It is quite visible, that the populists' illiberal forces have now an upper hand in mobilization of people of Europe for their views. It is relatively easy because people already have legitimate grievances, and, undoubtedly, Brexit will add to them a new layer.

We can be faced with something like a "Brexit Syndrome" – a traumatic event, the consequences of which stay with us even if the original event is completed.

Now, we are at a particular moment, when our role as those responsible for the proper functioning of the EU, is to make Brexit as harmless as possible for all – an orderly process that respects the European law and preserves the interest of the EU and its members with a view to long-term developments. Brexit will certainly test the resilience of our institutions, our projects. Therein, lies our chance. After 60 years of being together, we know that it is our togetherness that makes us strong.

Each member state individually is weaker than the Union as a cohesive whole. Sometimes it is the power of one to effect change, but these are extraordinary situations. Usually, it is better to be a part of a partnership of values and interests, which would be able to withstand the stormy weather and not lose ground.

Without doubt, the Union is something that we should improve in all terms - performance, institutional architecture, governance, transparency of goals and procedures, communication with citizens and between member states. However, at the same time, we should cherish it as something that, if lost, will not be easily replicable. Probably not ever possible to replicate.

We should also keep the Union generous. Those who want to go faster and deeper in integration have to have the right to do so provided the process is open to all willing and able to join.

We have to be united in completing Brexit, but above all in reforming Union. There is also, undeniably, a sense of urgency in moving further. In every policy area we need more effective and efficient instruments to act. Reforms of Eurozone deserve a special attention – here we must take seriously the proposals from the Commission - the first package will come in few days. Let us move fast with these reforms. Let us help those who for various reasons are still outside the euro – there is a good

proposal of the Commission on this as well. Let us complete single market and ensure that it is a place that provides a level playing field for everybody.

We are getting ready to start a big debate about the future of MFF. I fully support the view expressed by President of Estonia that we should approach this difficult discussion from the European perspective. There will be new ideas regarding both sides of the budget and one of net payers will be gone. In this context let me say that a robust regional policy has to continue, reforming itself along the way, as it has been the tradition. It has to be kept as one of the major instruments for equalizing the competitive field, fundamental for accelerating sustainable and inclusive growth and convergence, working steadily for the cohesion of the Union. We also need to approach growth in a new way. This last point leads me to say that we cannot be consumed in our thinking about the future only by immediate challenges.

We have to push the fast forward button and look at the issues through the eyes of the generations that would come after us. The challenges that will stay, after all the institutional reforms are implemented and Brexit completed, will concern the extent and nature of the migration in Europe, keeping pace with the digitalization of our life and the chances, but also dangers of infinite progress in this area, the impact of our activity on climate and the resilience of our continent as well as responsibility for those parts of the world that will be the most affected by it.

Here, in all these areas: economic, financial, fiscal policies, migration, digitalization and climate that would be paradigmatic for the future we would need solutions on European level, but also we cannot dispense the responsibility for sound domestic policies on the national level. The working out of consent of the citizens for reforms in these often-contested areas will be the most challenging in the long-term.

Reforms are also needed to bring about more innovation, more protection, more sustainability, more safety and more welfare. Being united is what makes us strong, also in our fight against populism. We must never forget that stable and reliable political environment keeps the European Union competitive and thriving, which reduces, in turn, the appetite for populist rhetoric and the politics of revenge. We need renewed integration dynamics that strengthen the four freedoms. We must modernize our trade policy in order to protect our strategic industries. We must enhance the Union's social dimension.

In this context, we should all enjoy coming into being at the summit of Goteborg of the European Pillar of Social Rights – with its concentrated focus on equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion. It is to serve as a ‘compass for a renewed process of convergence towards better working and living conditions among Member States, taking account of the changing realities of Europe’s societies and the world of work. The Social Pillar makes it clear that economic and social progress are two sides of the same coin. Without social safety nets, people do not take risks. Education and training, and other activation policies, are key ingredients to long-term competitive advantage and social protection plays a vital role in stabilizing EU economies.

The citizens also expect that their rights are observed and the law space of the Union is durable and transparent. Thus, we need to protect the rule of law and fundamental rights. This is also the way to maintain a stable investment environment and keep the EU attractive for future talents. It is essential to understand, that the rule of law, freedom of speech, right of minorities and fundamental freedoms for all is not only the right thing to do. They are also the essential elements of the European economic and social model.

The citizens must trust that the EU is on their side when it comes to defending fundamental rights enshrined in international law that all Member States have freely joined.

There is no question that the EU needs to strengthen its visibility, recognition and legitimacy. The European Election of 2019 is a primary opportunity to effect this. I am happy that the draft contribution of COSAC highlights the year 2019 European Elections.

2019 will be undoubtedly the test of our capacity to regain our offensive posture after Brexit, to meet the challenges prepare for the future. The election in 2019 will be an opportunity, a moment we should make most of for ourselves and for the future generations.

Thank you for your attention