

Danuta Hübner
Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament

European Policy Centre

Policy Dialogue: Crisis and Cohesion in the European Union: A ten-year perspective

EPC Conference Centre, 14-16 Rue du Trone, Brussels

Wednesday, 21 February 2018

I very much welcome the Cohesion Monitor and Josef Janning's presentation. I also broadly agree with its findings. There is a very important point made in the Monitor about how different crises have affected the cohesion, through different channels, especially the Engagement indicator (understood in the Monitor as turnout in EP elections, anti-EU populist vote share in the EP and national elections). It is true that the political confidence in the governing elites and the governance process itself have been frayed. The disaffection of citizens have led to rising tide of populism that seems containable at the moment, but it still bubbles below the surface. Thus the crisis is not yet gone. And I have an impression that it will last as long as the politicians will feel that it is in their interest to use it for their, often parochial, political interests. And we cannot disregard the fact that populist politicians frequently fail the young people and their aspirations for the future that they feel is connected with Europe.

During the financial crisis the European institutions and the national leaders have mobilized on an unprecedented level for reforms. We built the necessary institutional firewalls to prevent similar engulfing crises in the future. We showed high level of both political leadership and institutional resilience. We did not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the challenge, we proceeded calmly in the face of the storm, and we mobilized all of our resources for the cause of reforms that would give the EU the viability it needed in dealing with crisis' aftermath.

The migration crisis is of different nature. It involves varying perceptions of national interest by member states. It also evokes deep passions, often negative ones, like

nationalism or racism, concerning values on the part of the populations. As such it is much more difficult to contain. It can move in unpredictable directions, reconfiguring the political landscape on national level.

And that can also have an effect on the composition of the next European Parliament following 2019 elections.

The possible populist-driven re-composition of the EP is what worries me a lot, for we have always assumed that representation is somewhat connected with rationality of choice. Sentiments swirling around the migration issue may still show us that rationality is not always the driving factor in political calculations. Prejudice and propaganda effect of anti- migratory and anti- refuge sentiments may become one of key variable for political cohesion, which can also have a spill-over effect in the area of increased number of opt-outs in the political integration. The possible increase in populist vote accompanied by diminished voter turnout, would mean, in the last analysis, less institutional resilience.

The fallout from migration crisis percolates differently in different member states. Which shows how important it is to tailor cohesion-building strategies to individual countries.

As Europe attempts to reverse the slide toward illiberalism, we must recognize that not all illiberal trajectories are the same. It seems counterproductive, for example, to put Hungary and Poland into one basket, for they are different in terms of their political culture, historical affinity for the EU, the level of development of civil society and of a coherent opposition. Driving them even further into an “alliance of the scorned” fueled more by convenience than real common features would be counterproductive. We need to carefully asses their situation and to propose the incentives that would work in particular local context and that would allow them to come back into the liberal democratic fold.

We always have to remember that the European project is about integration and inclusion, not isolation. We should be careful about punishing societies simply because they happen to be led by irresponsible leaders at any given moment.

We still have to remember that there is, independently of temporary political turbulences, the European Union has proven through the years, that it is a house built on firm foundation of interests and values, as well as on, by now, pretty long common history.

To have thus an effective integration we have to create a sort of collective memory about our common achievements. Now we have to contend with a series of often divisive national memories that, in the moment of crisis, can become a “usable past” and politically be taken advantage of by the populist forces, in the name of the often false “politics of remembrance”. We do a lot as the European Union, but we are not very good at telling our story. But there are, as one example, already generations of people who saw Europe thanks to Erasmus program. They should be equipped to be the agents of active collective memory, that in time, I hope, will become this now missing glue in keeping the citizens and states together.

To create this collective memory, we also need to have the institutions that would express our visions and our aspirations, as they developed in historical perspective. I think that the House of European History, here, in Brussels is one of the places that could serve such a purpose. Such places can show us, by their compelling narrative, that indeed we can work out a shared memory and that our common future is can be stronger than the past that often divides.

Our current politics, and accompanying divisions are often a reflection of that dividing past. We should do everything to get over it. This is why it is so important that the existing divisions be bridged. What is needed is working out the solution to the issue of rule of law, as well as the best possible consensus on migration. It would have to be done patiently, without the punishing attitude in the delicate relations with the old and new members, especially. But also we have to find the ways to support those that are most touched by the crisis, like Greece and Italy, where discontent also brews.

What I believe might be a missing connection between the individual and structural cohesion, is what I would call a political cohesion. This is, or it should be, a glue that binds all of us in the EU together: a shared belief that we want to face the future

together, and a firm commitment not to give in to anti-European impulses in our national contexts. And I think this is the area where there is a lot of uncertainty or even political volatility. Some commentators go even that far as to say that the community of liberal democracies is showing signs of that disintegration all over the world, including Europe. Traditional "guardians" of the liberal international order seem overwhelmed and paralyzed. While not accepting fully this analysis, I nevertheless wonder sometimes if we did not spend all of our mobilization capital during buffering off the financial crisis and now we are pretty much simply tired – both as governments and institutions, as well as citizens. Brexit is still a factor that should induce this political cohesion, but it will not last long. When Brexit is over, we can lose our will to unite. Usually when we talk about Euroscepticism we think of it only in terms of populism (coming from the East, mostly). But recent Eurobarometer data shows, for example, that for the 1st time since spring 2010, on average 7 in 10 Europeans feel that they are citizens of the European Union. This feeling is shared by 77% respondents in Poland and by 55% in the United Kingdom. Thus I think that the problem is much deeper and concerns the attitudes of the elites, both East and West, which seem to be behind the citizens, when it concerns the commitment to Europe.

I can say that something like "europeization" of national politics is being gradually replaced by the "nationalization" of Europe in elite-driven national discourses. Europe is being seen by many representatives of the elites in member states as something that can be sized down to national aspirations, without taking as its goal European aspirations. I think that this is a long-term threat to the European progress and Europe's global role.

This threat is looming over the horizon at a crucial time for the future of Europe, when we have to bridge the existing political, social and economic divisions between the core and the periphery, between Eastern and Western, Southern and Northern parts of our continent. Of course the Eurozone is the Union's core at the moment, but we should use our policies intelligently, so as not to make those that are outside it, feel peripheral. It is interesting, that the euro, seen by some in the east as a dividing factor, is actually a factor that mutes down some areas of conflict. The new member states that do have euro (like Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia) seem to have less

problems with populism, for example, which is a staple of non-euro members like Poland or Hungary.

It is in our interest in the global arena to absorb as many countries into the Eurozone as possible. How it can be done? Incrementally. Important in this regard is to mention the new approach of the European Commission that recently presented ideas aimed at making the eurozone more democratic and resilient to economic shocks. Under the latest proposals, non-euro members, such as Poland and Hungary, will be able to apply for technical help and EU funds worth €300m to help them carry out reforms to prepare for joining the currency.

These proposals speak to the fact that Europe must deliver success, both on the institutional level, as measured in the confidence level in national contexts, and on the economic performance. But it has to do it as a whole, not as a discordant mechanism that consists of many conflicting parts that hamper its movement forward. Only this would give the Union must robust legitimacy, which is very much needed.

We are at the time when we have to contend with some false images of the Union: like the Union overburdened by legislation, for example. In terms of legislation overload, it is obvious that an average national government is much more intrusive in terms of number and detail of regulation than the EU, which is relatively a “light” regulatory structure. The so called “Brussels” as an epitome of the state Moloch is a crazy figment of imagination of unscrupulous national politicians.

What seriously undermines our political cohesion is a myth that “less Europe” will solve our populist problem. Well, it will not. The sources of populism are somewhere else. Europe is only a convenient target for expressing dissatisfaction with national elites that do not deliver.

From the European perspective we have to understand “delivery” in a sense that do not limit our policy reach. If we need more legislation that would be good for meeting citizen’s aspirations we should not be shy to say so. Better law making that we work on in the European Parliament and the European Commission does not necessarily mean less of it, but more precisely targeted and supportive of the goals for competitiveness, growth and social needs.

Regulations and laws should have as its primary goal to establish an environment for active citizenship, which is an often underappreciated factor for effecting more cohesion in the Union.

Well, as you probably know, I am a big fan of the Europe of citizens. It is always important to know that we, as European institutions, do not exist as some spaceship moving through the empty universe, but we are, or at least should be, an expression of the will, of the aspirations and expectations of the citizens. Jean Monnet said it already a long time ago that we are about uniting people and not integrating states. States are only the means to an end. I know that this is very difficult to remember it every day, when states have to act, often in the crisis mode, to respond to challenges that we face.

But nevertheless, it is citizens who should be the final guardians and arbiters of all that we do. This is why the participatory aspect of the Union should not be treated as an add-on on the EU's structure, but as its vital center of the future of Europe. I think that we should take advantage of the recent awakening of the bottom-up civic spirit in Europe. It came up as a response to the multidimensional crises. People have started to realize that Europe is something valuable, something that they do not want to lose due to caprices of nationalist elites. I think that Brexit was a turning point in this regard. It somehow allowed us, on the ground, to discover European citizenship anew. Paradoxically populist challenge made Europe more visible and anti-European emotional narratives have led to the emergence of the opposite ones.

Social media, while on one hand creating platforms for fake news and anti-European hate, have also mobilized large swaths of passive citizens in defense of Europe. So we have an opportunity, perhaps one in a generation, to mobilize citizens, to get them onboard, to make them feel responsible for Europe and prepare to act. It is always more difficult to mobilize people for good things, than to simply utilize their anger. And thus it is even more admirable, that we are witnessing the emergence of some important pro-European movements, like CIVICO, or New Europeans, for example. There is also a growing interest in making European Citizen Initiative more workable and accessible. I am also very much impressed with the European Movement in the UK, the organization that wants to fight Brexit. Well, even if they put

before them a Don Kichote's task, it is still something that will keep the UK connected to Europe in the future.

On our side, of the institutions, I think that we should help in creating a supportive environment for these and other initiatives that would, in time, become a critical mass for Europe. Because only the citizens and their commitment is the real guarantee that Europe will not revert to the dark times in European history. If politicians are afraid to be courageous to meet the challenges of the time, it is their voters who need to mobilize and show them the way forward.