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The challenge: how to refresh the European project for the new generation

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Dear Friends,

Europe is living difficult times. It is indeed not in a good shape. And it can get worse. This moment, I believe, justifies temptation to look back into the history of our great small continent. Allow me to dedicate 2 minutes to Europe's history.

For the most part of its long history, Europe was a landscape marred by nationalistic impulses that tended to metastasize into open jingoism, what, in turn, more often than not, led to bloody, prolonged wars.

That experience of unstable Europe, threatened in its existence, divided by political and military ambitions, locked in wars for hegemony, and periodically raising from the rubble of destruction, was an experience of many generations before yours.

The generation of your grand-parents had to overcome the trauma of the second world war.

At the time when the European community was coming into being, the remembrance of war losses, was in the back of the heads of those who just survived the II War, but their memory still contained the dramatic pictures of the 1st World War and one of the bloodiest battles in history, the Battle of the Somme which took place 100 years ago. More than one million men either died or were wounded during that protracted battle. The whole generation perished.

I am mentioning the 1st World War because it came about somehow from within the European family. There was no Hitler then. All the national leaders were more or less normal people. But they all were being eaten from inside by the worm of nationalism. Nationalism never worked for Europe.

European Union, that arose out of the ashes of the war, was not a purely brainy exercise. If it did not have the component of love for the people of this continent, this small appendix to Asia, it would not get off the ground, with all the Monets, Schumans and de Gasperis of the world.

It took off as one of the most fantastic projects in human history, because it spoke to the soul and the heart of the Europeans and their war experience.

The European Union that they created aimed at the far –reaching process of integration not only of economies but also of people. The genius of the founding generation of Schuman , De Gasperi and Spinelli was in their ability to garner the enthusiasm of the young generation for the project of the unity and peaceful development of the continent.

The young people of that time saw how, day by day, the Europe of dreams, propelled by moral impulse, but also by steadfast political will, became the web of institutions and practices that prepared a better future to all. Europe was not a slogan, but an everyday reality.

And the narrative of the EU in the beginning was that we had to do everything to replace those nationalistic impulses with feelings of European universalism. If the common supervision of coal and steel production can make enemies into friends, let's do it. It was pragmatic, but also, in a sense, a romantic attitude. Europe as breaking barriers, as an adventure.

The project became so successful, that new incoming generations have taken the EU as an agent of peaceful dispute resolution and motor for development for granted. It dramatically re-wired our understanding of nationality, community, cooperation, and it made large-scale conflict and an all-out war virtually unthinkable in Europe.

But the natural tendency is, that if we take something for granted, we appreciate it less. The enthusiasm slowly dissipates, and the disappointment, of various origins, sets in.

We somehow missed the moment, when this legitimization narrative, based on forging lasting friendship and solidarity out of the wars' ashes, became more or less irrelevant to younger generations and, unfortunately, also to new generations of European leaders. That weakening of legitimacy allowed the return of virulent nationalisms out of the margins into the mainstream of the European discourse.

This is no longer the problem of the “democratic deficit”. This is something much more serious that can threaten the survival of our European values, not only the institutions. And when our values are lost, we are lost.

Some of us thought that the European Union has such a strong construction that we may tinker with it here and there, but it will still stand unmoved.

It is not the case. Sometimes not the obvious evil is the most destructive. I think here of the hidden evil of good people who give in to bad impulses. And the stability of the EU construction depends not only on formal laws, treaties, regulation, intergovernmental relations, but most intimately, on the commitment of people to the values that inspired the founding generations.

The decision of the British people opting for Brexit was such a poke in the eye – but as we see now, and most Brits too, it changed everything, in a most dramatic fashion. Practically the day after the referendum, the British citizens learned that the negotiations may take some years, that they do not simply step out of the Union in one day. Well, that was a surprise of the day after the shotgun wedding, when the fast-acquired husband or wife turns out not to be as lovable as the day before! Brexit unbalanced whole Europe, which requires now the redefinition of relations with Britain, as well as many relations on the continent.

Most of you here represent generation that does not know the world short of European integration. I, however, do remember my home country isolated from integrating Europe, remaining for decades on the other bank of the river. Fortunately, the door stayed ajar long enough and got fully open when the transition to market economy and democracy could begin in our part of Europe.

And as you can imagine, 1st of May of 2004 was the day of the fulfillment of the dream of our young years. But that was more than 12 years ago.

And this is your generation that will soon take the responsibility for the Union's future. On one hand, it will certainly be easier – for you are not weighted down in your perception of Europe by history of its divisions. But at the same time you will have a difficult task to repair some things that our generation broke, perhaps inadvertently. You will have to cope with many challenges.

Today, within the EU we have to muster all the institutional strength and the power of persuasion to face the growing populist challenge all across Europe. Already next year, the major member states will enter the electoral contests in which the enemies of Europe, encouraged by Brexit, may mobilize the dissatisfied sentiment for the likes of Madame Le Pen or Mr. Wilders. We can also see new calls for referenda on the EU, which could become festivals of populisms and irresponsible accusations and false promises.

That's why we have to work out very fast the anti-bodies for this poison running in veins of Europe. We have to develop a new, inclusive, strong in values, political culture that would be able to repulse the politics that finds its base in the worst instincts of human beings - hate for the Other.

We need to enhance dialogue for sustainable European democracy on all levels: political, social, cultural.

One can say that the sheer depth and length of the crises, as well as the fact that territory occupied by populists has expanded beyond what Europe could digest, are a sufficiently strong source of legitimation for deep and far reaching reforms.

However, some politicians do not see the multiple damaging crises as providing exceptionally powerful legitimacy for far reaching reforms, for governments to act favoring European solutions. These politicians who want to take Europe back to a stage of a loose integration of states united by a not so common single market, deprived of free movement of persons.

It is the momentum for taking people away from populists. They are aiming at destroying European political cohesion and European capacity for dialogue and solidarity. Brexit is adding to those risks. Brexit will make both EU and UK smaller. It already works in this direction.

But more efforts are needed to make Europe a working democracy. If you listen to what influential politicians say you can see that we are divided on how much vision and how much pragmatism should be in our thinking and acting, and getting people involved. It is difficult to mobilise people for a grand change without a clear direction. I believe a vision is key now. 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.

There are many areas of European integration where changes should continue and we have to find solution quickly. Many important changes, however, will take time. But in both cases there is a common fundamentally important factor. To make Europe a functioning democracy capable of delivering what people expect from it, we need a long term commitment from national leaders. New Europe can be built only if politicians remain committed to Europe. Do we have this commitment? I am no sure.

There are democratically elected leaders who do not base their European narrative on facts and positive emotions. Quite the contrary. British referendum provides clear evidence that you can win electoral campaign having as a base for your political narrative lies and false promises embedded in anti establishment emotions. Politicians can build their political capital on a logic where facts do not matter. We must take the politics back to truth and positive emotions. We must stop lying.

People of Europe, pressured by the part of the irresponsible elites to hide into the shells of nationalism, should put a resistance and once again proudly display the European Union flag as a symbol of freedom and of humanity..

And we should do something, as the community of free people, and do it quickly. Perhaps there should be a new Commissioner for Combatting Populism, Rasism and Intolerance? Such a move would send some signal that we are concerned about these problems at the top level.

In the EU, nothing will change unless there is a political will to move forward. If you look at the reality of last years, you can see how often and how many governments were actually opposing reforms of the European Union which would benefit citizens. Actually, mainstream parties' governments have been often competing with their narrative dangerously close to the one of

Eurosceptics or even Europhobes from far left and far right. In short, we have a problem with national leadership, increasingly weak when it comes to thinking and acting in a pro-European way.

Yes, we need action but we need also a genuine debate about what Europe is for, today and tomorrow. This debate must involve citizens. People want to talk. People want to discuss different policy choices, different integration paths. People want to have this debate with other people. These other people might have different views and dreams. These diverging views are one more reason for having a talking Europe.

We all should leave the ivory tower and get involved more in a dialogue with citizens. Dialogue means listening to the other side. We should also create networks, frameworks in which to mobilize academics, think tanks, civil society. We need many initiatives like Yours.

One of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's novels is called "Elective Affinities". Nobody can be forced to become a European against her or his wish. In this sense Europe is an "elective affinity" – you have to choose it not only with your passport but also with your heart. And when I look at you, I hope that you can look at the history of this great small continent and feel this special tinge in your hearts, tinge of Europe.

Thank you for your attention.