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Brexit: by design or by default?

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Europe has been always rejecting the idea of *finalité politique*, giving itself a space for change. Its only permanency has been and will be a constant adaptation to evolving circumstances; I guess it will continue this way without the vision of *finalité politique*. Union's strength will continue to come from this capacity to change.

If we look at what we tend to label as crisis it is normally lack of political capacity to cope with the need of change. At the end of the day, political will and capacity to act come and decisions are made. Unfortunately far too often decisions come too late, too little is being done, unfinished business stays for the future. Over the last decade capacity to identify common European good, for example the rule of law, has been seriously weakened undermining the base for political cohesion.

Brexit, which has brought us here, could be looked at from the perspective of a broader, regressive trend in European politics. And it seems legitimate to ask whether the 2019 European elections will become an opportunity for grabbing the power in Europe by far right, nationalist parties and illiberal democracy leaders as they call themselves.

They have already demonstrated how they want to redesign Europe, not necessarily to dismantle it. They have chosen migration policy as the major battlefield between liberal and illiberal democracy, dividing us, European citizens. We see open, committed to liberal democracy society and we see xenophobic, intolerant, fortress minded one. We have here two different sets of values and principles. When divisions are not about policy choices but about values, there is a problem. Without shared values there will be no Europe.

It is not the first time that the ugly undercurrent in European thinking raises its head. It is here with us even if the current package pretends to be new. And not only the Central and

Eastern Europe are susceptible to this undercurrent. So yes, it is unfortunate but we have to admit that Europe is not only Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet. It is also Pierre Poujade, if you still remember this French politician. And these are also many contemporary politicians who are practicing democracy bending the rule of law clearly aiming at getting rid of the liberal order in the EU and globally.

They first capture the state power at the highest level in general elections. Then they follow the idea that they will really win if they undertake long march through broadly understood institutions. For them elections to European Parliament next year will be a perfect moment to take control of Europe. Radical elements have been growing for a while in all mainstream European political groups.

It is against this background - strengthened by action of global game changers like Russia, China or President Trump - that we have to look at the EU's capacity to change for the future.

We have managed finally to move away from the poli-crisis obsession toward individual challenges we face. This has allowed us to see that the real threat to our existence comes from lack of political will to cope with migration. This has allowed us also to see better that euro zone remains vulnerable to future crisis. Its challenges have not disappeared. But there are many more which require urgency in putting Europe in 'can do mode'.

It is legitimate to ask whether European institutions deliver what Europe needs. I have doubts. Increasing number of issues is not solved at Council level and goes up to the European Council. As a result the latter does not provide a strategic vision which is its Treaty based duty but copes with legislative disagreements. European Commission has made, in my view, a wrong mistake by making its flagship initiative to do less. Without support of the European Council it struggles with member states arrogance and lack of respect for rule of law. What it will be remembered for is migration and Brexit. So we have a combination of institutional deficiencies and inefficiency of political machinery.

Brexit is one of the challenging political and technical processes on the European agenda. United Kingdom will soon leave, with or without a formal withdrawal agreement. The unity among member states and institutions is not a unity against the Brits but a unity in support

for Michel Barnier and his negotiating team. This unity is indeed exceptional and deserves attention in the context of a general inclination to disagree on most of other issues.

In my small talks about Brexit I have been starting usually by expressing hope that somebody from London will call Brussels one day and call it all off. Today I do not expect it anymore. The nonsense of Brexit will continue until the end. I am just an external observer of the British politics but I feel tempted to say that I continue to believe that that was a bad and a wrong referendum. A political mistake with far reaching consequences. There is something wrong with the democracy if such a small majority, in a consultative referendum where hardly anybody could know what leaving the EU really means, leads to political decisions of that scale. We hoped that negotiations would be a learning process for both society and politicians. Maybe this is the case but embraces a tiny group of already convinced Remainers.

It is hard to believe that a decision of that scope of consequences for people's life for generations to come could have been made without a deep strategic impact assessment. People can be and in case of referendum usually are led by emotions in their choices and decisions. But public authorities and institutions cannot. Maybe those who suspect that what we could see in UK for the last two years has been no more than power battle and personality politics, may be they are right. But then a big surprise for me is how, indeed, shallow British democracy is.

In the title of your debate, you ask whether Brexit has happened by default or by design. I do not know what your answer is but I agree with those who claim that of those who triggered referendum machinery hardly anybody was aiming at this outcome. I think Brexit has happened by accident. It will come at a cost. There are more and more studies pointing to costs and far reaching multi dimensional long term consequences.

Where are we now with the process for which success will be measured by finalization of withdrawal agreement, including transition and political declaration on the future framework within the treaty based deadline?

Time continuous to generate headache of those involved. These negotiations are probably unique in that they have treaty-based deadline. Time factor has played its role from day

one. Now, of course, it is reaching crucial importance status. We see the likelihood of a delay probably by a month of the finalization of negotiations, provided there is willingness to move on substance of remaining issues of utmost importance. Extension of two-year period, though technically and legally possible, seems completely undoable in political perspective. Also, elections to European Parliament work against this idea. So, end of March next year is the date when UK will become a third country.

The priority is finalization of the Withdrawal Agreement where a list of outstanding issues remains too long. However, the real problem here is the lack of agreement on the backstop for the Northern Ireland border.

Without doubt and in spite of many commonalities regarding future agreement on foreign and defense policy and internal security with focus on citizens, the political declaration on the future arrangements is far from what is expected. The economic part of future partnership remains a dividing element. Additionally, there seems to be some sort of misunderstanding on the nature of the declaration. It will not be a legal text. It cannot provide any guarantees. It cannot be either too detailed or content void.

An elephant in the room is the no deal scenario. Nobody of those in charge on both sides would see it as an option but everybody admits that the risk of no deal as a landing zone is not anywhere close to zero. Of course, no deal is not going to be negotiated. But we have to be prepared. So recently on both sides, there has been a lot of efforts toward stepping up actions in this area.

On the EU side the preparedness is rather well advanced at all levels, European institutions, member states, businesses. Responses to the recent questionnaire received from the member states by the Brexit Preparedness Group in the Commission show different level of advancement in member states but also serious efforts related to two scenarios, no deal and the situation when UK becomes a third country as a follow up to an orderly withdrawal.