

Professor Danuta Hübner
EPP Coordinator in the AFCO, European Parliament

***Video message to the Harvard European Conference on
"Deeper or wider: Where is the EU headed?"***

European Parliament, Brussels

March 7th 2020

Good morning everybody, it is always a good feeling when people want to talk about Europe, in particular when it takes place on the other side of the pond as we say here. So thank you for creating a space for such a debate and for the invitation and for allowing me to use the technology to address you. And apologies for not being able to be with you physically.

You asked me to respond in my remarks to a few questions. Maybe first a few general comments. Nearly my entire professional life has been about Europe. I taught European integration at the University, I was Minister in charge of the Polish accession to the EU, and at that time I took part in the Constitutional Convention. I was the first and second Polish EU Commissioner and now I have already eleven years in the European Parliament. I probably can say that I feel responsible for Europe.

And I am convinced that the Big Bang enlargement of 2004 played a fundamental role in bringing the continent together, in expanding democracy, and making Europe more relevant globally. I continue to believe that enlargement is one of the most important and effective European policies. And I hope that Europe will respect its commitment from the Thessaloniki Summit which took place nearly twenty years ago to enlarge to Western Balkans. We should never forget that Europe is also a peace project.

But of course the European Union has always been about change. Since the moment when it emerged from the ashes of the Second World War, it has been about change. We never accepted the logic of finalité politique. Europe was always moving forward where a need, trust, and political will came together. The demands for change have been coming from a global world, but also from our internal need to evolve.

Today we live in times of uncertainty, instability, challenges to security. The global world is not only unpredictable and dangerous but also full of opportunities generated by processes of change that do not respect borders.

Unfortunately we, as the European Union, feel that we have lost our traditional like-minded partner on the other side of the Atlantic. Not only a political partner with whom we shared major values, a commitment to the multilateral system of rules based trade, multilateral institutions, openness and political will to stick together in coping with challenges like those generated by China. We also lost an economic partner.

We are not in a trade war with the US, but there is a long list of trade-related disputes, mostly generated by transactional tariff based approach of the current American administration. This is bad for both the EU and the US, but it is also bad for the world.

As a result, we spare no effort to expand and further differentiate our European trade relations with the rest of the world because trade is a major job and growth-creating mechanism. You ask me whether I see the fact that recently in the European Union, trade agreements relatively easily become mixed agreements and not an EU exclusive competence, as a problem. You are right, it is an issue to be coped with if we want to continue to see trade as a driver of integration. And if we want those who negotiate with us to trust that the deal will be implemented. I would say it is a confusing signal for our external partners and yes, in my view, the EU should find a solution to this issue. But let me add that for us, securing a global institutional trade framework, and reforming thoroughly all aspects of WTO functioning, including its dispute settlement system, is crucial.

This is the only way to make China adjust its development model, based on state capitalism, industrial subsidies, and forced technology transfer, to globally respected common rules. The US used to be the partner who played a major role in establishing the global multilateral order after the Second World War, based on rules, institutions, and values. We have to work together with all major partners in the WTO.

It is important to act jointly with the US, because many challenges we face do not respect borders. I think here of climate, migration, terrorism, but also of opportunities like emerging technologies, in particular digitalisation, 5G, AI, robotics. We should establish common standards in these areas to facilitate future cooperation.

You also asked me about the Conference on the future of Europe. This is linked to the fact that Europe has to cope as well with its internal, home-grown challenges. One big member state decided to go its own way. It is indeed an unprecedented case when a big economy decides to abandon a preferential trade area. With all its consequences.

We also have political leaders in some member states with a taste for a nationalistic populism, lack of respect of the rules of the club to which they voluntarily belong.

We decided to make climate change a major driver for growth in the future, we build a defence union, we still have only 19 of 27 member states sharing a common currency. Its architecture is not finalised. We want Europe to be more socially sensitive but also more competitive. And we know that we need now to get together with our citizens and decide together about how we see the future of the Union. Hence the conference on the future of Europe which will be a two year process of joint debate, of developing broad ownership of Europe. Whether we will conclude this joint exercise with a shared political will to change the existing treaties it is too early to judge but it cannot be excluded. The European Parliament also proposed to include future potential EU members and neighbours in this debate. I hope they will join us. We are still before joint decisions of three European institutions regarding the design of the conference. But many of us take it seriously.

You ask about appetite for institutional changes in the Union as a result of the Conference. We probably agree that institutional change might be not the most sexy

issue to debate, but I think there will be ideas on how to make Europe more democratic and more efficient.

And the last issue you raised, the multi-speed Europe. Of course it is already a fact of life because we have states without the common currency, there are also elements of flexibility in the Treaties which allow for opt-outs or opt-ins. But I also sense a new potential opening for differentiation of a more voluntary nature. There will be less willingness on the EU side to stop breathing if a member states says no to a new initiative. Like with climate commitments, if you do not want to go forward with others, they, the EU will move forward and you can stay where you are, but there are consequences. I hope member states will not use this self-marginalisation option.

I wish you a good debate. Once again thank you for the invitation.