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“Europe cannot be imagined otherwise than as a democratic construct”

The Democracy is Europe: Remember to Revive

The Union of European Federalists

Gdańsk (online), 21 October 2021

It's good to have European federalists in Gdańsk. I very much regret that I cannot be there with you.

But even if in a hybrid reality, we are together for important discussion. And it happens at a moment, when democracy is very much a preeminent issue on the European, and, also, on the world agenda.

You put in the title of the meeting the collapse of the Soviet Union, big issue for my generation. One of the brightest moments in European history. But I can imagine that for young people of Europe, the end of the Soviet Union is today an “old hat”. That is history to be studied in the history books. But, indeed, the post-Soviet Russia with which we have to contend today, is a geopolitical adversary and competitor. Without any doubt.

Unfortunately, the real challenge for us today is, maybe paradoxically, to defend European democracy against internal adversaries rather than external enemies, though I have to admit it is not to deny that Russia has influence over creating populist landscape in Europe.

We're just a few days after the debate in the European Parliament concerning the rule of law in Poland. I think this debate will have its place in the annals of history. This debate was in a sense a game changer.

And it has a direct relevance to the topic of our panel “Democracy is Europe: Remember to Revive.”

In this debate, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, recalled the name of Lech Walesa and the Pope John Paul II, as well as Solidarity as those who changed the history of Poland. They all had their crucial contribution to the rebirth of the democratic Poland and revived the democratic spirit across Europe.

The point is not only to remember this as a historical artefact, but as a vital element of the European construction.

Europe cannot be imagined otherwise than as a democratic construct.

“Europe” that would accept other forms of its political existence and governance would not be a real “Europe for” citizens and by citizens” as Treaties say.

Not every bag with the name of Louis Vuitton on it is a real Louis Vuitton. Some are just cheap fakes. Its mass production spoils the market and cheat the people.

The same is with Europe: Europe of populists, anti-integrationists, deniers of various sorts would not be a real Europe, but just a retarded version of it, a cheap political product that would fool people by pretending to be a real thing.

And the debate in the European Parliament was not just about Poland and its problems with rule of law. It was a powerful defense, from all but a few political families, of that idea of Europe as democratic construct.

I think that those who would like to reduce Europe's presence in our life must have been mightily surprised by the determination of the European deputies, who, in practically every speech, were defending the core values of Europe with zeal and ardor.

Polish politician attacking European integration saw with his own eyes that the Parliament will not give in to authoritarian tendencies and will defend democratic Europe against the onslaught of the false, populist politics.

Well, to a Polish politician, who is used to juggling truth and mix real facts with fake facts on the national Polish scene, it must have been a surprise to witness the determination of European democrats. I think it was a powerful and a very needed lesson of humility in the face of prodemocratic consensus in the Chamber, with very few dissenting voices from the old Right flank.

In philosophy there is a term “sensus communis”. Some translate it as just “common sense” but it is more than that.

Giambattista Vico, an Italian philosopher of 17. Century refers it to a constellation of power around certain concepts of knowledge that embed themselves in particular social practices.

And in the EU, seen as a set of certain social practices, developed over years, the rule of law is such a concept, a fundamental base for Europe as a community of laws and values. And it is not just an accidental term introduced into the EU speak, but an

existential foundation for the EU as this democratic construct I mentioned. Whoever steps out of that, crosses the red line and is outside this “sensus communis”.

This was very clear during that very long debate. The bond of the principle of rule of law is as the Commission's President said, “a glue” that binds Europe's member states, and without which Europe does not make sense.

As Martin Luther said “Here I stand. I can do no other”.

Indeed, European Union must stand on firm principles and “can do no other”.

Now, the question is whether those who by their own volition go outside this “sensus communis” should be excluded from the consensual community of the EU? Some commentators, on the anti-European side, saw that debate as such a sign of rejection of Poland.

Well, I believe that the Polish government's arrogance of actions, its disrespect toward the EU and its institutions, its hollowing out of the judiciary, crude attempts at defenestrating the public sphere of our freedoms, are facts of life. But Europe's soul stays with citizens, also us, citizens of Poland. There has been a search going on for the soul of Europe for some time now and illiberals are those who want to deprive us of this soul, to change our principles and our behaviour.

Most of us, Poles want to be and, indeed, are credible members of the “sensus communis”, we want to participate in dialogue on the future of Europe in a credible way, to present the real proposals for making Europe stronger together in the face of the world.

As the saying says “the hope dies last”. And it is in this spirit that the Commission, and especially its President, Ursula von der Leyen, has held the hand extended to the rule of law offenders, ready to talk to the last person standing. But in vain.

The Polish government has not repaid with the same openness for dialogue. It probably still counts on national brakes deployed by the Council. But this time around politicians must not ignore what citizens stand for. Those who believe in and care about democratic Europe have to commit themselves to staying together, as a responsive, evolving community of citizens.

Democracy can be destroyed at the institutional level, if only autocratic parties or forces are very determined. Procedural democracy, on which we usually rely is an inherently cold formal being that can exist in an unchallenged state only in the context of a general political consensus.

If any anti-democratic force breaks this consensus, then the limits of procedural democracy are clear. Procedures can be thrown out of the window overnight, and democracy slowly dies.

I am convinced that democracy will only defend itself when it is a life-giving value of the civil society. Democracy is realized on a daily basis through our moral and concrete commitments.

And this democracy, based on a strong identification with values such as the rule of law, equality, civic participation, as well as on horizontal ties between the different segments of society cannot be overthrown as easily as procedural democracy. It is a type of network democracy in which each node of the network strengthens the other.

Denis de Rougemont, said 100 years ago: "The point is not to foresee the future, but to create it". Indeed, Europe of tomorrow will not just happen, it will have to be created.

I hope that the Conference on the Future of Europe, taking place as we speak, will be such an instrument for bringing a Renaissance of civic involvement on a pan European base and reviving Europe of our dreams.

The Conference should become a place for a sort of "enhanced cooperation" of European citizens. Who said that only member states can enhance European integration? Citizens can do it as well. Conference can become a natural place where the citizens will be the „masters of Europe's future".

We see some of good signs of that ownership already. Now it is more probable than in the past. More than nine in ten Europeans - 92% - agree that citizens' voice should be considered for decisions relating to the future of Europe. Only 6% disagree with it. These numbers in themselves are a potent driver for making Europe "an ever closer Union". We should build on this sentiment.

Let me end with an apt quote from the Ventotene Manifesto:

"The moment has arrived in which we must know how to discard old burdens, how to be ready for the new world that is coming, that will be so different from what we have imagined."

I would only modify it so far, that this new world is already here. And, however astonished by it we can sometimes be, we must be able not only to adapt to it, but lead it.

Thank you.