

Don't let them win

Fabian Zuleeg

The terrorist threat has returned to Brussels but this time is different: everyone is feeling on edge and life is still far from normal. There are many that show defiance and, slowly, people in Brussels are returning to school and work, but the sense of threat remains. Unfortunately, this is far from unusual for many cities around Europe, as Paris and many others can testify, and is likely to be replicated again and again, here in Brussels and across the continent.

A Fortress Europe?

The reactions are predictable: many are calling for stricter security measures, including restrictions on civil liberties. Populists are attempting to gain political capital from this tragedy: based on some of the Paris terrorists apparently entering via the refugee route, some populist and even mainstream politicians have already blamed migration at least partially for these attacks, calling for border controls and more fences, with Schengen increasingly in the line of fire. Many more will make that link in the coming days, increasing the tendency for Europe to re-erect borders it has dismantled over the decades.

While some stricter security measures might be necessary, attempting to build a Fortress Europe is neither desirable, nor will it address the problem. Determined terrorists will find routes into Europe, not least because many of them already come from here in the first place. It is the long years of failure in effective integration of certain groups, the lack of effective security cooperation and foreign policy failures that are now proving costly, not the removal of barriers to free movement. A Fortress Europe will not solve the underlying challenges.

A role for Europe

This is not to say that the EU has no role – on the contrary. Maintaining free movement will require greater cooperation between Europe's nations, with a renewed emphasis on internal and external security cooperation. In case of threat, Europe's security services need to work hand-in-hand, as clearly the terrorist suspects are moving across borders. If internal border checks become temporarily necessary, this should be done jointly, and a renewed effort is necessary on supporting the countries with external borders and intensifying cooperation with third countries. More effort will also need to go into integration of marginalised groups as well as effective integration of the newly arriving refugees, which can be supported more by the Union, including through EU funding.

But the role of the EU should go further than this. The current situation is a classic demonstration of the transboundary nature of today's policy challenges. In spite of the right-wing populist rhetoric, the current situation demonstrates the need for more Europe, not less. The list is long: a more effective Common Foreign and Security Policy, including a forward-looking Neighbourhood Policy, a joint asylum policy, a renewed freedom of movement agenda, preserving the achievements the EU has already delivered, a development agenda that can address some of the root causes of conflict, coordinated active labour market policies, etc., etc.

Instead of pandering to understandable fears by creating the illusion that a Fortress Europe is the answer, politicians need to explain the need for greater cooperation, directly challenging the narrow logic of right wing populists and Eurosceptics. The time has come to remember that the EU was created to provide greater security and it can still fulfil this role, even in these changed circumstances.

Collateral damage?

But preserving European integration is not only necessary because it is more effective than the alternative of fragmentation and disintegration. The EU also stands for everything these terrorists are trying to destroy: peaceful cooperation, tolerance and mutual support. As the Treaties put it, we should draw “inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, from which have developed the universal values of the inviolable and inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law.” This is exactly what these terrorists are trying to undermine.

If the collateral damage of the crisis we are experiencing is restrictions of civil liberties, a restriction of the right for asylum, a weakening of European institutions and borders being re-erected – physically and in people’s minds – the terrorists have won.

More Europe!

So, above all, we must work together to defend and strengthen this European Union in a time of crisis. Fragmentation, fear and distrust are in the interest of the terrorists; effective, Europe-wide cooperation, based on European values, is a victory for us. This will not stop the terrorists from committing further atrocities. Nor will it solve all the challenges the EU is facing, including the enormous task of integrating the arriving refugees. But without European cooperation, we cannot begin to tackle these issues and to defend our common values. This is what the EU is for and this is what it should stand for.

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