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What's wrong with the European Union? And what can be done?

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THE CRISIS AND THE EU CRITICS

The EU is in the most serious crisis since its beginnings in the 1950's. Never before has there existed a realistic risk of implosion: a collapse from inside, at the least a significant and serious decline of cooperation, cohesiveness and common action, a loss of ambition, possibly ending with no more than a loose free trade area. It is time to remember what the European Union stands for, and it is time to take to heart what Abraham Lincoln said in 1858, some years before the beginning of the American Civil War: A House divided against itself cannot stand.

There is extensive criticism of the EU. A majority of the British have decided to leave the Union. A new nationalism is growing in Europe, for different reasons but to no small measure feeding on a wide-spread EU-critical sentiment. And as if that were not enough: At the same time new threats have emerged, within the EU and on the outside.

Criticism comes mainly from two different groups.

First, there are those who recognize the shortcomings of the Union but continue to be deeply convinced of its value. They want reform not dissolution. However, these critics follow two different approaches. A not insignificant number sees the solution in 'more Europe', i.e. in bolder integration steps (they are to be found mainly in Brussels), while the other cluster sees the answer in some limitation of central powers and a more pronounced role for member states.

In contrast, the opposition of the other large group of critics is fundamental. They reject the EU as such. Those on the left in this group have essentially different political, economic and social concepts while those on the right emphasise what they consider to be a sacrifice of national identity and control. This fundamental hostility to the European Union on the left and right (both supported by Putin) has grown and become more outspoken.

The current mood is thus not favourable to 'ever closer union'.

The nation-state offers identity and seeming control which distant Brussels does not. If something needs to be changed, ordinary citizens see it happening in their immediate environment, and if they hope to have any influence at all, it is in this environment. "I want my country back" is a feeling that is found not only in Britain.

The American phenomenon of the forgotten 'frustrated poor white man' is discernible also in Europe: a combination of personal resentment, the feeling of being left behind and not heard, opposition to globalization (CETA, TTIP), anti-Americanism and repudiation of our institutions, political elites and the need for compromise. These people, often indifferent in the past, are now turning to those parties that openly express this frustration and blame current political elites, at home and in the EU. As many studies have shown: socio-political frustration and nationalism often go hand in hand.

Thus, we face two challenges. We need to reform the EU and put it back on the path to success. At the same time we must confront the basic questioning of our democratic way of doing things: of accepting diversity, the search for compromise and decision by majority.

THE BENEFITS OF THE EU

Often taken for granted, we need to remind ourselves of the many benefits that accrue to us from cooperation and unity in Europe. More on our minds today seems to be what is wrong with the European Union. True, the Union is not managing critical issues effectively: but that is reason to improve, not to abandon or deconstruct it.

When we talk about the benefits peace is usually mentioned first. We have overcome ingrained, often century-old, animosity between our countries. This is the historic achievement. It is today taken as a matter of course. But it is not self-sustaining. It needs to be nourished and cared for.

One way of ensuring this is by keeping in mind what has been achieved and serves us well. The European project has brought us a singular, in fact revolutionary structure for peaceful conflict resolution. This is the essential foundation on which all else rests. However complex and at times dysfunctional the institutions in Brussels may be, they ensure contact, discussion, compromise and thus peace and progress.

We see each other and we talk to each other on a daily and equal basis. Among so many states with so many different interests and ways of doing things – would anybody expect this not to be complex? To be easy, simple and always transparent? We have differences, conflicts, crises – but we have the instruments and means, that we have built up over the years, from Rome to Lisbon, to find compromises and to move together to guard that specifically European mixture of democracy, freedom, diversity, social justice and welfare.

Yes, this does not always come about effectively and often not efficiently. Most of the time it is circuitous and long-winded. The results are sometimes uneven. They do not satisfy everybody. But we have nothing better. I claim that it is this structure – today so often criticised and even scorned – that is the decisive achievement of European integration! It is this structure that ensures cooperation and peace within our community. It ensures our ability to stand together in facing internal threats as well as political, economic and military challenges that come from the outside, challenges and tasks that no state can meet alone.

CITIZEN SUPPORT

But are European citizens fully aware of this? The support of our citizens is essential to maintain and develop the Union. Why do we seem to be losing this support (not only in England and Wales)? Let me suggest some reasons.

First of all, except for the early 1950's, the European integration process was never an issue that elicited strong emotional support in the general public. It was an elite project and it had the support of the public – or was simply neglected by the public – as long as it did not create problems and went along with economic progress. This is valid also for all of the extensions of the Union, including the eastern expansion of 2004: it was not cooperation or unity but the expectation of economic gain that stood on the forefront.

In the past integration and economic advance went hand in hand. That is different now. The economy is stalling. We are no longer integrating only benefits but are confronted with the need to integrate problems – such as monetary union, mass migration and terrorist threats. These are the issues that make headlines, and they touch on the daily lives of citizens. The Union is faced with greater demands and expectations. In short: more problems, fewer benefits.

As Goethe said, nothing is more difficult to bear than a series of good days. We have experienced a series of good years, dangerously enhanced by the availability of cheap money, and large groups of our citizens do not understand why this should come to an end. The truth is that we need reform. More money alone will not do the trick.

THE EU AND THE NATION STATE

What can we do? Let me look at a number of suggestions.

To enhance national influence and make it more visible, the idea of giving the national parliaments a greater say in decisions that are currently made in Brussels has been revived. But

apart from the voice member states already have through their governments, democratically elected, and the European Parliament, democratically elected, I have not come across a specific proposal on how this can be done without seriously disrupting EU policy-making capability.

We are just witnessing this in the case of CETA. Remember: we already find the decision-making processes complex and too slow!

Of course, the idea is not new. To increase the influence of national parliaments, to ensure subsidiarity and to encourage a more widespread discussion of issues in the member states a number of measures were foreseen in the Protocol on Subsidiarity and Proportionality, attached to the Lisbon Treaty, as well as in several articles in the Treaty itself. The idea was that national parliaments could intervene whenever they thought that the EU was infringing on the rule of subsidiarity. For logistical and political reasons they have rarely been used. These measures may have looked promising on paper, but they have not stood the test of reality.

Is there an alternative?

A way out of the dilemma could be a renewed effort to define – and limit – more clearly and concretely the competences that accrue to the European Union. Everything not clearly specified as Union powers, would remain in the national remit. Beyond that, areas of cooperation could be defined in which Brussels would act primarily as a facilitator for common policy and action.

Of course, I am entirely aware that this is difficult. But it is not impossible. Let's not give up before we've tried. To quote Seneca: We are not trying because it is difficult, but it is difficult because we are not trying!

Above all, it is the only genuine reform that would make a real difference. On the one hand it would be 'more Europe' by ensuring closely knit ties in certain areas. On the other hand, it would be 'less Europe' by leaving prime responsibility in all other areas with the national states. Responsibility would become more transparent and clearly attributable. Subsidiarity would become real.

Of course, once you have assigned competences, you must stick to them. You cannot, when the going gets rough, casually re-assign them, as has just happened with CETA. If somebody had predicted this scenario five years ago, you would have taken him aside and calmly explained how the European Union works.

What Europe needs is a renewed comprehension of our deep and lasting interdependence. The awareness of this has faded in the past years. Delineating competences,

on the one hand, and areas of cooperation, on the other, would represent a start in reversing the trend. It would be a reminder and a wake-up call for national political leaders in Europe.

OVER-REGULATION

Another area for reform is the much criticised over-regulation by the Commission. The Commission, regularly supported by rulings of the European Court of Justice, has continually extended its powers. Under the heading of completing the internal market, the responsible directorates of the Commission have gone over-board in detailing what member states or their citizens may or may not do.

The situation is made worse because member states or various interest groups use the EU to achieve rulings that are unpopular at home – and then allow ‘Brussels’ to be blamed.

Yes, many of the regulations may be justified from the internal market point of view. But concern about olive oil jugs in restaurants or high heels for hairdressers on the EU level does seem a bit ridiculous. Also, citizens find it difficult to understand why, on the one hand, the EU is telling them what light bulbs to use or how much power their vacuum cleaners may have but, on the other, is not capable of developing a common energy policy to ensure that there will be power for the light bulbs and vacuum cleaners.

Here, too, it is necessary to make the term ‘subsidiarity’ tangible and to make it clear that the EU is there to deal with the big issues, the issues that no state can deal with alone. As Commission President Barroso recognized in his State of the Union Address already in 2013: “Not everything needs a solution at European level. Europe must focus on where it can add most value. Where this is not the case, it should not meddle. The EU needs to be big on big things and smaller on smaller things - something we may occasionally have neglected in the past.”

We must resolve the paradox that the EU seems to regulate everything but gets nothing done.

INTERNAL SECURITY AND MIGRATION

In the field of internal security we have begun to understand that cooperation between police, intelligence services and administrations is a critical requirement.

Every incident highlights our shortcomings and after every incident we talk about these issues. But before the Charlie Hebdo incident only four member states were actually sharing

information on terrorist suspects. This is changing. Every incident pushes us a bit further on the road to closer collaboration. The EU is establishing various agencies to improve the state of affairs. But progress is far too slow. It is hampered by national egotism, bureaucracy, political failure, incompetence and above all short-sightedness. We are short on long-term thinking. As in many other cases, this too depends on the member states more than on Brussels.

Since the summer of 2015 migration has become increasingly connected to internal security. We know that some of the terrorists came in with the refugee flow. That has led to suspicion and discrimination against migrants in general, making the task of integration more difficult.

But for many of our member states and their citizens there are two further questions that cause anxiety. Citizens are concerned, first, about the possible long-run difficulties of integrating new minorities from very different cultural and religious backgrounds and then, second, about the effects on the identity and homogeneity of their societies. Why, they ask, should they be requested (or even forced by majority vote) to import, as they see it, potentially unforeseeable problems? Are they really to be blamed? How do we combine the concerns of these member states with the demand to find a common European solution? It is likely that the EU will have to give more room to its member states in these questions.

These are highly sensitive issues. But we cannot afford to allow political correctness to hamper a frank discussion. The functioning of a democratic society depends on argument and the presentation of alternatives. Concerns are not automatically unjustified, arguments not necessarily invalid just because they come from the 'wrong side'. On the contrary, it is dangerous to leave the articulation of such anxieties to radical forces on the left or the right. We must react to concerns where applicable and refute arguments where they are wrong.

Migration and the security of external borders are obviously related to Schengen. If external borders are not secure anybody who crosses them can move about freely and uncontrolled in the entire Schengen area.

Schengen was concluded in a somewhat romantic and optimistic mood. The security of external borders did not seem an issue at the time since the influx was limited and manageable. The same is true for the first Dublin agreement at the beginning of the 1990's. Nobody had the imagination to consider that simply the numbers might change. And numbers make a difference. We are now talking about millions of people.

No sovereign state will be willing to relinquish the right to decide on who should enter the country. If the EU underestimates the importance of this, it will lose the support of its citizens and contribute to the growth of extremist movements.

The issues must be discussed and the EU must present better arguments as well as better results. After all, the migration issue did not come entirely by surprise. Already in 2013 the President of the Commission pointed to the need to establish a common asylum policy, to strengthen the protection of external borders and to combat irregular migration.

The Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the various information exchange procedures are a start but not enough. The next step will have to be the development of a common European immigration policy. Such a policy could differentiate between valid asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. In this way one could oblige all EU member states to accept the first category, also the second on a quota system, but would allow for differences on the third group.

ECONOMIC REFORM

Next to internal security and migration the economy is the third major challenge facing the EU. As I have already indicated, to a critical degree the success of the European integration process depends on the economy. This does not refer to some overall European economy but to the national economy of each member state. If the parts do not function, the whole will not function. If the economic infrastructure is not in order the political superstructure will not function.

The truth is that we need fundamental structural reform in most countries. This means adjustment, also painful adjustment. The euro countries – thanks to monetary union – can no longer increase their competitiveness by adjusting exchange rates.

When EMU was set up, it was assumed that with the set rules these countries would adjust their economies accordingly. But they found they had an alternative: cheap money. Now, after this is failing or not producing the desired results, they can only hope to become more competitive by lowering their costs – and that means lowering wages (and in view of the large state debts also pensions and social services).

And that is exactly the problem. That is why it is hurting the weakest members of our societies, leading to more disenchantment with the EU, considered to be responsible, and the growth of Euro- or EU-critical parties.

When tough adjustments are required popular resistance comes readily. In many cases, even when governments recognize the need for change, they show themselves as either too weak or too opportunistic to make an attempt to convince their electorate.

What is worse is that the current policy of the European Central Bank of providing billions of euros of 'cheap money' is decreasing the pressure for reform. 'Whatever it takes', is the word, and it is taking a lot (currently some 80 billion euros a month, over the past two years almost 2 trillion – a 2 with 12 zeros!). If an engine is broken, there is no use in pouring more petrol into it. But that is exactly what the ECB is doing. The flow of money is helping weak economies to survive by the skin of their teeth and to continue avoiding the necessary reform that would lead to recovery and sustainable growth.

If you think this judgement is harsh, ask yourself what success the ECB's policy has had so far. None. It has neither raised the inflation rate nor has it increased investment or stimulated growth in the weaker economies.

It is a vain hope that somebody will invest in the faltering and uncompetitive economies. Investors do not invest because money is cheap; they invest because they expect profits. And profits in these economies cannot be expected unless structural reforms are implemented; not just decided upon but implemented.

True, this past year we have experienced some modest economic growth – but not surprisingly primarily in those countries that have implemented some reforms rather than in those that have not.

The EU has now proposed a massive investment programme. This is good, but such investment must be sustainable and support structural reforms. If it is used only to meet short-term dissatisfaction, it will remain, as I understand the French say, 'bling bling' investment, or in the German term, a straw fire that flares up briefly and collapses quickly.

The irony of the issue is that the policy of low interest rates is also reallocating wealth from the poor to the rich by decreasing the value of savings and increasing the value of stocks and property. And a final negative effect: The citizens in the weaker states feel lectured to and among others blame the EU while the citizens in the stronger states feel exploited. Rather than further uniting the Europeans the fact is that monetary union as handled thus far has divided them.

Meanwhile EMU has become 'sanctified'. The euro is equated with the success of the European Union: "Scheitert der Euro, scheidert Europa" – if the euro fails, Europe will fail. A

doubly incorrect statement: if a state left the euro-zone, the euro would not fail, and even if the euro failed, it would not be the end of the European Union. While all finance ministers at one point favoured a temporary 'Grexit' in order to allow Greece to recover, the heads of government ruled out this option for political reasons. But if it does not work economically, it won't work politically.

Do we need more responsibility on the part of political leaders or do we need more insight on the part of the people? The answer for both is long-term thinking which Max Weber considered a basis for economic success. If voters expect quick results and politicians see only the next election, history's judgement will not be kind.

ADHERENCE TO THE RULES

Allow me to raise a final point: adherence to the rules. EMU lumped together a number of incompatible economies. Those were political, not economic decisions. If it could work at all, it could only work if the rules set up were adhered to. After all, that is why these rules were made: to make something work that by all economic standards and recognized historical experience could not work. Rules to prevent excessive spending and indebtedness were indispensable.

Instead, it has become customary to bend rules or not to adhere to them at all – we now call it 'flexibilisation'. Moreover, where the Commission claims to be enforcing them, it does so in a discriminatory manner: against some members but not against others, against the weak but not against the strong.

I recall the Commission President's answer to the question why France was not being held to meeting its obligations: Because it's France, he said. The effect on respect for the EU is disastrous. It undermines both mutual confidence and trust in the EU. To take an analogy: The CEO of an airline announces that the safety regulations for small aircraft will be strictly enforced. But there will be tolerance for the larger passenger aircraft since they are big and important companies produce them! How much confidence would you have in such an airline?

We must return to the rule of law. The rule of law is a basic principle of our political system. Member states must abide by the rules that they have set up. If Brussels does not insist on this, it undermines its policies and loses respect and legitimacy.

FOREIGN POLICY

Foreign and security policy is an area for which – while recognizing the benefits of cooperation – the member states have set narrow limits for the Union. Within these limits the EU is active in foreign and security policy. The High Representative had a central role as a facilitator in achieving the nuclear agreement with Iran. The EU is active in several crisis areas in Africa and in the Mediterranean. It is building up Frontex. It is cooperating with NATO in developing concepts to meet hybrid warfare threats, a crucial issue where the EU can make a significant contribution.

There is now talk of increased defense cooperation, even a European Army. How we would manage that in view of our difficulties with monetary union and now even trade, escapes me. Before we launch new ideas we might go ahead and implement those things that we have promised so far: real cooperation in production and procurement of defense material and permanent structured cooperation. In this field we have enough to do before launching ambitious new plans.

Of course, there are shortcomings and possibilities for improvement. State and nation building – particularly the latter – is a key to crisis prevention and post-crisis stabilization. Development aid – of which the Europeans are internationally the largest donors – has not been particularly successful. In both areas new ideas are urgently needed. The United States for once is not on the intellectual forefront in these areas. Why don't we Europeans present new and promising concepts? We tend to talk mainly about hardware. But influence derives also from good ideas to solve key problems.

Yes, we would like to see a more active, more influential and more effective international role for the European Union. But the 'single voice' in European foreign policy by institutionalization and majority voting is not in the offing very soon. Nonetheless, the Europeans can achieve more by closer and effective cooperation. That requires a clearer definition of concrete targets for specific issues, a broader exchange of information and the distinct will to achieve common positions. It is alright to speak with more than one voice, but we need to say the same thing. That would be common enough.

CONCLUSIONS

What are my conclusions?

First, there is no sense in pretending that this is just another EU crisis, and in the end we will all be stronger for it. We are at a crossroads, and our future depends on whether we make the right turn.

Second, we need to be clear that we are confronted by two different but related threats, a threat to the EU and a threat to all that the EU stands for. Both challenges must be met.

Third, we need an open and frank discussion on four points:

- why do we need the European Union,
- what shape is the EU to take,
- what can we expect the Union to deliver,
- and what changes does this require?

Such a discussion must be launched in Brussels and in all capitals. It must be conducted without fear of possible treaty changes.

The EU is no longer an elite project known only to a few. We must gain and assure the support by the European citizens. Without this support we cannot achieve anything.

Many a Master's thesis that I received in the course of the years ended with the conclusion: It all depends on political will. How right they were.

It is our task to foster insight and develop the will for reform and the determination to cooperate. A House divided against itself cannot stand. We must not allow the European Union to go into history as no more than a great experiment.

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