

Opinion Article

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After the UK Referendum, the Main Trial: Save Europe!¹

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If any part of the European legacy of the post-WWII generations is worth holding on to, it probably is Europe. Europe as a Union, as an ethos, as a set of policies and laws that have attached a new significance and meaning to the power of the individual, his capacities and his reach. One's options, access and security are maximized when he is a 'European Citizen'.

We somehow failed to communicate this to 52% of our fellow European British citizens. The debate on the UK's membership was very intense for under a month, and it took the loss of a labour parliamentarian in favour of 'Remain' for a deeper engagement with the dilemma and its implications. It took the 'Remain' side too long to understand how deep-rooted and complicated the support for 'leave' was; how fervent it had become following an obfuscated anti-foreigner campaign on the grounds of 'jobs' in a country where unemployment is under 6%. In any case, the campaign is less relevant now. We have a result. A bad result; bad for the UK, bad for Europe and bad – above all – for the citizens of both.

Maybe I am a blinded pro-EU optimist, or influenced too much by the Greek experience last year, but for some reason I am hoping that this is not the ultimate end for the UK-EU relationship. The win was quite marginal (50+2%) and the negotiations for the UK's departure from the EU family of nations will be long, cumbersome and far more unpleasant than a walk to the poll station on a rainy day. Political realities change fast, and before the end of the negotiations for Britain's departure, perhaps we will already be witnessing the beginnings of a new series of negotiations. Negotiations revolving around how, where and under which conditions Britain could, in fact, remain part of at least some of the EU's structures (e.g. Common Market).

On a different note, in spite of the very sad, worrying, negative developments across Europe, I am not yet completely ready to accept that our continent is in fact ready to slip into the hands of people like Nigel Farage, Marin Lepen, Heinz-Christian Strache or the AfD. One could argue that it is actually the responsibility of the European citizens themselves to prevent it from happening. Too much space and political power has been left there for populists and extremists to grab with impressive ease.

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To reverse these trends, positive and pro-active agency is required; a re-engagement with the political sphere, greater participation in the main debates, and even door-to-door eye-opening campaigning on key national and European issues. It seems that if what people and markets often perceive as the 'silent majority', remains 'silent' for too long, it may eventually bitterly find out that it is no longer the majority. And when in the 'last hour' these 'progressive' forces finally become vocal or, even, loud again, it has repeatedly proven to be 'too little too late'. One may observe this in both the Greek and the UK referenda.

People in Britain were heavily misinformed vis-à-vis the 'costs' and 'burdens' of the EU, and this issue was only partially tackled and very late in the course of the campaign. All in all, the kind of anti-establishment, anti-elitist, anti-globalisation, anti-immigration rhetoric which has been gaining ground continentally, is populism at its worst. The 'decent', 'hardworking', 'every-day' people whose best interests European populists claim to have at heart are, sadly, in fact, the very same people who are most negatively affected by the implications of the policies advanced.

The 'big capital', flies; the 'big multinationals' move out (taking many jobs elsewhere); 'big politics' continue their modern global 'chess' (a game played 'above' the lives of the everyday citizen); and the highly educated, highly skilled and highly experienced 'golden' (or not) girls and boys go where demand is (enjoy exceptional global mobility).

The real, normal, everyday problems and challenges however, stay. They stay, augment and torment - *above all* - the 'decent', 'ordinary', 'hardworking' people whose vote the populists work so hard to 'seize'.

Arguably, the more distant the 20th century hardships and conflicts of Europe become with the passage of the time, the harder it will be for the arguments in favour of the EU trying to relate to that era to 'win the case for Europe'.

Moreover, any honest assessment must recognise that Europe has not gotten everything right either. The management of the financial crisis, although crucial and much needed, was often very poorly handled at the political level. Furthermore, a series of European media greatly exacerbated the situation with sensationalism, populism and stereotypes obscuring and poisoning a much-needed European discussion on the Europe we need and want, as well as the steps required to get there. From the question of competitiveness and productivity; to questions of socioeconomic security, immigration and asylum policy; to our foreign, security and defence policies. Nor did the European management of the so-called 'refugee crisis' show true vision and leadership on the part of EU, its stateswomen and statesmen. The vast inequalities and imbalances within the member states and throughout the European family must also be recognised and addressed. Crucially, the European political establishment and the European leaderships need to work hard, fast and systematically to promptly restore the European social security and welfare model, which has been decisively undermined throughout the continent over the course of the crisis.

What the UK experience also probably tells us is that campaigns run on fear are more effective when they grapple with tangible, immediate things. The xenophobic, anti-immigrant dimension of the 'Leave' campaign arguably related easier with the electorate that sees and experiences migration daily. Instead, the more distant yet so true 'Remain' campaign arguments explaining that leaving will incur financial damage, loss of jobs, income, relevance, global sway, global say, the advantages of the EU and the risk of the continent sliding back

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into the antagonisms of the past - somehow did not have the catalytic effect one might have expected.

Anyway, people hate admitting making mistakes, societies perhaps more so. I do not want to let my optimism cloud my judgement completely – the EU 27 must continue, the EU must deepen, without the UK most probably², and this is probably the only way to heal the wound and stop the 'bleeding'. One thing is certain, the responsibility now lies once again with the citizens of Europe to elect and pressure leaderships in a steady and steadfast EU deepening course that will once again ensure that the EU's pull power is restored to its maximum and that centrifugal forces are nullified *via* a new virtuous European phase of collective progress.

May we all Europeans work hard to safeguard our Union, our peace and relative prosperity which is so mistakenly and so oddly taken for granted.

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² For some time at least.