

## **The Political Situation of Europe**

We celebrated the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Rome on 25 March. These contracts have introduced economic agreements like never before in Europe. With more than 500 million inhabitants, the European market is one of the largest in the world. Thanks to European cooperation, since 1950 we have seen states cooperate instead of fighting each other. Europe thus contributes to global peace efforts. We have succeeded in creating an area of free movement of persons (Schengen) and a common currency. The Treaty of Rome has paved the way for the process of building Europe, for Europe is first of all a process that unites differences. Jean Monnet recalled: "We do not unite states, we bring people closer together." (*French: « Nous ne coalisons pas des États, nous unissons les hommes. »*) (*Jean Monnet at the National Press Club, Washington DC, 30 April 1952*)

First, let us consider the current difficulties of the European Union, starting from the major crises that have shaken it (I), before we come to an analysis of the topical issues (II) and finally point out a path of hope (III).

### **I At least five crises have shaken Europe lately.**

They have either caused a muddled situation or caused great concern.

#### *The Greek crisis*

The "rescue" of Greece was the test of the credibility of its currency, the Euro, as the basis of the European project. One rescue plan follows the other and no "debt restructuring" has been decided yet; in Europe, the uneasiness continues to smolder. Even though the Euro retains its solidity, confidence has dwindled, especially between the countries of northern and southern Europe.

#### *The Syrian crisis*

The "Arab Spring" was a more or less peaceful or violent revolt in which the peoples demanded more democracy (Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria ...). Reforms have been launched with varying degrees of success for the cause of democracy. In Syria, the crisis leads to a civil war, and the United States, together with European countries, Turkey and Russia decide to intervene. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), The result: 465 000 dead and missing persons in six years, as well as three million refugees on their way through the Middle East, Turkey and Greece finally reaching the heart of Europe. Germany shows solidarity, France hesitates. Other countries build barbed wire or wall fences, denying their "share" of the load.

#### *Libya, the Sahel zone and the Horn of Africa*

Africans flee from the war or the climate crisis. The questionable military intervention in Libya has also created the crisis area between Libya and Niger, where tribal actors are joining forces with criminal organizations. Many come from Guinea or Senegal, where there is no war, but there is a loss of confidence among young people in their country, where they see no future. However, the failure of the distribution of refugees to

European countries shows how difficult it is to share the burden of Italy where the refugees arrive.

#### *The Ukraine crisis*

The first is the decision to accept the accession offer of the European Union or to seek a closer rapprochement with Russia. The Crimea is simply annexed. Europe protests. Massive help for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia are passed. Europe is divided. Some want to enforce the law, others believe that Russia's efforts to surround itself with a belt of neutral or friendly states should be respected.

#### *The Brexit*

It was a shock and the entry into order: beginning of an existential crisis for Europe. This vote also confirms the lack of a rooting of the "European project" in society and in the English political class, while highlighting the current shortcomings of European construction. Is the building going to break or is it an opportune moment, a "kairos" that should not be missed?

## **II A Europe that asks itself questions**

#### *The nationalisms*

An alarming picture is the emergence (order: rise) of populism. Nearly 30 populist, extremist or nationalist parties are burdening political life in Europe today. Five of them are part of or lead a government. All of them have a real influence on the political discourse. This aspect of European policy is therefore extremely worrying. The fear of personal and collective decline leads to a desire to withdraw into the national space, and nationalism reappears in numerous national, European or international positions. The current crisis of the Schengen area with its fencing and its barbed wire is the latest example. Separatist aspirations are at work in Catalonia and Scotland ...

#### *The migration problem*

Several questions arise (number of refugees, quotas per country, hospitality, integration, security ...), but the main issue concerns the massive illegality associated with the phenomenon of migration. It's about the combination of humanity and legality. Today, with few exceptions, there are no legal channels for immigration to Europe from poor countries. In 2016, 180 000 people arrived in Italy via the Mediterranean without a visa or residence permit. Is it not possible to negotiate agreements with countries of origin and to demand that the leaving of their citizens is restricted by improving genuine development at the same time. We must welcome the creation of humanitarian corridors by the community of Sant'Egidio and other associations providing humanitarian visas to needy people in Italy and France, as well as to refugees fleeing from the war in Syria and those fleeing from the Horn of Africa.

#### *Poverty*

Despite a slight decline, in 2015 almost a quarter of Europeans lived "at risk of poverty". According to a study by Eurostat, 23.7 % of the inhabitants of the member states are indeed or most likely in poverty. A figure equal to that of 2008 before the crisis started to spike and even broke through the 25 % mark.

According to these estimates, the Statistical Office of the European Union assumes that a person is considered as being "at risk of poverty" if it is affected by at least one of the following three criteria: shortage of money, low employment intensity, serious lack of material things. Almost 120 million people are affected, while the European Union has set itself the target of pushing it below 100 million by 2020.

It is not surprising that the unemployed are the most likely to suffer from poverty. 66.6 % of them are affected. However, employment in no way guarantees that a person is excluded from being at the risk of poverty: 12.5 % of European workers are also in a precarious situation.

### *Security*

The need to strengthen the security within the Union is widely accepted with respect to terrorism. The Twenty-seven make the same diagnosis. The EU has never been so destabilized since the end of the Cold War. The threat comes from the south – the Middle East has been in chaos for a long time - with terrorist metastases that we know and will not soon disappear. It also comes from the East, through an at least unpredictable Russia. This requires collaboration of all instances.

### *The global warming*

Unprecedented droughts, stormy floods, rising sea levels, declining agricultural yields, human migration, etc. – climate change is a reality that affects our lives. Its effects are also felt in our political institutions. Because – as the climate researchers point out – even if the warming does not necessarily cause the crises, it does increase their consequences, for example by pushing the population to emigrate. Even in Europe, arable land turns into desert, access to water becomes more difficult, hence the risk of conflict. The challenge for democracies is to prevent that the current climate crisis leads to political conflicts; it should set in motion a portfolio of measures which help to tackle the problems and provide the money to fight against them.

## **III Where is hope?**

### *Young people are the best Europeans*

The 15- to 29-year-olds, representing around 20 % of the European population of nearly one hundred million people, are the generation most likely to overcome the fatigue of the European project, and then manage the handover. Due to their age, but also by their above-average pro-European position – as the referendum on Brexit and some surveys show – the youth represents the primary hope.

One way to prevent Europe from losing the younger generations is to strengthen the Erasmus exchange program for students, a symbol of an evolving EU that has benefited three million Europeans since its inception in 1987. As “Erasmus +”, it will also include trainees and young people from working-class neighborhoods beyond students. The commitment to the Union, whose existence is often justified by the need to prevent war after the catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century, does not appeal to the younger generation as it does to the older generation. Telling young people about peace is not enough. Credibility also means providing a vision, perspectives and a more direct relationship between young people and European leaders.

### *Questioning Europe to give it a meaning*

The recent events (the Brexit, the elections in France, the crisis in Catalonia, immigration ...) give Europe the opportunity to regenerate. In order to continue living and dreaming the original spirit of the founding fathers, it is important to reinvent it. Above all, it is important to restore authentic relations between the rulers and the citizens as well as between the peoples. This also applies to the indispensable trust of the European peoples, without which nothing is possible today.

Let us not hesitate to question Europe. Let us dare to give sense to Europe as a project of the future, able to arouse the enthusiasm of those who populate Europe in with their diversity. The peace and prosperity we live in must not diminish the efforts necessary to preserve the bonds that unite us in building the Europe of tomorrow.

We have different cultures, but common values. These values can help us to build a trusting, sovereign and sustainable Europe, a Europe that is ready to take risks.

### *A Europe of descendants*

We are in a “tired Europe, which doubts in itself, a Europe that is grandmother and no longer fertile and alive”, in which “the great ideals that have inspired it seem to have lost their appeal in favor of the bureaucratic administrative machinery of its institutions.”

(Address by Pope Francis to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, 25 November 2014). These words are from Pope Francis. The Pope reminds us of our origins, refers us to the fathers of Europe. Reinventing Europe, rebuilding it, does not require a return, but to act as descendants of those visionaries and brave men who were the fathers of Europe.

This is, more than ever, the moment to give the floor to the Europeans and all the living forces that make up our continent, to give their full strength to democracy and hard-won values.

Let us quote the Pope once again: “To go into the future we need the past. Deep roots are necessary, and courage is needed not to hide from the present and its challenges. We need memory, courage, a sane and human vision of the future.”

*Translation from German: Simone Grötz and Werner Hübner*