

STRONGER TOGETHER – EVEN AT 27!

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The organisation of an “EU27” summit in Bratislava takes note of the British decision to leave the EU and is a decisive step in other Member States’ expression of their desire for unity. This summit aims to launch the process to revive European construction, underscoring both the principles guiding Europeans’ common identity against a backdrop of globalisation and the fields in which it is in their interest to work better together, collective security in particular. Yves Bertoncini and Enrico Letta take a stand. This Tribune was also published on EurActiv.com and HuffingtonPost.fr.

1. Reviving the desire for unity: the start of a process

First and foremost, the Bratislava summit must establish the statement that Brexit is in no way the start of a process that will “dislocate” the EU, as the democratic decision expressed by the majority of British voters is marked by specifically domestic features. We must *render unto Shakespeare that which is Shakespeare’s* and leave to other EU peoples what belongs to them, a subject that they will discuss together.

It is welcome news that such a summit will be held in Central Europe, where many citizens have expressed *marked Euroscepticism, which must not, however, be confused with British-style Europhobia*. None of these peoples wish to leave the EU, the Schengen area or the Euro, and neither do their neighbours to the West, North and South. Heads of State and Government must then be guided by the desire to resolve the “crises of co-owners” that they have been tackling for almost a decade, from the management of the Eurozone in the past to the response to the refugee challenge today, inciting them to look more outside of their “common home”.

When the proper functioning of the EU was called into question by its deepening and enlargement, the members of the European Council adopted the fine “Laeken Declaration”, which commendably identified the institutional and democratic challenges to be faced and launched a political debate process in order to meet them. Today, as the coherence of the EU is again at stake, their successors must break with the « business as usual » conclusions of the European Council and adopt a “Bratislava Declaration” that reiterates the meaning of European construction, which is confirmed to all as reversible by Brexit. This implies

speaking to the hearts and souls of European citizens, by answering their hopes and fears, without reducing them to consumers or taxpayers. The EU doesn’t need more firefighters and masons, it needs prophets and architects, i.e. leaders able to promote a unified vision. It is primarily by stressing the fundamental reasons why the union is more necessary now than ever, by recovering its direction and soul and by identifying real projects that will give it new substance that the participants of the Bratislava summit will show that they live up to their responsibilities in line with their predecessors.

2. Living better together in a globalised world

Those attending the Bratislava summit are meeting in the centre of Europe, but less than ever at the centre of the world, of which they account for 6% of the population. It is by looking through the prism of globalisation that they will be able to reassert all that unites us “in diversity”, while putting the scope of our differences into perspective: while there are of course myriad differences between someone from Slovakia, England and Scotland, these disparities are barely detectable when viewed from Beijing, Brasilia or Lagos...

It is up to the Heads of State and Government to bring home just how much Europeans share a common desire to reconcile economic efficiency, social cohesion and environmental protection, in a pluralistic framework, and that this sets them apart from other regions of the world: they should consider this an asset to be nurtured rather than a liability that should be endlessly curtailed, in the guise of overall competitiveness.

It is up to them to launch initiatives that convey this desire for balance, in particular by supporting growth and employment, for example through a new “major

investment plan” that takes the “Juncker Plan” a step further. They must also deal with the identity-related anxiety expressed by EU citizens, who enjoy the benefits of international economic and cultural openness to significantly varying degrees – the launch of an “Erasmus Pro” programme for apprentices would be a particularly symbolic signal against this backdrop.

Lastly, they must at the same time deepen the single market, in particular the energy and digital markets, Social Europe and European budget support, following on from the “competition that stimulates, cooperation which reinforces and solidarity which unites” triptych successfully implemented by the Delors Commissions.

3. Asserting that there is strength in unity when faced with threats

Last but not least, the participants of the Bratislava summit must stress that “unity makes strength”, as history is once again becoming tragic and the world unstable. They must promote the EU, not as a threat or “the” threat, but as a response to a range of threats: Islamist terrorism, the chaos in Syria and Libya, unpredictable migratory flows, Russian aggression, and also unbridled finance, energy dependency, climate change, China’s drive for power, etc. The many challenges facing the EU must urge us to forge our destiny more effectively by sharing our sovereignty, rather than being subjected to them divided and therefore defenceless, including when crises occur on our doorstep, with tragic consequences hitting our concert halls, underground trains and places of worship.

Initiatives to step up our collective security will combine efficiently operational emergencies and the emotional dimension, along the lines of the welcome creation of the European border control corps: examples include reinforced police cooperation and increased intelligence exchanges, the creation of a European counter-terrorism prosecutor’s office, the launch of joint military R&D programmes, heightened resources in terms of the transportation of troops and the effective formation of common battle groups... There is no shortage of projects, and their completion appears to be within our reach, even more at a time when the UK prepares to leave the EU and the USA is strategically shifting its gaze to Asia.

It is by promoting a collective security action plan that the Heads of State and Government meeting in Bratislava will be able to restore meaning to the union. In terms of European construction, this means getting back to basics, as this project originally started because Europeans were fearful of another war between their nations and felt threatened by the USSR. It’s only afterwards that it was deepened while singing the “Ode to Joy”, which is much difficult to heard in these times of crisis.

In Brussels’ language, “Bratislava” already means that Brexit is scheduled. Yet it must stand for much more than that, namely that the union retains all of its meaning and usefulness for all 27 Member States and for current and future generations. In short, not only does this summit show that Brexit is not the beginning of the end, but also that Bratislava is the continuation of the union by other means.

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