Let's not retreat into our national shells

The importance of a united Europe

At the moment, it does not take much courage to join the chorus of voices determined to make the European Union a scapegoat for every conceivable ill. Europe-bashing is en vogue. Not a day goes by when the dire state of the EU is not painted in the darkest of hues. Commentator after commentator proclaims that the EU is in a state of decline and makes the case for the return of nation states as strong, effective actors on the global stage.

The view that the best solution for the pressing questions of our day is for individual countries to go their own way is spreading from the political fringes to the mainstream of our society. Many no longer trust the EU to find convincing solutions that benefit the common good. On the contrary: the EU is accused of acting against the wishes of the majority of citizens and lacking sufficient legitimacy.

The UK's Brexit vote last year made it painfully clear that this view can have very real political consequences. This should be a lesson to all politicians about where decades of Brussels-bashing can lead. Even the governments of EU member states attempt to win political support at home by blaming everything on "red tape" in Brussels. That cannot turn out well in the long run.

There is no denying that the EU is currently at a crossroads: do we stick together and tackle problems together, or crawl back into the shells of our separate countries? The debate about returning powers to individual nation states will only lead to a dead end.

We need the European Union more than ever

When it comes to solving crises and conflicts in our region, dealing with international terrorism, protecting the environment, regulating financial

markets, managing international trade flows, improving conditions for workers across the world or mounting an effective, humane response to international mass migration based on the principle of solidarity, one thing is clear: we need the European Union more than ever.

Because the ability of old-style nation states to tackle these global issues is limited by their national borders. In the globalised world of the 21st century, even a "big" player like Germany can only promote and assert its interests in and through Europe. On a global scale, we would be pretty small fry all on our own! Only in a united Europe can we win back our long-lost ability to act as a global player, capable of influencing world affairs. The EU remains our life raft in these tempestuous times.

What this means is that populists and nationalists are peddling a misguided folly. When individual countries go it alone, nothing improves; in fact, it makes many things worse. In an increasingly globalised world, the "national sovereignty" that nationalists crave is an illusion. You can only lose something if you actually have it in the first place. We cannot hold onto powers that, in reality, we lost long ago. Those clamouring for "less Europe" and the return of nation states do not yet seem to have realised this. Anyone who rejects the EU has simply not understood globalisati

Germany: EU flag-bearer

Germany has a truly unique responsibility in Europe. We of all countries cannot be grateful enough for the courageous Europeans who still believe in a united Europe. Nazi Germany inflicted unimaginable suffering on the whole continent. Back then, we could scarcely have imagined that our neighbours would welcome us back with open arms instead of shutting us out.

The European project has brought peace, freedom, democracy and prosperity. Consequently, we in Germany now have a special duty to keep the European ship on course, even in times of crisis. We have been shown so much solidarity, generosity, openness and friendship. As a result, we are obliged to do all it takes to save Europe.

So we should look ahead to the future. Brexit has been a heavy blow, a wake-up call. It has caused an unprecedented crisis. But it certainly does not mean the end of the EU. The remaining 27 member states have repeatedly made clear that we will stick together; for us, the EU continues to represent an indispensable framework for our common endeavours in the 21st century.

For all the justified criticisms, we have taken the first crucial steps. The agreement to set up a joint border and coast guard agency was a milestone. Why can we not see that? Where else in the world is there a permanent multinational border agency of this kind?

Collaboration on migration policy between source and transit countries is now an integral part of European foreign and development policy. Despite the difficulties, the bilateral agreement between Turkey and the EU has been implemented successfully. We share a common interest in making the EU a stronger player on the international stage. The process of implementing a global strategy is underway, and extensive resolutions have been adopted that move towards a Europe-wide consensus on the need to improve security and defence.

The picture on the economic and social front is mixed, to be sure. But Portugal is doing well, and there is hope for further recovery in countries such as Spain and Greece. One particularly welcome development is the drop in unemployment by 1.4 million among young Europeans aged under 25 since the launch of the EU's Youth Employment Initiative. Nonetheless, every unemployed youngster is one too many. The EU needs to become a beacon of hope again, especially for the younger generation. The promise of prosperity for the many, not just the few, is another defining feature of the European proje

The battle for hearts and minds

We need to dare to set ourselves ambitious goals again and help the EU to develop further. Because, unlike in the post-war era, when European unity was still seen as a desirable goal by those who wanted to limit the continent's destructive potential, at present many people seem more interested in splitting Europe apart.

Europe's top priority must be to win back people's hearts and minds. The EU will appeal to their minds if it is able to find answers to the urgent problems of our time. If it can do that, there will be plenty of rational arguments its existence. But Europe also needs to appeal to people's hearts. To do so, we need solidarity, courage, confidence – and a dash of passion and emotion. Unfortunately, these things are all too often in short supply.

For we stand to lose far more than just an internal market or currency union. Democracy, rule of law, tolerance of minorities, a free press and freedom of opinion are all hallmarks of Europe. It is precisely these values that give us our inner strength and make us an object of envy throughout the world.

Europe is a unique community of values, characterised by cultural, religious and ethnic diversity. This can sometimes be difficult, but it also enriches us and makes us strong in a globalised world. It is this diversity which inspires our ideas and creativity, and spurs us on to new deeds.



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