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Marching to the same beat

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras outlines his vision for a progressive Europe

The fact that the European Union is unsure of its future direction should not surprise us. Over the past few years, the European edifice has been put to the test by both the economic crisis and the refugee crisis, and the end result is not at all encouraging.

Austerity and strict fiscal restraints have increased the gap between the European economies and have further aggravated the problem of social cohesion. Meanwhile, the refugee crisis has reinforced xenophobic and eurosceptic trends in the conservative social strata, politically strengthened extreme right-wing populism and, of course, put the unity, cohesion and prestige of Europe to the test when it comes to implementing common commitments and decisions.

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The potential consequences of Brexit and unprecedented developments across the Atlantic are adding to economic and geopolitical uncertainty. At the same time, given the rapid increase in political influence not only of the doubters but also the deniers of Europe, critical elections in major European countries this year are leading many to question not just the future and character of the Union, but also its very existence.

Against this backdrop, we need to talk to each other more and take bold decisions. We Europeans shouldn't blame the circumstances around us, saying the shoreline has moved when in fact it's we who have been steering a wrong course. The debate has of course just started but given the circumstances we can expected it to move fast.

All parties involved should therefore directly and sincerely express what they have in mind. European member states should engage in constructive dialogue and define the rules, limitations and substance that will characterise the future of Europe, so we don't backtrack on the

European *acquis* – what has been achieved on European integration – and avoid the real possibility of division in our united Europe.

On the other hand, any decisions taken must be realistic and be implemented in the framework shaped by the current network of relations between member states and institutions. And I am not referring only to political relations but also to those of 27 countries with different priorities, economic possibilities and political cultures.

When it comes to this situation and the current equilibrium, it is obvious that the member states' express wish for an "ever closer Union" has lost its dynamism. Instead, the prevailing trend seems to be that of a Europe *à la carte*, where each party looks only to its own interests, participating in the single market, the structural funds and the cohesion fund, but contributing only selectively to the Union.

We clearly saw that during the refugee crisis, when some states refused to implement binding targets for the relocation of refugees, and chose instead to fortify themselves with fences and closed borders.

This practice risks turning the EU into a mere free-trade area. The undermining of solidarity between member states is a worrying indication of the level and quality of European cohesion. Equally alarming is the rise of the extreme right and a sense of isolationism in many countries: an indication that whole swathes of society have lost trust in the European model.

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Is a "multi-speed Europe" the right answer to this crisis of confidence? We need to reflect carefully before answering this question.

Mountaineers tied together by one rope move at the same speed. If they get rid of the rope, they can move forward at different speeds. Depending on their strength and capabilities, each member can choose to tag along with the strongest, or set off in another direction.

This does not mean more freedom. It means abolishing the stronger members' responsibility to support the weakest. We cannot accept a weaker model – either at member state level or in society in general - whereby the strongest play by their own rules, and the others either follow these rules, or risk destruction.

At the same time, if we ensure that all of us are in one boat sailing at the same speed, we shouldn't lock the doors to those wishing to go out on deck, just because some passengers prefer to stay in their cabins.

So if we are looking for a new way of doing Europe, we shouldn't speak of a "Europe of differing speeds" but rather of a "Europe of differing options". If the Europe of tomorrow wants to offer differentiated degrees of integration, that should become possible through concrete requirements that will guarantee the open, democratic and cohesive nature of Europe.

What does this mean practically?

Firstly, it means that any discussion or decision on a new model for Europe should take place in the framework of existing treaties, rules and procedures in the European Union and should be based on the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, forms part of the EU constitution today.

Secondly, if we deepen integration in certain political areas we need to start from the basis of cooperation we have already achieved. We must abandon any thought of dismantling institutions tasked with deepening integration, such as the Eurozone and the Schengen area.

Thirdly, we should not accept closed "clubs" of nations with their own internal rules from which third parties are excluded. This means abandoning the notion of a 'hard core' inside the Eurozone, around which the remaining countries revolve. Any level of reinforced cooperation should remain open and freely accessible to all member states.

Last but not least, we should not weaken the European cohesion and convergence policies: those policies which embody the principle of solidarity and guarantee that a multi-option Europe will not bring today's Europe to its knees.

Greece, which is very close to achieving the objectives of the objectives of the second evaluation of the current bailout programme, inclusion in the European Central Bank's quantitative easing programme and medium-term debt sustainability measures, is finally emerging from a long and

dark seven-year period.

The Greek people have carried a disproportionate burden on their shoulders in the name of Europe, since they have been caught in the middle of both the economic and refugee crisis. And we Greeks increased this burden by choosing to remain in the most integrated parts of the EU, in the Eurozone and the Schengen area. We are therefore entitled to play a leading role in the discussion concerning the future of Europe.

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In any case, the discussion we are demanding should focus on a European strategy re-oriented towards growth and solidarity. Otherwise, the breach between European institutions and European societies will keep widening in both the stronger and weaker economies.

Progressive Europe, trade unions and social movements, the political parties of the left, social democrats and greens also need to find a leading role in shaping Europe's development.

We must work together, without short-sighted self-interest or prejudice, to build a progressive alternative agenda for Europe that will claim the democratic majority. Its main strategic objectives are to consolidate democracy, safeguard of dignified labour, defend of the welfare state and reduce social and regional inequalities.

Such an agenda is the only effective answer to the forces of right-wing populism, isolationism and xenophobia and is therefore the only way to keep Europe united. The path to follow is the path leading to a democratic and social Europe. There is no other clear path towards the future.



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