

How Europe got its future back

Keynote speech, 15 years of European Studies,

Maastricht University

10 June 2017

Ladies and gentlemen.

It's a pleasure to be with you today - and it is actually a special pleasure to talk to you about the future of Europe. Just six months ago, of course, Europe had a future, too. But somehow nobody talked about it. The conferences and debates about Europe that I was invited to at the time, had negative titles. Gloomy titles, like 'The Disintegration of Europe'. Or 'The End of the European Dream'. It was utterly depressing.

In those days I was asked to write an article for a serious policy journal. The editors had dedicated a whole issue to populism. Well, I said, I'd rather write about the anti-populists. Can I do that? I think they're gathering strength. They're lying low. But once they start speaking out, the whole debate will change. And the editor said, "Uuum. Anti-populists. Well, OK then." It was as if she was a little bit, er... disappointed.

This was around the time when, in December 2016, just before Christmas, the Russian ambassador to Turkey was assassinated. Remember the photo? Of this gunman, a policeman, with his unbelievably long index finger stabbing high into the air? On Twitter, people immediately asked: "Is this the Franz Ferdinand moment of the 21st century?" As if war could break out at any

moment. In those days, end-of-year programmes on television were doing predictions of 2017. Many agreed it would be a “revolutionary year”, worse than 2016 had been, full of turmoil and upheaval. A book like *Phantom Terror* by Adam Zamoyski shot up the bestseller lists. This is a gripping book about the epidemic of fear and outright hysteria 200 years ago under Napoleon Bonaparte. Another page-turner featuring high on Christmas holiday reading lists was *Das Zeitalter der Nervosität*, by Joachim Radkau, written 20 years ago but now in rapid reprint. It’s about rapid globalization 100 years ago, and how this dizzied the civilian population into restlessness and stress and yes, total hysteria once again.

I am mentioning all this because I want to show you where we have come from in just six months: very far. It was deep and dark out there. So let us leave all this behind now, and let us look forward. We came out of it. Suddenly our conferences and debates have more upbeat titles. Like the one we’re having today. Now we can talk about the future that was waiting for us all along. The future of Europe.

First I want to discuss with you why I think the eurosceptics have lost some of their appeal over the past few months. And then I will sketch out some of the contours of the future of Europe for you. Some are already becoming a little visible.

Between December and now all of a sudden Europeans, a critical mass of them in any case, have realized that democracy is a bit more flexible we thought. We saw what happened in the US, with the election of Donald Trump, and in the UK after the Brexit vote. Here on the continent

some sentiments that have led to the Trump and Brexit votes exist, too. They certainly will have to be addressed. But many of us didn't like how that was done in America or Great Britain. Isolationism, nationalism, protectionism, blaming foreigners – for the UK and the US this was rather new, at least in this mix and to this extreme degree. But here on the continent, we recognized it. As the new editor-in-chief of the *New York Review of Books*, Ian Buruma, said in a recent interview: “We have been there before.” This is one reason why we backed away from it. This is why the Austrians, I believe, voted for Alexander Van der Bellen as president, and not for a member of a far-right party set up after the war by former nazis. This is why Geert Wilders came nowhere near winning the Dutch elections, either, in March. His party just holds 13 percent - no more, no less. This is why Emmanuel Macron won the French elections early May. This is why the new Prime Minister of Ireland is someone who, just like Van der Bellen and Macron, believes in European integration and is not too shy to say it out loud. On the contrary.

Some people argue it was sheer luck that constructive politicians from the center or close to it stood as candidates at such an important moment in time. I disagree. I don't think it was “luck”. A little, maybe. But what was also involved, was clear reasoning: a readjustment of democratic possibilities.

These politicians have, during their campaigns, proven that if you leave the whole field to populists who just blame Brussels and foreigners and the elite for everything, you should not be surprised if voters end up believing it. What was needed was an antidote. An antidote of realism, of history, and – yes –forward looking.

A *story*, in other words; a convincing story. When you look back over the past few years, you notice how one story dominated everything: the one of eurosceptic populists. It was such a powerful story, that even the politicians who disagreed, felt they should not contradict it.

I will give you some concrete examples. Last summer, for instance, I was at a conference of European trade unions. I'll never forget the leader of one of the large French unions. He said: "I believe we need the EU more than ever. But almost our members vote for Marine Le Pen!" So he didn't talk about Europe anymore. He stopped pointing out for instance that if France calls Facebook or Google to stop violating the law, they don't even hear it in California. And that if Europe does it, Facebook actually changes the rules *and* pays a fine.

Here's another example, from The Netherlands. The government pushed hard for an association agreement with Ukraine. During the negotiations, which took years, they made sure that the deal (negotiated by Brussels) would be fair for Philips, Dutch farmers and so on. Then, one day, some Dutchmen who are against the deal called for a referendum about the agreement. And what did the government do? It stepped back and said: "We are not going to get involved in this discussion. Let the people decide." But the people didn't know what was in those 1600 pages. And they never heard it, because those who did know decided to remain silent. The only ones who spoke out were the sceptics, smashing the deal – sceptics, who printed the text on loo paper with government subsidy while proudly announcing they hadn't even read it. This is the only side of the story that

the voters heard. Some call that a debate. I call it a monologue.

I don't believe that in an interconnected world it makes sense for a small country just to check out, using foul language. But we have freedom of speech. Eurosceptics should be able to say these things. My real problem is therefore with the people who should have answered them. Because they didn't. They were lying low. They kept their heads down. No one answered the eurosceptics for a very long time.

Europe, Brussels – that's *us*. It is *our* ministers, going there and taking decisions with ministers from other countries. They give and they take. Everything is a compromise. Why do they do this? Because before we did this, there were wars all the time in Europe. That is why Brussels was invented: so that we would not shoot with live ammunition anymore, but with words. This, of course, is not very difficult to explain. And still, governments, politicians - they hardly ever do it. They go to Brussels and make a compromise – and then come home attacking Brussels for 'imposing' a decision on member states against their will.

Austria, for example, was one of the countries blocking a strong Frontex – the external border protection - in the early 2000s. This is why Frontex ended up with a handful of staff in Warsaw, on a tiny budget, unable to go into countries of their own accord. Of course, when the refugee crisis erupted, Frontex was nowhere to be seen on the Greek islands. They didn't have the personnel. Or the equipment. Or the money. It took months before the government in Athens invited them in. But instead of acknowledging that they had made a mistake by keeping Frontex so small and powerless, the Austrian minister of

the Interior raged on television every day that the EU had utterly failed in the refugee crisis. And that it was time for member states to take back sovereignty. *Take back?* They had never given it away in the first place. This was the world upside down.

We have seen a total lack of ownership of national politicians vis-à-vis Europe. Out of laziness, out of carelessness. They want to win elections, which are national, and so they sacrifice the EU. I have spent 10 years as a reporter in Brussels, also during the euro crisis, and I can give you many, many more examples of this. The result was, of course, that the eurosceptics and the populists said: “This proves our point. The EU is a failure. So let’s get back borders and kill the currency.”

Now the good news is: this has brought the European project so close to the brink, that the silent majority of people finally *had to* stand up and start protesting. It was really nice to see it. Many citizens, who had been sitting on their hands for a long time, getting more and more worried, took to the streets or the Internet and started opening their mouths and answering back. In Frankfurt a group of lawyers who had never demonstrated in their lives, started Pulse of Europe, every Sunday at 2 o’clock. In no time, it spread to 130 cities in Europe. Before the Dutch elections, lots of people started initiatives like NoNexit, and Operation Libero. In Germany two guys fought so hard for free Interrail tickets for Europeans after their final school exams, that now the European Commission and the Parliament help to make it come true. Many media did not pay attention to this. They thought it was useless. They guessed it would peter out, and die. But it didn’t. Some politicians saw the potential, and used the political energy for their campaigns. Van

der Bellen and Macron relied heavily on volunteers. They needed to, because they both had much less money than their populist opponents.

I went once to an election rally by Van der Bellen. He said very clearly: we need more Europe. All our challenges are international. Austria cannot deal with climate change, terrorism or migration on its own. The audience asked him: how do you want to repair Europe? Van der Bellen had thought about this. He said: “Member states must give up their vetos in Brussels. In Austria, no national decision could ever be taken if the provinces would come to Vienna with a veto right. They would only think of their own provincial interest. No one would go for the Austrian interest. It is the same in Europe.”

Macron used similar, clear language about the EU. Yes, he said, we're in a mess. But it is a mess we created ourselves. If we keep complaining and not doing anything, it will never change. Let's go to work! Let's make the euro stronger. Let's stop blaming Germany for everything. We can do it. Macron even went to Berlin, holding the most upbeat speech I've heard in a long time – with concrete plans to get Europe back on its feet again. It was precisely this self-confidence, this idea of 'we can do it', that had gotten between the wheels of the chariots full of populists racing around Europe.

I have just read an interesting book by a French philosopher, Frédéric Worms, called *Les Maladies Chroniques de la Démocratie*. Worms says: yes, our democracies are going through a difficult time, because of globalization and many other factors - but that doesn't mean we cannot fix them. He says: there is no need to despair. There's no need to be too apocalyptic and think that democracy is coming to an end now. What nonsense!

Times change. The world is changing. Why would our democracies and the whole European structure not change, too? It is only logical. They are much more flexible than we think. Worms sees democracy mainly as a way to govern ourselves in such a manner that the inherent animosity between groups in society does not erupt into violence. Each time this animosity comes up, the two key components of democracy get out of balance: freedom and equality. You constantly need to re-set them. In a democracy you constantly negotiate. About everything. It is moving all the time. On the local level, on the national level, on the European level.

It is a pity that mr Worms' book has not been translated into English. The French are good in political theory – and I believe we have to go back to that. If we must make politics more effective and attractive, why not go back to the drawing board? We can use the classics for inspiration. You learn a lot. It enables you to take a fresh look at what we think is a sclerotic structure. Is parliament there to represent parties, like now, or to represent the people? Has the government always been more important than the parliament? No: after the French revolution, for example, the government had no more than five people, implementing instructions from Parliament.

We will have to do a lot of fresh, critical thinking about what national democracies will look like in the future. We've been rocked to sleep by the fact that we were rich and safe. We must look hard at the European architecture, too. Europeans have enemies, all of a sudden. What does a continent that has always been protected by America, and has become pacifist as a result, do when it is suddenly attacked? Now that we

cannot totally count on the US anymore, or on NATO, we must think about that. Europe also has to become more democratic. That, too, needs a rethink.

All those things are totally impossible, the sceptics say, because of a lack of political will in the member states. But is there? I visit European capitals regularly, and I can report that after many years of stagnation, soul-searching and complaining of the lack of political will some thinking on more European integration is suddenly well underway. Why? Because we have to. Because of Trump, because of Brexit, because of Macron and Merkel and others cooking up strategies. We are actually *already* moving. Europe is no longer “on ice”, to borrow a phrase from commissioner Timmermans. A lot of political energy is going through this continent trying to figure out where exactly it is moving.

After Brexit, to use a concrete example, there is no alternative but to think about new strategies. Did you realize that the north loses 12 percent of the vote in the Council in Brussels without the UK? Did you know that the south as a result becomes more important? Did you realize how easy it was for small countries in the north to block a proposal in Brussels they didn't like? They just needed to phone London. With the UK on board they were almost there already. No more. All these countries will now have to form new alliances, across Europe. They will have to get to know each other much better. National embassies in several EU capitals are already working on this. The Danes sounding out the Austrians, the Dutch visiting Madrid to find common ground on certain issues. I can tell you: the public hardly notices it, but the heartbeat of Europe has accelerated considerably. Many

people involved in this actually like it. It gives them adrenalin - *positive* adrenalin, for once.

I was in London the other day, and in Oxford. All the discussions there are on Brexit. They haven't – understandably – digested Brexit at all. There is fear, there is frustration, lots of uncertainty. People are depressed. They talk about getting Spanish or French passports, about moving out of the UK. It reminds me of our pessimism during the euro crisis. Then I would go to London sometimes for some fresh air. Now it is the other way around. I was happy to fly back to Vienna, where I live. As the French say: *comme ça change!*

We all lose from Brexit , sadly. At the same time Brexit has liberated the EU. The negotiations are bitter and acrimonious – already. The budget battle will be historic, let's make no bones about it. But the UK was a member state that participated less and less in the common project. No Schengen. No euro. No banking union. They constantly pulled the brakes, or looked out of the window out of disinterest. Without the UK, there will be a new political ballgame. We're in Maastricht here. So let's take the example of The Netherlands. I predict: we will become less eurosceptic, just like the Danes, the Swedes and a couple of others. Why? Because without the UK we cannot block or modify Franco-Germans plans so easily anymore. We will need many other countries on our side to do that. They may do us a favor on condition that we also help *them* out one day if they need us. The Hague will not be able anymore to jump up and down every time it doesn't like something in Brussels. We will have to pick our fights more carefully, because we have to keep these new coalitions going. It may be hard to get used to, but this is in the Dutch interest. Because the Dutch are in

the heart of everything in Europe: Schengen, euro, justice cooperation, and so on.

The same applies to Sweden, Austria, Portugal – many countries. They will slowly become a little more diplomatic. A little more European, you could say. I already know of one head of government who has asked his ministers not to be so negative about the EU anymore.

I find this fascinating. You want to hear more? OK. Think what will happen now to the non-euro countries – the ‘outs’. They lose their biggest megaphone, the UK. Without the UK they have less power to protest if eurozone countries take decisions – about banks for example – that also affect the ‘outs’. A Czech politician told me that for this reason, some people in his country now argue that they should join the euro as soon as possible. Not because they have suddenly fallen in love with the monetary union. No: it is to make themselves heard politically.

OK, one more. Recently I was in a discussion with a Dane and a Brit. The Brit said: “You are as eurosceptic as we are. I am sure you will help us to get a good Brexit deal.” The Dane, someone with first-hand experience of the verbal battlefields of Brussels, shook his head. He explained that 55 percent of Danish GDP comes from the internal market, while only 6 percent comes from trade with the UK (mainly pig exports). He said: “The internal market is much more important for us than trade with the UK. We will not allow single market rules, or any of the four freedoms, to be taken down.” And what about your euroscepticism, the Brit wanted to know? Well, replied the Dane, it was easy for us to be eurosceptic and we would get away with it, because “there was always a

bigger eurosceptic around, and that was you. When we will not be able to hide behind you back anymore, this will probably change.”

All this has been set into motion already. These discussions are taking place as we speak, and they are fascinating to listen to. This is focused on the future. It gives us a direction. It is happening without a grand discours, treaty change or whatever. It is called Realpolitik, also known as *La force des choses*. Michel de Montaigne once said: be careful with radical change, you may regret it – small little steps could already change a lot. One at the time. Well, this may be what that looks like.

It is going to be rosy and successful and romantic? Probably not. Are there going to be failures and setbacks, and will we hear the sounds of smashing doors sometimes? Very possibly, yes. My point is that suddenly, the mood has changed in Europe. When everyone least expected it. Just because we were standing at an abyss and some responsible people finally realized you have to fight for democracy, and said: no, we shouldn't go there. Not again. Do you realize this 'never again' is precisely the reason why we started European integration in the early fifties? I cannot think of any better reason than this to keep working on it.