

# “EUROPEANS’ FATE IS IN THEIR HANDS”

Enrico Letta | *President of the Jacques Delors Institute*

**0** ur President, Enrico Letta, takes a stand on the main issues of the European Council of 15-16 December 2016 by answering questions on the European strategy for refugees and migrants, the collective security for the EU, a prospective rapprochement between Washington and Moscow, programmes in favour of youngsters and of youth employment as well as a new 27-strong debate on the EU’s future.

## **1. The European Council is due to conduct an assessment of the progress made in implementing the European strategy for refugees and migrants. What do you expect to come of it?**

The refugee crisis is first and foremost a human tragedy, initially inside the countries that are at war but also when asylum-seekers lose their lives while seeking to reach the European Union. I am still not prepared to admit that, considering their strength and their principles, the Europeans cannot do more to take in asylum-seekers who are primarily victims, or that they should be so badly split over such a challenge.

In that connection, I believe that it would be useful for the heads of state and government to highlight the progress that has been made in their efforts to act at the very source of the migrant crises, in particular through the forging of partnership agreements with the migrants’ countries of origin or transit, in the spirit of the action plan adopted in Valletta. Though the issue as a whole has not been settled yet, it is more satisfying to see the Europeans striving to work together at the source rather than tearing each other apart by temporarily reviving controls on their national borders the way they did last year. This, because it is by offering financial aid to the countries concerned, particularly in the Near East, in Africa and in the Balkans, and by making those countries responsible, that the Europeans will be able the better to control the magnitude of the refugee and migrant flows bound for the EU. Particular attention must, of course, be paid to the agreement between the EU and Turkey on account of its strategic importance, but also on account of the potential distortions that it might create in the effective examination of applications for asylum.

It would also be very useful for the heads of state and government to show that the measures adopted to bridge the gap in trust between the member states are producing

results – I am referring in particular to the European Border Guard Corps whose initial operations should be overtly welcomed.

Lastly, I would like to see the implementation of the solidarity mechanisms put in place at the European level being subject to equally meticulous monitoring because those mechanisms are the concrete translation of a comprehensive political compromise. Above and beyond the crucial financial solidarity towards such countries in the front line as Greece and Italy, it is also necessary to encourage the member states to implement the decisions reached over a year ago in connection with the relocation of refugees.

And finally, given that the European Council appears to be a little more inclined to act at source, it should issue the necessary signals for a more standardised and more practical application of the right of asylum, taking its inspiration from the very interesting proposals recently formulated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

## **2. Donald Trump’s election is reshuffling the cards in the field of collective security for the EU. How can the heads of state and government adapt to this situation?**

While the Europeans’ external defence is ensured by the Atlantic alliance, I would like first of all to stress that the European Council meeting is also going to address internal security issues, in connection with which our fate lies squarely in our own hands. All of the initiatives either launched or expanded in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 are moving full-steam ahead in both the legislative and the operational spheres. I am referring, in particular, to the struggle against the funding of terrorism, to stronger monitoring of the arms trade, and to the Passenger Name Record (PNR). Thus

the European Council should underscore the very welcome progress made, while at the same time launching further sweeping initiatives, including the creation of a European counterterrorism prosecutor's office and far more intense sharing of intelligence in the bilateral and multilateral contexts.

Where external security and defence are concerned, Donald Trump's election is going to have a destabilising impact of which no one seems yet to have gauged the full extent. If a new crisis were to break out in the EU's neighbourhood, would Donald Trump refuse to supply the Europeans with the key strategic enablers that they are still lacking? Given that it has failed to achieve full strategic autonomy with sufficient rapidity, could Europe end up finding itself defenceless and incapable of resorting to the military tool when it becomes appropriate to do so?

In this uncertain context, the upcoming European Council meeting can only act to accelerate the full implementation of the decisions that it took back in December 2013. The heads of state and government must also support, and implement, the proposals which High Representative Federica Mogherini submitted a month ago on the basis of the EU's global strategy presented in June 2016. They should also show active support for the Commission's "Defence Action Plan" which will bolster the Europeans' security, in particular by using the EU budget to fund research projects, including those with military implications.

The will to be perceived as equal to the strategic upheavals taking place should also prompt the European Council to launch new projects in an attempt to achieve the goal of "strategic autonomy" set by the European security strategy as soon as possible, so that we depend less directly on the ups and downs of US domestic policy. If it is necessary to increase national defence budgets in Europe - and Donald Trump is sure to remind us that it is - then that must be achieved by improving the quality of our investments and thus of European cooperation. European cooperation and integration should become the norm, from the furthest upstream level (research to ensure Europe's autonomy in the wars of the future) to the furthest downstream level (operations conducted by the EU's national armies) and including the merger of our defence industries, shared procurement of military materiel and common troop training.

Such systemic, structural and ambitious cooperation will probably be driven by about a dozen European countries which are both willing and able to pave the way. In

addition to the resolutions adopted in Brussels, the heads of state and government must act at the national level by ensuring that their administrations, their armies and their industrialists really do implement the decisions that they reach on 15 and 16 December. At this juncture it is of vital urgency and more than ever before we cannot afford to classify it under the label "business as usual".

### **3. How can we prevent a prospective rapprochement between Washington and Moscow from taking place to the Europeans' detriment?**

Donald Trump's expressions of esteem towards Vladimir Putin in the course of the election campaign have alerted the Europeans to the risk of a potential agreement that would weaken Europe's position in Ukraine and in the Middle East. It is difficult at this stage to predict Trump's real intentions towards Moscow, from explicit recognition of Crimea's annexation to Russia and rejection of Ukraine's NATO membership bid to a drastic review of US investment in NATO, the possibilities are legion...

And it is equally complex to anticipate Putin's response, whether it be in favour of detente between the two powers or whether, on the contrary, he plans to make the most of the United States focusing on domestic issues to adopt a more offensive style in consolidating his position in the EU's neighbourhood. European construction was launched in a context marked by the rivalry between Truman and Stalin. Today it is having to cope with a double act comprising Trump and Putin which can either sorely put it to the test or force its leaders to travel further down the diplomatic and military path - here again, our fate lies squarely in our own hands!

The Europeans did not have the same strategic priorities as the Obama administration but they shared the same interests. Their interests now risk diverging, and certain European capitals could thus be tempted to align with Washington's positions in order to ensure US support in the event of a security threat while others may call for a strengthening of the EU's strategic autonomy. The extension of sanctions against Russia beyond January 2017 is thus going to be the first test for Europe's cohesion in the Trump era. The decision to extend these sanctions would send out a message of mobilisation and consistency on the European partners' part, while a gradual lifting of those sanctions coinciding with Trump taking office would offer Putin greater room for manoeuvre to split the Western allies. Even though the Ukrainian and Syrian issues are handled separately, the Europeans

must adopt an even firmer stance on Ukraine in view of the enforcement of Russian interests in Syria.

The European Council should also endorse the proposal for an interpretative declaration which Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders has suggested building into the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement to prevent the ratification process from being frozen by a "no" vote in the Dutch grass-roots referendum. This declaration specifies, in particular, that the Association Agreement should not be seen as a step on the road to Ukrainian membership of the EU, a fact it is worth clarifying from the outset. It also highlights the fact that Kyiv can under no circumstances demand Dutch military engagement in its defence, or financial support, and that it cannot seek access to the European labour market for its workers. The agreement would facilitate the economic and commercial cooperation accords which are necessary to reconstruct Ukraine once the Minsk process has been achieved.

In Syria, the Europeans' dual goal is to achieve a cessation of the fighting and to put Da'ish to flight, while developing a pattern for the country's stabilisation. But it is also necessary to set a limit on the ambitions of Russian power in the region. To do that, the heads of state and government need to make an effort to clarify exactly what the EU's medium-term interests in the region are.

Putin's ability to destabilise the Europeans in this new Trump era is in danger of gleaning further strength from the fact that it has developed extremely offensive propaganda strategies, making active use of espionage, cyber-attacks and lobbying but also of financial investments in the media and in certain European political parties which may well be playing a crucial role in the upcoming round of major elections. In the awareness of this ability to destabilise the governance of Europe, the heads of state and government need to mobilise in favour of a European cyber-defence strategy and to counter the influence strategy being pursued by Moscow in its determination to bolster its allies both in Europe and in the United States.

#### **4. The heads of state and government vowed in Bratislava to make decisions on reinforced programmes in favour of youngsters and of youth employment. What can we expect to come of those promises?**

Youth employment is a major challenge which is handled first and foremost by the member states, but it must also become one of the European Union's priorities. While

youth unemployment may have dropped in recent years, it still stands at unacceptable levels in numerous countries, in particular in the countries of southern Europe. Above and beyond its economic cost, massive unemployment for Europe's young people also threatens to undermine social cohesion and political stability in numerous countries. Europe cannot afford a "lost generation".

The member states have primary responsibility for coming up with answers to this scourge, but the EU has a crucial role to play, particularly in the realm of coordinating and supporting national action and of contributing to the funding of measures designed to reduce youth unemployment. Back in 2013 the EU approved a "Youth Guarantee" scheme offering a job, an internship or training to people under twenty-five. I am delighted with the Commission's proposal to add 2 billion euro to the 6.4 billion euro already earmarked in 2013 for funding this initiative.

The members of the European Council are also called on to endorse two recent proposals submitted by the Commission in its package entitled "Investing in Europe's Youth". First of all, they need to welcome the establishment of a "European solidarity corps" offering young people willing to help and to learn, the chance of an experience as enriching on the personal level as it is on the professional level while also displaying solidarity and doing something useful for society. This is the kind of initiative which, quite apart from the individual benefits it brings to those taking advantage of it, allows us to promote European values and to nurture the spirit and sense of belonging to a shared project. I also call on the European Council to encourage the new initiative designed to bolster European apprentices' long-term mobility (six to twelve months). We in the Jacques Delors Institute submitted a proposal for an "Erasmus Pro" as long ago as in May 2015 and thus we can only welcome the fact that the Commission should have adopted this new, simple and immediately understandable label designed to maximise the potential of apprenticeship and of European apprentices. Having said that, the magnitude of the challenge would have demanded a more ambitious initiative with fresh funding and with the possibility for young people to serve their apprenticeship either in part or in its entirety in a different member state, because the offer of apprenticeships today is extremely uneven in the various European countries. These mobility programmes must be a tool allowing us to impart fresh lustre to apprenticeship's image and thus, by extension, to contribute to the development of apprenticeships in those countries where they are still below par.

## 5. The heads of state and government will be holding a new 27-strong debate on the EU's future. What recommendations would you like to make in that regard?

I am fully confident that the European institutions and the member states will give the management of the EU/UK divorce all the attention that it deserves once our British friends have decided to initiate the exit procedure called for by a majority of their fellow citizens. In the immediate term and thereafter, however, I believe that the Europeans should focus more than ever before on the future of the 27-strong EU, because it is facing both numerous external threats and internal rifts impacting its cohesion.

The "road map" sketched out in Bratislava basically addresses three kinds of issues already on the European Council's agenda, namely migrations, security challenges and investment, including in favour of Europe's young people. It is now up to the heads of state and government

to develop a clearer formal vision of the future awaiting the European project, by going beyond the sum of common projects and indicating to our fellow citizens exactly what meaning they attach to our union. The next meetings set in Malta and then in Rome to mark the 60th anniversary of the signing of the treaty setting up the common market are crucial staging posts along the path leading to our common future and they place a historic responsibility on the shoulders of the heads of state and government.

It is up to them to repeat that the EU is both an area for economic and human opportunity and a response to the international threats that we have to face! It is up to them to highlight what unites us as Europeans above and beyond whatever collective projects we may wish to develop together, and to highlight what sets us apart: our distinguishing features in a globalised world! And it is up to the political parties, to civil society and to all of the players involved to goad them on down that path! Where inventing our common future is concerned, our fate also lies fully in our own hands.

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