

A NEW PRESIDENT, FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

António Vitorino | *president of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*

António Vitorino takes a stand on the main issues of the European Council of 26-27 June 2014 in an interview on the EU action plan up to the year 2019, the Commission presidency, growth and jobs, the migration policy and Ukraine.

1. Do you think that the EU action plan up to the year 2019 should receive special focus during this European Council?

It is indeed essential to specify the political directions based on which the EU is called upon to act after the European elections of 22-25 May, rather than reducing the debate to what is in store for one candidate or another. Such clarification of the programme is all the more necessary as the president of the Commission must receive the support of a qualified majority of European Council members and the approval of a majority coalition at the European Parliament. It is therefore necessary first of all to foster compromise between the programmes of the political forces likely to form these majorities, member states and parties, by taking into consideration the balance of power established by European voters.

In this regard, the priority is to promote EU action that is clearer and capable of producing conclusive results, by selecting some key projects that Europeans would vigorously embrace. For it is first and foremost because EU action would be better embodied by great projects that it would be clearer: it is important in particular to abandon "Europe of the Troika" to return to a Europe of the "competition - cooperation - solidarity" triptych formalised by Jacques Delors, promoting balanced economic, social and environmental development. It is also important to move away from a parliamentary term and a euro area crisis during which the Europeans were engaged in serious navel gazing, in order to look at the world more and assert the interests and values of Europeans within globalisation, where union is strength. And on these foundations, to implement some symbolic projects, such as Banking union, the European energy community or the creation of European border guards.

The fact of retaining a limited number of priority actions will help respond to those who have perceived "Europe" as being rather intrusive these past few years, particularly in the "countries under programmes" but also because it adopts norms that are very detailed, badly explained and often met with a hostile reception by citizens. While the Troika has already left Ireland and Portugal, there is no doubt that it is necessary to send the same political signals concerning the level of detail of EU rules and interventions from now to 2019.

Such programme directions should naturally be subject to deeper discussion within the European Council, but also between the European Council, the candidate appointed for Commission president and the majority political groups of the European Parliament. The organisational procedures of such a "trialogue" need to be urgently invented, including to facilitate the adoption of an interinstitutional agreement formalising a "contract for the parliamentary term" that would provide the EU and its citizens with the direction they need more than ever. I understand very well that people want to draw inspiration from the practice of "Spitzenkandidat" (campaign figurehead) used in Germany, but let us not forget its natural corollary, i.e. long discussions between the leading political powers in order to adopt a joint programme in a clear and transparent manner.

2. The European Council is called upon to propose a candidate for Commission president to the European Parliament. What is your position in this respect?

As I have just said, I believe that it is first and foremost necessary to agree on a programme for the parliamentary term that suits a large majority, then to ask the best-placed candidate to implement it. It seems to me that it is easier to make concessions and to build compromise on the content of a programme than on the choice of one candidate or another.

I also believe that it is important to clarify the terms of the opposition in principle that has emerged, especially between David Cameron and the main political groups of the European Parliament. The text of the European treaties is clear on one point, without the Lisbon treaty having changed anything: it is not possible for the heads of state and government to impose a candidate of their choice, based uniquely on diplomatic negotiations, and without the formal approval of the European Parliament. The treaties also do not establish an automatic link between the candidates who have solicited the votes of the electors and the proposal of the European Council, that must “take into account the European elections” before putting forward its proposal. Rather than remaining a question of legal interpretation, it above all concerns finding the most adequate candidate to build the large coalition required to meet European citizens’ expectations.

In any case, it is important that the European Council and the European Parliament work on finding an acceptable compromise as the president of the Commission must inevitably benefit from dual legitimacy, both civic and state, which incidentally is mentioned in the treaties and which is in accordance with the “European federation of nation states” praised by Jacques Delors. Experts know what criteria will prevail in this context in the choice of the right candidate, starting with his party affiliation, but also his personal profile and his country of origin. It would be very welcome if these three dimensions, each one legitimate in itself, were more clearly set out in the ongoing negotiations, without which, citizens and voters have the impression of being in the “fourth dimension”...

Furthermore, let us not forget that the real change brought to bear by the Lisbon treaty is that three candidates must now be chosen, and no longer just one: the president of the Commission of course, but also the high representative/vice-president for foreign affairs and security policy, as well as the president of the European Council. It is based on the same political balance of power that these choices must be made, given that the leading party in the European elections cannot claim to obtain the three posts. I believe therefore that it will be easier to agree on the choice of president of the Commission if we have also made progress in identifying candidates designated for the other two posts, based on the observation that the EPP will inevitably have to give up one of the two posts of president that it held until now.

I would finally like to add that beyond the conflicts of legal interpretation and institutional tensions, it is essential that the European Council and the European Parliament appoint leaders with a sharp sense of the political and not just the technical nature of their mission. The same goes for the candidates to the other posts of commissioner. For it is also in this case that the EU could be better “embodied” over the coming years, from the viewpoint of both states and citizens.

3. The European Council will bring a new “European semester” to a close and outline perspectives for growth and employment: what are the priorities in this respect?

While the last three “European semesters” have been marked by “crisis management”, the European institutions today highlight the need to adopt national measures leading to the generation of sustainable and employment-rich growth in post-crisis Europe. The objective of budgetary consolidation has not been abandoned, but there is now more emphasis being placed on the need for structural reform that will help to strengthen the competitiveness of the states.

While this rebalancing between stringency and growth is, in theory, desired by European leaders, it should be reflected in more concrete terms in their actions. This will be achieved through the nature of the recommendations made to member states, that the European Council will be called on to approve. But also and above all through a renewed ambition at European level for new joint initiatives that will help to stimulate growth in Europe and to create new and better jobs, following on from the Growth pact adopted in June 2012.

The fight against mass unemployment should clearly be the main priority in Europe, which implies national decisions, above all, but also a more visible contribution from the EU. In order to create jobs in Europe, it is necessary to facilitate access to credit for national businesses countries particularly affected by the fragmentation of the financial markets, especially the countries on the periphery of the EU. In addition to the important role played by the ECB in this domain, it would be useful to assess the increase of lending capacities of the European Investment Bank determined in June 2012 to alleviate the funding difficulties of businesses in the short term.

To avoid compromising the prospects for growth in EU countries, it is urgent to guarantee that the reduction of public expenditure will spare investment in the longer term in education, research and innovation and help meet the needs of the most vulnerable. This could result in the adoption of a golden rule, which would exclude certain investment expenditure in the calculation of public deficit. National welfare states have paid part of the bill for the adjustment that is ongoing in several European countries. While it is true that the welfare states are in need of reform in order to meet new challenges such as an aging population, they cannot continue to be sacrificed. European citizens are attached to their social model and will not be able to support the European project if it is seen as undermining social solidarity and the fight against inequalities.

Lastly, the fight against fraud and tax evasion should be a priority for member states, given the budgetary difficulties encountered by most of them. Efforts made at European level should also be continued. There should also be deeper discussion, both by experts and leaders, on strengthening fiscal and social convergence in the EU, or, failing that, in the euro area. The crisis highlighted the increased interdependence and interconnection between countries sharing the same currency and I am not sure if European economies can take full advantage of this common currency area as long as new progress aimed at limiting fiscal and social competition between the member states has not been made.

4. The European Council is called upon to adopt new directions in terms of freedom, security and justice: what are your recommendations, particularly in the field of migration?

Since the Tampere programme of 1999, those of The Hague in 2004 and Stockholm in 2009, the policy of freedom, security and justice has been one of the most active policies of the EU, for which the heads of state and government must provide new strategic directions for the 2014-2020 period.

New initiatives are needed to strengthen mutual trust between judicial administrations of countries and to try to simplify administrative procedures to encourage free movement within the EU. But it is in the migration component that challenges have increased. Illegal immigration increased in 2013 after a significant decrease in illegal border crossings for several years. It remains difficult to coordinate the commitments of

member states in terms of asylum and the sovereign right of each state to decide who can enter and settle on its territory. Cooperation between countries of origin and transit countries of illegal migrants is also very difficult. To meet these challenges, a response at European level is more relevant than ever.

Today our attention is drawn, as a priority, to securing external borders and the management of illegal immigration. The avenues suggested by Task Force Mediterranean and the European Commission aim to strengthen solidarity mechanisms related to border control in such a way as to balance the burden on the member states most exposed to illegal immigration (emergency aid to certain member states, increasing resources to Frontex and Europol, strengthening cooperation with third countries, etc.). It is necessary to go further by deciding the issue of the distribution of asylum seekers, which should be more balanced in terms of the wealth of a host country or the proportion of asylum seekers in its population. To seek the solidarity of third countries in the fight against illegal immigration, it is necessary to pay more attention to their expectations in terms of visa liberalisation and to establish a link between development aid and a long-term perspective of migration issues.

Moreover, the migration challenge is twofold and Europeans can no longer ignore the need to face the demographic decline of the EU. We must go beyond the security-based approach to external border control to develop a common legal immigration policy that will anticipate sectoral shortcomings in labour in the medium term. The net contribution of migration to the growth of the total EU population has decreased since 2003. Without further immigration, the European working-age population could decrease by 12% in 2030, which would already lead to shortages in labour by 2020. In order to reinforce our economic dynamism, the funding of our social systems and the sustainability of our public services over the coming decades, we must make use of immigration and we should even make our countries more enticing to attract the migrants for whom other regions and continents have already opened their doors.

Coordinating the conditions of admission of legal migrants into all member states and facilitating intra-EU mobility would make the EU a unique and coherent area, more attractive in order to compete with other world regions involved in the race for talent.

In a context of high unemployment in several countries, heads of state and government have the challenging task of making the various components of a responsible migration policy audible. More public debated is required in member states to involve members of civil society in these issues. Furthermore, the new European decision-makers who will take up their duties at the turn of the summer should also be involved in adopting these strategic directions.

5. In your opinion, what are the main messages that the European Council should formulate in relation to the situation in Ukraine?

The European Council should maintain both the firm and open attitude that it has held since the start of the crisis, to encourage ongoing de-escalation efforts, which should firstly lead to a ceasefire, then to a peace plan. The Ukrainians now have a new elected president, which creates the conditions for better dialogue with the Russian authorities, provided that they adopt a clear attitude.

Dismantling Ukraine is not an acceptable option, but maintaining its cohesion requires massive EU aid:

therefore, heads of state and government must send a clear signal in this respect, especially after the recent gas supply shortages. This is in the Ukrainians' interest as it is in ours, given that almost 50% of European imports of Russian gas pass through Ukraine. Although the EU is better equipped than in the past thanks to efforts made to deal with such shortages, significant progress still needs to be made so that European energy solidarity can play a role. The priority is to develop the necessary interconnecting infrastructure to integrate the various national networks. In this respect enormous disparities within the EU can be noted, with Central and Eastern European states being much more vulnerable.

It is also necessary to determine to what extent the EU is ready to become involved and support Ukraine in the reform of its energy system, a particularly challenging task. But it is also important to improve energy relations between the EU and Russia, in order to move beyond the status quo of confrontation and to base these relations more on interdependence and reciprocity.

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