

EUROPE: UNION IS AN OPPORTUNITY AND A STRUGGLE!

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A few days ahead of the European election on 22-25 May 2014, Jacques Delors, António Vitorino and our Board of directors underline that the European Union is both an opportunity and a struggle to overcome the economic and social crisis but also the Ukrainian crisis, while urging the citizens to chose the political majority which will take decisions on behalf of the EU in the next 5 years. This Tribune was published in *Le Figaro* (France), *To Vima* (Greece), *La Razón* (Spain) and *Le Temps* (Switzerland) and on EurActiv.com.

Just like the crisis that has been rocking Europe for the past few years, so the recent Ukrainian crisis, too, reminds us of the extent to which the European Union (EU) continues to be an opportunity, but also a struggle - a struggle in which the people of Europe are urged to take part by voting on 22 and 25 May.

1. The Union facing the economic and social crisis

This struggle is directed at overcoming the economic and social crisis which has been caused both by banking and real estate speculation and by the poor management exercised by governments, and which is having a serious impact on a large number of Europeans. While the European Central Bank (ECB) has responded rapidly to the crisis, the heads of state and government have had to thrash out painful compromises on the basis of a simple principle: the creation of European aid for countries in difficulty, but only in return for increased control over national policies. The Troika is the most radical embodiment of this compromise, which has led to the EU working alongside, and in the same manner as, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to the point where its popularity has sunk to about the same level as that of the IMF... The efforts made by the countries under programme, often excessively painful, have allowed Ireland to escape the crisis and the other countries to come back on the financial markets.

On a more traditional level, the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact now makes it easier to prevent any new crises: it provides both for stronger tracking of any excesses in the field of public deficits and debts, and also for an assessment of the growth of private debts and of imbalances in economies' competitiveness. The

flexible implementation of the Pact has, for its part, revealed the effort made to reconcile budgetary consolidation with the safeguarding of member states' growth potential. But the European priority for growth and employment now needs to be strengthened, well beyond the Growth Pact adopted in June 2012. The struggle against mass unemployment must evidently become the leading priority in Europe: if it rests first and foremost on national decisions, it also requires a higher-profile contribution from the EU.

The European struggle against the crisis is also a struggle against the dysfunctioning of the financial markets. The creation of the Monetary Union has offered us more stability, by protecting us against both speculative attacks and competitive devaluation: the will not to see their spectre return probably explains to a large extent why a majority of citizens in every country in the euro area are opposed to a return to their national currencies, which would have a disastrous financial and social impact. The banking union, which has recently taken crucial steps forward, is also going to protect us better against the mismanagement of financial institutions, because banks will effectively be subject to increased surveillance under the aegis of the ECB; they (rather than the taxpayer) will also have to pay for their bailouts if such a move proves necessary again in the future. And lastly, while a comprehensive taxation union does not appear to be on the slate any time soon, the recent agreement on the taxation of savings deserves to be welcomed and to open a new era: finally achieved after six years of intense negotiation, it is going to allow governments to improve their taxation of taxpayers tempted to engage in cross-border tax evasion, and thus to have additional public resources available to them in these difficult times.

2. The Union facing the Ukrainian crisis

Just like the Arab spring, so the Ukrainian crisis, too, primarily highlights the fact that several of our neighbours aspire to enjoy the same economic and political conditions as we do. But it also reminds us that the world's development is fraught with instability. The national and European authorities have unanimously deplored Russia's annexation of Crimea; they have adopted both political and financial sanctions (a freeze on assets) against the Russian authorities. They need to maintain their unity towards Vladimir Putin, who can only be effectively kept in check by a united front of European countries acting in conjunction with the United States.

In view of this, it goes without saying that the Ukrainian crisis must encourage us to impart a fresh boost to the EU's common foreign and security policy, to develop a genuine neighbourhood policy clearly distinct from the enlargement one, but also to bring forward the adoption of a fully-fledged "European energy community" based, in particular, on mechanisms of solidarity among member countries and on decreasing our dependence on our suppliers, especially our Russian suppliers.

Bailing out countries in difficulty, struggling against unbridled finance, and firmness towards Russia: those are three challenges over which the unity of the EU's member states was far from being a foregone conclusion, but over which it has proved possible to patiently build that unity in the Europeans' common interest. This unity doesn't prevent member states to act as they see fit in numerous areas and it must be go on being rooted in respect for national diversity. It is more than ever necessary if we are to address the major challenges in the face of which our individual member countries would be sorely at a loss if they tried to act single-handedly.

3. An union based on a political majority chosen by the Europeans

It is precisely because the European Union is an opportunity but also a struggle that it is important to choose the political majority that is going to form the European Parliament for the next five years. The European elections invite us to determine the balance of partisan forces on the basis of which the European Parliament's decisions are going to be forged until 2019. Five major European parties have usefully nominated candidates running for the presidency of the European Commission, allowing us to put faces on the divides amongst the political forces in Europe, in the framework of a broad pluralistic debate. The upcoming European elections will appoint MEP's called to choose the president of the Commission and to take decisions on major issues such as environment, energy, agriculture, transports or public health.

They are not primarily a vote for or against Europe: above and beyond their systematic criticism of the EU, the parties opposed to the EU formulate no proposals capable of allowing the people of Europe to address the challenges they face; and in any case, this inconsistent and divided front is far from being in the kind of position which will allow them to win a majority of seats.

Looking beyond the May 2014 deadline, we wish to combat those evils in our societies that go by the name of apathy towards politics and the deterioration of the civic spirit. Taking part in the debate, voting to contribute to the achievement of our collective destiny: we are going to continue to do that, in our small way, in an effort to foster citizen participation at both the European and the national levels.

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