

What lessons have I learned from my five years at the head of the Council of Heads of State and Government?

The Council decides unanimously with 27/28. It is a big club, but as always there are "leaders" and "followers". In the crisis in the euro zone, there has been a North-South division. With the European budget, it is East-West or net payers and net receivers. As far as migration is concerned, there is a North-South (Italy and Greece, those who should receive asylum seekers and who ask for solidarity from others) and East-West confrontation (not so much by the citizens, who often think the same, but by the leaders), which makes things very complicated. In the Brexit: 'one against all'! Sometimes fundamental contradictions have to be overcome. A crisis helps. 'Never let a good crisis go to waste' (Churchill). Beyond the necessity, there is also, thank God, the political will, the support for the European project by the leaders. Without it, nothing is possible. This is also the reason why Brexit did not have a domino effect.

Populism is above all a national phenomenon. It started years before the eurozone crisis. At the European level, populism does not lead to an exit movement, an exit because European citizens do not want it. Support for EU membership is the highest in a generation. Moreover, populism is not just a European

phenomenon. Look at the USA, Turkey, Brazil. It affects all democracies. In dictatorships, you only see the societal malaise when a revolution breaks out: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Arab Spring, etc.

The rise of populism is the result of a huge societal unease. It is a complicated phenomenon. There is a loss of faith in the future due to the many and rapid changes at the same time (globalisation, climate, migration and digitisation) and to the fear and powerlessness that result from it; an over-accentuation of negative facts and evolutions and a loss of the sense of longer term perspective by the social and other media creating an atmosphere of hopelessness; a general lack of confidence in ideas and institutions that transcend the individual; finally increasing inequalities. Many citizens do not feel sufficiently protected by their leaders at every level of government. These anxieties create new confrontations between the knowledge poor and the knowledge rich, cities and the countryside, natives and immigrants, citizens and institutions of authority. Democratic leaders are accused of not 'listening' to the needs of the citizen, but opinions have never been as divided and heterogenous as they are today due to the loss of solid social structures and organisations, social capital -as a result of individualisation- which can accompany changes. Governance at national and European level

has never been so difficult. It is a phenomenon that affects the whole of the West. How to protect people more against real or perceived threats without protectionism? A new policy mix is needed involving competitiveness, fairness, migration and climate. It's better said than done.

Populism prevents us from making real progress towards "more Europe". People know that the great problems of our time can no longer be solved at national level, but at the same time many people are reluctant to transfer national competences to Europe because they feel they do not have much control over the Union. In times of uncertainty and confusion leadership is needed, especially to choose for 'more Europe'.

Every European solution is a mix of responsibility and solidarity. On the one hand, populism is the opposite of courage and political leadership also in terms of budget and climate, for example - populists want to remain popular - and on the other hand, populism hinders any form of solidarity. After all, solidarity always requires an effort: everybody for himself, is apparently more natural! That is why progress at European level can almost only be made in times of crisis.

Who is the driving force of the Union? Normally it is the Commission, with its monopoly on legislative

proposals. The recent Green Deal is a good example of this. Compare it with J. Delors and the single market and EMU. The Franco-German couple can also play this role, within the European Council or beyond. All the more so as the two countries represent two different economic cultures and are representative of a group of countries with similar sensitivities. This is much less the case when it comes to migration and security. The smooth functioning of Franco-German cooperation depends on individuals, economic and military power relations, history and geography (Germany belongs to Western and Central Europe). It depends on a wider balance: Germany's economic power (until recently) and France's political know-how and 'force de frappe'. Today, this balance is fragile and partly explains the immobility in the EU.

In general, member state governments are much weaker than they were a few years ago because they are in a minority in about ten countries, face internal social tensions or problems within heterogeneous coalitions (due to the fragmentation of the political landscape and the rise of extremist parties). As a result, many countries have become inward-looking and thus less European. How can the Union be strong if the member states are weak? It is therefore surprising that it was possible to agree at the last European Council on climate neutrality in 2050, when the climate issue has

become controversial at national level. However, national leaders have transcended their narrow national sensitivities.

Brexit is a political amputation for the Union. It is the least integrated Member State and yet, for a majority of Britons, it is too much. Brexit runs counter to the economic interests of the citizens and the geopolitical interests of the nation. Brexit jeopardises the unity and the survival of the UK itself. Brexit is coming anyway on January 31. The subsequent negotiations on the future of the EU-UK relationship will be less spectacular for the outside world, but important on the ground. The UK starts those talks with a handicap because it is much more dependent on trade with the EU-27 than the other way round. The UK government is complicating matters unnecessarily by saying now that it will not ask for an extension of the negotiating period beyond 31 December 2020. Wait and see. We are used to.

Over the last decade, the Union has been hit by a succession of crises known as the 'multiple crisis'. It has highlighted structural problems in the euro area and in the Schengen area. But the last few years have also highlighted the major structural weaknesses of the European economies, particularly Germany. Our heavy dependence on new technologies of other continents and the lack of competitiveness in the new economy

have become a major challenge for the EU. European sovereignty has become a political issue. The current balance of power in the world is mainly economic. Only closer European cooperation and integration can meet the Chinese and American challenge. Size matters. Scale is important. Invention and innovation require exactly that amount of resources that is beyond the capacity of even a single country, even a so-called big country. Finally, we are aware of this reality. There is no European digital company among the fifteen largest in the world! That is why it is so important for the EU to become a world leader on climate change, not least because of the enormous economic opportunities it offers.

The EU does indeed play a geopolitical role in a number of crucial areas such as trade, climate and the currency (euro), development aid and SDG, because we can speak there with one voice. The absence of a coherent military arm of the Union, a European army, reduces our geopolitical weight. However, we must bear in mind that the Union has no ambition to become a kind of interventionist power on all continents. Above all, we must focus on the defence of our interests in terms of prosperity and security on a global scale. That is why we have f.i. only two concerns in the Middle East: illegal immigration and terrorism. Nothing more than that.

The relevance of geopolitical dominance, moreover, is decreasing as is multilateral order, the foundation of globalisation. A positive respectively a negative evolution. Brutal geopolitics failed. The so-called geopolitical interventions of the United States and Russia in the Middle East of the last two decades have not brought stability nor have they increased their control over the major countries of the region on a lasting basis. The European intervention in Libya in 2011 also created instability and chaos, even against our own objectives of curbing illegal immigration. Geopolitics has declined, because it failed. The United States is withdrawing more and more and Russia is only a regional rather than a geopolitical factor. Chinese geopolitics is mainly based on geo-economics(Belt and Road), especially outside the Far East. But China is aware of the growing resistance to that strategy.

It is a pity that in recent years Western cooperation has diminished and sometimes even disappeared to such an extent that the EU must also adopt a sovereign position on foreign and security policy precisely in order to defend its interests and promote its ideas. Global stability also helps to safeguard these European interests. I am thinking of safeguarding the multilateral order.

In a nutshell,

The EU is losing an important member this year, which is very regrettable, but the European caravan continues. Structurally, the central challenge is to restore European sovereignty and competitiveness. Quite simply, the Union is facing major challenges. However, we have a track record of overcoming those crises. That gives me hope in the end.