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KEYNOTE SPEECH

**THE EU CHALLENGED: POPULISM AND
NATIONALISM IN TODAY'S EUROPEAN UNION**

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Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

Let me begin by quoting Thomas Jefferson.

“Experience declares that man is the only animal which devours his own kind; for I can apply no milder term to the Governments of Europe, and to the present prey of the rich on the poor”.

This was written by Jefferson to Edward Carrington, one of Virginia’s delegates to the Continental Congress, on January 1787. Jefferson was then the U.S. Minister in Paris. He had succeeded Benjamin Franklin. In France the *Ancien Régime* was about to come to an end. One can but surmise what Jefferson might have thought of Europe in the nineteen thirties of the 20th Century, the cradle of the “European Union”.

The process of European integration was in fact intended to provide a new answer to the problem of internecine warfare and subsequent social dislocation of the previous forty years. The primary goal was to eliminate the two scourges denounced by Jefferson: new wars in Europe and the lack of an acceptable compact between capital and labor. The underlying but undeclared strategic aim was to strengthen the economic and social base of Western Europe and immunize it against alternative models of socio-economic organization. Read Communism.

All those aims were achieved. War within the European Union became unthinkable. Economic growth ensued. The welfare State became a reality as a result of the underlying pact between what was essentially the center-right and the socialdemocratic left. Until ten years ago the European Union could boast a history of almost uninterrupted social, economic and political progress - although one pockmarked by episodic crises. This is no longer the case.

I

The European Union's current predicament can be directly attributed to two major sets of intertwined factors, economic and political.

The economic factor relates to a situation which mutated from a banking and financial crisis into a fully-fledged economic one. This crisis has led to a growing lack of trust among member States and to high levels of output forgone, social distress and unemployment in various countries. It has been aggravated by the tardiness in setting up the efficient institutional and operational tools necessary to deal with shocks of such magnitude. The rigidities and imbalances of the mechanism originally put in place for managing the single currency turned out to be abysmally short of what was required.

The need for a carefully redefined balance between public expenditure and stimulus for growth has been recognized. In practice, however, policies geared toward growth have been distinctly lacking. Rather the emphasis was put on policies of austerity with a view to freeing up resources to reimburse creditor countries. Bad economics and too much of a purely ideological approach have predominated.

The outcome has been catastrophic. Countries such as Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain have lost years of economic progress. Hunger, poverty and despair have returned to the fore. The political compact between capital and labor has become strained at the seams. Many countries, with the UK, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland in the lead, have begun dismantling the welfare State. New concepts have appeared: Prime Minister Cameron launched the idea of the "big society", one never defined. The Dutch now speak of "a participative society". In truth we could instead speak of a transfer of responsibilities from the public sector to the private sphere. In the United States this may not be surprising, but in the European Union it is. No wonder the integration process is being perceived as the major source of socio-economic turmoil.

The second set of factors which has brought about the current predicament is strictly political. It is rooted in the institutional evolution of the European Union. It is far more subtle than the economic factors just discussed.

Let us have a look at the past.

The European Union was conceived as an experiment in cooperation amongst States through the insertion of supranational elements into its decision making-process. This is reflected in the Community method. It is a fundamental departure from intergovernmental cooperation such as it exists in international organizations. Under this new approach of intense regulation and strict compliance with European law (which takes precedence over national laws), sovereignty is not exercised by national Governments exclusively. It is exercised by all Governments *jointly*. This ensured a relatively smooth integration across Europe of sectors in what political scientists usually call “low politics”: international trade, agriculture, fisheries, and regional development.

The intergovernmental Council of Ministers is the institution with the power to accept that the integration process be brought forward. This is done on the basis of proposals from the Commission which, as the supranational component, has the exclusive right of initiative. The European Council became the fulcrum of any strategic decision thanks to its identification as the foremost authority in the Union. It is also intergovernmental.

It soon became clear that under conditions of shared sovereignty *more* integration was necessary if *better* integration was to be achieved. I freely admit that this is not an approach with much emotional appeal. However, it did not encounter significant opposition while the sailing was good.

By 1990 the European Union had decisively stepped into high politics but it did so by partly abandoning the supranational method. The move involved the creation of a monetary union and a common foreign and security policy. In these, and in the area of internal affairs and justice, the Commission was not deemed to have the right of initiative. Progress was made by intergovernmental decisions with unanimity being the rule of the game. The Maastricht Treaty enshrined this curious paradox. This meant

that powerful nations such as France, Germany, Italy or the UK were unwilling to submerge their policies into a common pot.

The dictum of Prime Minister Thatcher in her famous Bruges speech of September 1988 concerning the dangers of a Union allegedly working toward a sort of European identikit, could not have been more wrong. The legendary president of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, was right in defining the European Union as an UPO (**un**identified **p**olitical **o**bject).

The fall of the Iron Curtain changed the European Union forever. Three successive rounds of enlargement have without a doubt been a great success. They have also multiplied the diversity of national interests. Meanwhile the scope of Union activity has reached into almost every nook and cranny of public policy, whether economic or not. Unsurprisingly, some member States (Denmark, UK, Sweden) resented this trend and negotiated opt-outs in a number of Treaties. These treaties were all designed to improve the workings of the Union in the move away from supranationalism.

II

Today the European Union operates in a far more complex domestic and external environment than it did up to the end of the Cold War. Internally, the improvement of the European market and the creation of the single currency have facilitated a high degree of liberalization of the movements of labor, capital and enterprise. Internationally, the Union has decisively been affected by a globalization process spurred by technology and the world-wide mobility of capital.

European public opinion became agitated by the erosion of national sovereignty. The crucial Maastricht Treaty was accepted in France by a very small margin in a referendum. In Denmark a second referendum was needed. This happened in Ireland also, with both the Nice Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty. The European Constitution was brought to an ignominious end by the French and the Dutch in 2005. The Lisbon Treaty which came

into force in December 2009 was, operationally speaking, a second best solution. However, the dual nature of the Union introduced by Maastricht remained in place. One expert, Sergio Fabbrini, has even spoken of a "supranational Union" and an "intergovernmental Union".

The implications of this were not understood by European public opinion. Few were those who appreciated the fact that intergovernmentalism was upgraded by the new institutional status of the European Council. The counterweight by the institution which represents European citizens – the European Parliament- did not compensate for that enormous transformation. Nevertheless, in countries such as the UK, France, Austria, the Netherlands and Italy voices were raised against the supposed encroachment upon national sovereignty. In the public's eye no distinction was made between the supranational and the intergovernmental components of the evolving European Union.

When the economic crisis erupted the intergovernmental Treaty provisions were applied and, as enshrined in the Fiscal Stability Treaty, a policy of austerity became the norm for the Eurozone. Mainly thanks to Prime Minister Cameron, it was approved as an ad hoc intergovernmental instrument of which not all Member States are a part.

This emphatically reinforced the trend toward intergovernmentalism. It also strengthened a new mode of governance based on coordination, benchmarking, mainstreaming and peer reviews. In this so-called "open method of coordination" decisions cannot be appealed through recourse to the Court of Justice of the European Union and member States can hold others to ransom until finding a minimum common denominator.

It is my contention that this kind of intergovernmentalism has nurtured nationalism. In this presentation I understand nationalism in a very specific way. It is *a strategy designed to forward a nation's interests far beyond the accommodation with other member States which is required by the sharing and limitations of sovereignty.*

You will not find it put in this way in the many books written about the European Union. Working from this definition, Germany and France - traditionally the engines of the integration process - have become much more nationalistic. Furthermore, the UK and some member States (new

ones such as Hungary and old ones such as the Netherlands), have played their national card much more assiduously than they did in the past.

Populism has been furthered by nationalism and by the mutation of the economic crisis into a social and political one. In this presentation I understand populism *not* with the positive connotation it has in the United States. I understand it *as a reaction against the multiple crises of the European Union. It does so by exploiting a yearning for simple solutions so as to find a way out of the constraints imposed by the integration or coordination process.*

The reactions may vary from the dream of a return to the national state (this underlies the proclamations of the Front National in France), to a wish to opt out of the Union entirely (as proclaimed by UKIP in the United Kingdom). In between these, there are movements which aim at doing away with the euro (AfD in Germany) or even, in some fringe parties, expelling debtor States from the Union.

The spillover effect from the combination of nationalism and populism varies between countries. It has also been influenced by collateral effects which are a consequence of the integration process. I give you 4 examples.

One -- Immigration has become a highly charged issue in the political discourse of certain countries. However, we must differentiate. While the statement "immigration of people from other EU countries" evoked a positive feeling, in the case of immigration from outside the EU a negative reception was in the majority.

Two-- The global surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center show a rather more complex picture. The belief that immigrants are a burden because they allegedly take jobs and social benefits is especially high in certain member States (in particular Italy, France, Spain, the UK and Greece). The political interpretation varies from case to case. That belief is highest amongst voters for right-wing parties.

Three-- The political implications are conditioned by national peculiarities. The wish to restrict the freedom of movement of labor within the Union is particularly intense in the UK. It does, however, not play any major political role in Spain. On a brighter note, support for a common European

policy on immigration remains very high. One might even say that member States are trailing behind citizens' expectations. Meanwhile, unease about the waves of political and economic refugees seeking entry into the European Union is front-line news daily. They flee war, famine, devastation, hopelessness. The problem is worsening from year to year. The EU is confronted with one of its most dramatic moral challenges ever.

Four-- Fears about a national identity allegedly under siege by Islam has become a powerful factor. This fear is more prevalent among the right. According to the Pew Research Center as far as anti-Muslim views are concerned Italy leads the way. It is followed by Greece, Spain, and France. Today Germany would probably also join this infamous group given the eruption of the Pegida movement.

Politically this translates in different ways.

I live in Brussels where almost a third of the population is foreign-born. No massive rejection of foreigners is perceptible, although the unease has certainly increased. I am Spanish by birth. Xenophobia in my home country is limited although sub-State nationalism is rampant. I am not aware that distrust of foreigners is a major problem in Ireland, Portugal or Luxemburg. However in France or the Netherlands, in Greece or Italy the situation is completely different.

In the Union we can always contest whether the glass is half full or half empty. What does the latest Eurobarometer tell us? A majority of Europeans have positive feelings toward the Union. However there are also many who have a neutral or a negative perception. This may be presented as a success. I think it is not. The negative perception is above the average in Greece, Austria, the UK, Italy, the Netherlands, and France. Three out of the six initial member States are in that list. A success?

Citizens asked whether they think their voices count in the European Union provide more worrisome answers: more than half say that they do not. The highest concentration of dissatisfaction is found in the UK and, unsurprisingly in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece. These are some of the countries most affected by the policies of austerity.

Thousands of books, essays and articles have been written about this state of affairs. How have we come to this point?

III

From a purely operational point of view I have six answers.

My first answer is that the most important blame lies with the political establishment of the European Union itself.

Governments have generally done very little to familiarize their domestic opinion with the fact that the integration or coordination process essentially means a sharing or limitation of national sovereignty. Instead, Governments have usually presented themselves as the supreme defenders of an almost untrammelled national interest when in negotiations within the Union. To proclaim victory has been the usual paradigm. In the case of defeat this has often been explained by positing a heroic resistance against usually formally unidentified others. The intense negotiations in the Council or in the European Council, the fulcrum out of which the major strategic orientations emanate, have remained the proverbial black box of the decision making process. The rumor mill, along with the intentional asides to national media, provide a window through which leaders let their citizens know simply what they want them to know.

For obvious reasons the European Commission has been very wary of launching itself into the political arena in the battle for European public opinion. Furthermore its communication policy has usually been handled in a distinctly technocratic fashion. In the last fifteen years the Commission and its presidents have generally taken a back seat. Their profile has been low and, frequently, extremely low.

The European Parliament has gained ascendancy but only within the supranational decision making process. In general it has become more transparent as far as its own resolutions are concerned. Until recently, however, it has not achieved great credibility in the perceptions of the public. The past elections in May 2014 revealed abysmally low indices of

participation in some of the new member States. There is a widespread misrepresentation that the European Parliament is just a talking shop for well paid representatives who have been sidelined from national political games.

My second answer is that very few Governments have undertaken sustained efforts to make the Union understandable to the common citizen. This is disgraceful as in some countries the media is rabidly anti-EU. Furthermore, Governments rarely defend or celebrate the European Union's outstanding achievements. The abolition of passports within the Schengen area, the mobility of labor, the unprecedented access to the market of other member States, the undoubted contribution to the growth of the European economies... all of this is more or less taken for granted. The average European citizen is left without any kind of orientation or guidance as to what extent those successes are the outcome of sustained and dedicated policy decisions. A new narrative about the *raison d'être* of today's Union is sorely missing.

My third answer is that the European integration or coordination process remains either excluded from or dealt with summarily in national curricula. History and the reflection on the past is conducted within primarily national frameworks. No wonder the ongoing crisis has led to a resurgence of ugly national stereotypes. The Northern Europeans are serious and hardworking. The Southern ones are lazy and love to take the sun on the beach. In this landscape myths flourish. Polish plumbers go to France in waves and steal jobs from French workers. Wrong! Immigrants in their thousands take advantage of the social provisions of national welfare systems. Wrong as well!

My fourth answer may be somewhat surprising. Until quite recently the European institutions have taken neither the causes nor the impact of voters' dissatisfaction very seriously. In the runup to the last European Parliament elections in May 2014 this seemed to be no longer the case. However, it came too late. A wide range of anti-EU parties increased their share of the popular vote and strengthened their presence in Parliament. They reflect a widespread alienation from the established political parties and a yearning for a return to a now past golden era of perceived unfettered sovereignty.

In the current Parliament the mainstream political parties still enjoy a solid majority. No serious challenge can be mounted by the Eurosceptics. However, this overlooks the fact that their success at the European elections has had an encouraging spillover effect on domestic policies. Today the Front National in France, UKIP in the UK or the PVV in the Netherlands have all become serious contenders in the domestic political game. This has led to the mainstream parties accepting some of the aims, if not the solutions, of the populist parties.

The new Commission and Parliament have awakened to the dangers of populism. They are unlikely to react to the much more dangerous nationalism.

My fifth answer is that European élites, both in business and Government, have been slow to recognize the operational consequences of the link between domestic fragility and international challenges. It is clear that these challenges have multiplied in number. However the rise of nationalism has meant that the EU has been slow in shaping a clear policy toward neighboring regions, be they the East (Ukraine, Russia), the South (North Africa) or the most explosive area of the globe, the Middle East. Facing structural phenomena such as climate change, underdevelopment, aging populations, immigration, terrorism and political instabilities abroad the EU has labored to put efficient policies into practice. Free riding on other member States or the U.S. has become the order of the day.

Two new strategies to deal with the challenges thrown up by this international environment and by immigration are now in the making. It has, however, taken far too long to recognise this need. A previous attempt by a high-level working group mandated by the European Council and presided over by the former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez went unheeded.

My sixth and last answer is that the manner in which the economic crisis has been handled has shown, once again, the limitations of intergovernmentalism. The European Council and the Council of Economy and Finance (subsequently the Eurogroup for the euro crisis) have been the protagonists in this context. In each setting the more powerful

Governments have imposed their will on the less powerful. Furthermore, *disunion* in terms of strategy has become the norm. Even when France or Italy occasionally showed signs of counteracting Germany and its allies, the impossibility to make a common front with the countries under surveillance (Ireland, Portugal, Greece) brought French and Italian efforts to nothing. The only *effective* answer given was that of the European Central Bank, a supranational institution. It took more than three years. The intergovernmental approach has been, by its very nature, self-defeating.

My conclusion is that *the Europhobic and Eurosceptic trend is bound to continue. Furthermore, I would go as far as to say that the rise is not yet over.*

IV

Last January the European Union was shaken by two major events. The first was the jihadist attack in Paris on the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* and the assault on a Jewish grocery shop, resulting in the deaths of some twenty people, four of them Jewish. This was followed by the neutralization of further jihadist groups in Belgium and Spain as well as another killing in Copenhagen. More incidents are expected. The perceived level of risk has been raised in several countries

The second event was the voting in of the Syriza Government, a coalition of left-wing parties in Greece. This was a first for the European Union. Governments have usually been formed by combinations of the four mainstream political groupings: Christian-Democrats, Conservatives, Social-Democrats and Liberals, with an occasional Green presence or other shades of right and left. Except in the case of France during the first Mitterrand mandate, the Communists have always been absent from national Government. Now a coalition of the radical left and the national, xenophobic right rules in Greece. Does this mean that the ground is shaking under today's European Union?

We will see in the not too distant future. As of today all options are open.

The Union will also be confronted with a vastly more defining juncture. The British general elections will be held next month. The prognosis is uncertain. Labor may suffer a blood bath in Scotland and therefore become unable to command a majority in Parliament. UKIP may gain a few seats. The liberal-democrats may be reduced to insignificance. If the Tories claim the day, Prime Minister Cameron has promised to hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership. His intention is to negotiate the transfer of some EU competences back to Westminster. Were this to require an amendment to the Lisbon Treaty the ratification process would take too long. If the transfer does not require any amendment, however, the scope will be much less broad. In short, a *Brexit* is not impossible. The effects would be utterly dramatic. The Union would be transformed beyond recognition.

The Spanish general elections will take place in November. It is unclear to what extent the rotation system between the two main political parties, the conservatives and the socialdemocrats, will continue or whether a new party such PODEMOS, leaning toward Syriza, or Citizens, on the center-right, may form part of the Government. The fallout would be essentially domestic but a systemic effect cannot be excluded.

Whatever the European Union does or does not do in the coming months, the prospect of further turbulence in domestic politics cannot be dismissed. *This may be the year after which the Union may take a turn for the worse.* Whether further economic reforms, the weakening of the euro and the drop in oil prices may contain this possibility remains to be seen.

That said, one cannot be unduly pessimistic. The European Union is an enormous political, economic, social and cultural achievement. Doubtless the most important one in a European history filled with blood. It is unlikely that its stake-holders will countenance a continuously and ever more enfeebled Union. For over sixty years the European elites, whether they be in Government, business or labor, have learned to make compromises in never-ending rounds of challenging negotiations. Acute brinkmanship has often been resorted to as a means of unblocking seemingly intractable situations. The culture of integration or coordination is not dead.

The euro has been vigorously defended by the European Central Bank. American hedge-funds managers who betted against it such as John Taylor have been decisively defeated. The Union has not lost its appeal: in the Balkans there are several candidates for membership waiting in the wings. European public opinion has shown remarkable resilience as to the many advantages of a huge market with free movement of labor, capital, and enterprise. Not everything in the European Union is rotten.

Obviously, there are serious problems which need confronting. They can no longer be swept away under the carpet. I quote from the Spanish daily *El Pais*:

"Europe faces an existential challenge. It is the challenge of the rise of populism and nationalism, both of them anathema to the integration process. In order to find answers to problems, to pessimism and to the closing of the horizon for millions of people, the political class and the forces which have so far borne the integration process must reflect seriously on what is happening".

This is an issue over which many people have been pondering for years. It has now become urgent.

VI

The remaining parliamentary elections this year after Finland (in Poland, and Portugal) will gauge the extent of dissatisfaction and/or alienation of the average citizen vis a vis the political and economic establishment. The threat of further jihadist terrorism is likely to propel enhanced cooperation among member States' security forces and intelligence services. It already occurs bilaterally. I fail to see why it could not be enlarged to cover a broader framework. Surely intelligence services can share their findings and threat assessments more widely than they do currently.

Austerity policies are unlikely to become tougher. The IMF has become highly critical of them. The European Central Bank has ceased to be a branch of the Bundesbank. This would have not happened if Germany had opposed the current bond purchase program. Economic growth has resumed although its feeble fruits are distributed extremely unequally. Meeting strict deficit and debt targets has given way to a renewed emphasis on structural reforms under more lenient terms. Germany's chances of maintaining its *de facto* leadership of the European Union will likely diminish when the economic crisis lessens.

Germany is unlikely to assume the leading political role in the future development of the European Union. The German past still lingers in too many Europeans' minds. Were the UK to leave the Union, the role of political leadership would fall on France. This is why France is the linchpin of the Union. Whatever happens in France will have far more serious consequences than whatever happens in Greece, Italy, the UK or Spain, to name a few of the early member States.

Where will we find our answers? According to many observers there are two major requirements. The first is easily identified - it is called *political audacity*. The European economic scene is changing rapidly due to processes which are both domestic and global in their nature and scope. The European political process, however, seems to be limping behind real-time developments. This leads me to the second requirement: *political and economic creativity*. There was a time when creativity was the order of the day in Europe. This seems to have fizzled out. For how long?

There are three reasons which may explain the absence of these elements: complacency, the fear of change and the new relationship between capital and labor.

First reason. Complacency was understandable at the end of the Cold War. The West had won. Today we must wonder if that complacency was seriously misplaced. Societal challenges spring up both internally and externally. They must be confronted because they are not going to disappear by waving some magic wand.

As Laurent Baumel has said,

"The European model promised reconciliation of the market and social security. However, this has been compromised by (...) competition from regions less developed in terms of social security and the ideological offensive waged by neo-liberalism".

Second reason. The fear of change can be explained in the case of prosperous societies but for many in Europe the future is not so promising. Inequality abounds and is on the increase. The economic crisis has been taken advantage of by certain Governments so as to realize their ideological goals. With regards to the UK, Toynbee and Walker have commented that "under Cameron the country has become harder and meaner, more divided by class and region".

Third reason. Whether Piketty is correct or not, the balance of power seems to orient itself toward big finance and big business. The cries for less Government, while hoping that civil society will do its job instead, are deafening but less Government means a lesser capacity to raise taxes and less funding for common policies. We will see what happens to the investment plan announced by the Juncker Commission.

What to do?

Fighting unemployment should be a shared concern addressed by a wide range of properly funded EU policies. After all, the Union is theoretically based as much on competition as it is on solidarity. If progressive taxation in the Union is considered abominable, the EU may turn out not to be an engine for meeting the challenges of the future.

Is this really what we want?

Like in the nineteen thirties, a dark future for Europe is linked to the extremes, to extreme nationalism and to extreme populism.

Is this really what we need? Sadly, I do not have any glass ball.

Many believe that the European integration and coordination project is in urgent need of two fundamental components: a proper budgetary and fiscal base and a more legitimate political base. Both are currently missing. This means *more Europe* is required, although I can hear our British friends scream that this the approach favored by Eurocrats. This is not my case.

Many have learned how to be happy with a two speed Europe but few are happy at the idea of throwing the baby out with the bath water. For this reason we must continue to have faith in the European project while working for a European Germany and not for a Germanized Europe.

Thank you.

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