

Geremek lecture - 14 February 2017

Get off the couch, and re-start the European engine

A few weeks ago I was reading a little book by the Hungarian novelist Sándor Márai. It's slim and easily slips into your pocket. Ideal when you're often on the road, I thought. Well, how wrong I was. I was soon hooked and totally missed my metro stop. This book is a gem. In the text, written in 1950 but discovered in 2013, Márai describes the day that Germany annexed Austria, in the spring of 1938. Everybody had seen it coming. But no one did anything. Marai writes: "We couldn't believe that the things we feared secretly, would one day come to pass."

This got me thinking about today. I've never really known Bronislaw Geremek - but I've heard *of* him a lot and I've seen him around: discreetly, always in tweeds - and I've listened to him speaking in Brussels regularly. But I suspect Márai's book would have made Mr Geremek thinking about today, too.

But back to Márai first. On the morning of that day in March 1938 he goes to play tennis. Then he has a massage and a swim (those were the days!). Afterwards he works a bit on his new novel, about Casanova. Suddenly a colleague appears in the doorway. A bald man with a terrible cough. He says: "The referendum in Austria has not taken place. Prime minister Schusnigg has resigned." He coughs again. He looks embarrassed, not looking up but staring at the polished wooden floor.

That evening Márai goes to the theater. When he comes home, three dusty Austrian cars are parked in front of the garage. No need to wash them, one of the Austrians tells the *garagiste*. “We’re leaving tomorrow, first thing in the morning.” These are the first refugees. Márai goes up to his flat and soon falls into a deep sleep.

Something monumental had happened. A whole way of life, a bourgeois culture were about to disappear. Millions, like Geremek, would see their lives, families, everything they had go up in flames. A revolution had been set in motion, a horrendous energy had been unleashed. *Ça bouge*, Márai simply writes. That’s the term he uses: *ça bouge*. Everybody had seen it coming. A ball of dark political energy rolling their way. But people just let it happen. They were immobilized. Like rabbits, frozen in movement in the headlights of a car.

No - I am not, here, going to draw the parallels between the 30s and now. They are obvious. Let me just say this: once again an angry and fearful middle class is being whipped up by populist politicians. They use all the tricks in the book, like in the 30s. They claim to speak for the people. If you don’t agree with them, they say you are *not* part of the people. That you are a traitor. I am regularly called a traitor nowadays. There is a danger that we are sliding back into the times where ‘the people’ consists of just 30 or 40 percent of the population. The rest is excluded.

But history never repeats itself in the same way. It is *people* who repeat themselves. We keep falling into the same traps. That is why I want to focus on Europe today. On the future. On people *not* falling into traps. If we want that future to be as prosperous and peaceful as the past 70 years have been, we have the power to bring it about.

We *can* bring it about. But in order to make this happen, we cannot remain immobile.

People often make the mistake of identifying today's problems with Europe. "The EU constrains us," they say. "It's an imperium, taking power away from the people. We want our sovereignty back!" But how do they explain the fact that the same dissatisfaction with the effects of globalisation, and the same anger at the fact that many decisions are not taken in national parliaments anymore but at Wallstreet, the eurogroup or 'Brussels' - how do we explain that this dissatisfaction has mainly erupted in countries that are *not* members of the European Union? Look at Switzerland. It's the most globalized country in the world. The financial crisis struck much earlier there than in EU-countries. They started discussing bank bonuses, basic income and eating local food long before we did. The far-right has been the biggest party since the mid-90s already. All this, because of 'Brussels'? Why did the UK, which participates less than any other country in European integration, pull the EU plug first? And did the victory of Donald Trump, who abused the uncertainties of America's white man to his own profit, also come about because of the monster in Brussels? Of course not.

The diagnosis is wrong. The problem is globalization, not Europe.

True: unchecked globalization produces winners and losers. If people feel they are losing out, we've got to do something about it. Withdrawal is *not* an option.

Globalisation will continue without us. Without us, it will become even wilder than now. Globalization is fuelling Europe's growth. It is how we make our money. It pays for our salaries, part of our hospitals. If we withdraw, we'll lose a substantial part of our prosperity. That would

be dumb. When a small country like The Netherlands tells Google or Amazon “you violate the rules”, do you think anybody will notice? When the EU does it, these giants actually change their behaviour. So we’d better stay in the game. And make our voice as strong as possible, by bundling forces. Only then can we bend globalization our way.

This is not, however, the story that our politicians are telling us. They blame everything on Brussels. The populists started doing this a long time ago. Now mainstream politicians are doing the same – even if, behind closed doors, they tell you a different story. Why? “Well, er, Europe doesn’t sell,” one of them told me. When Jean-Claude Juncker was still the prime minister of Luxembourg, he said: “European leaders know what to do in Brussels. But if we do it, we lose elections at home.”

This must change. It is high time that citizens who don’t want Europe to be destroyed by spineless politicians come to her rescue. Look at the UK. Successive governments fed the nation nonsense about Brussels for decades. If you present everything that happens there as a “slap in the face of our great nation”, do not be surprised that people end up believing it.

I receive many emails, every week, from people saying: fantastic, keep writing this! That’s nice to hear. It’s also worrisome. Most are sitting on the couch or behind their screens ‘liking’ this. Very few people act. Many of us are like the rabbits in the headlights.

In Switzerland, this is why the far right has won so many referendums: they push, they shock, and make lots of noise. The rest doesn’t want to be insulted. They’re lying low. I understand. But now something is changing in Switzerland. Last Sunday the Swiss voted overwhelmingly

to ease naturalisation for 3d generation immigrants. Twice earlier they had voted on this. Twice the far right won. This time was different because a group of students got organized. They had made a short film about Vanja and Vania, two nice young women who grew up in a Swiss village, both the grandchildren of immigrants. Vanja is Swiss, Vania isn't. One can vote, the other cannot. People saw the film and found this ridiculous.

The student movement, Operation Libero, was set up over a year ago, because of another referendum. This was about taking the judge out of expulsion decisions of criminal foreigners. The far right wanted that decision to be made automatically – even for foreigners who had gotten parking tickets. This violates international law. Some students said: “We don't want to live in a country like that.” They went to the main political parties and asked: “Can we help?” One party said: “We have no money for a campaign.” The other said: “Do you really want us to defend *criminal foreigners*...?” In the end the students said: “OK, we will do it alone.”

It was hard work. You need trolls on Internet and teams on the streets. One day a smart young student with a radiant smile appeared on TV. She completely boxed the populist opposite her – a potbellied man in a grey suit – into a corner. Meanwhile you saw the polls change. The far right started out ahead. But from the moment the public heard the arguments from the other side, six weeks before the vote, support started shifting. In the end the students won. That was hugely important: it gave the movement wings.

When I wrote about this many readers asked me: “Are there activists like that in The Netherlands? We'd like to support them!” All were waiting for someone else to do it.

Emmanuel Macron, in France, is doing something similar as Operation Libero. He rows against the current, not with sneers but with positive perspective. People love it. He draws huge crowds. He says: look guys, Europe brought us so much good, let's stop complaining. Let's fix what is wrong. All our problems are cross-border: immigration, terrorism, climate change, data protection. Do you really think a country can solve any of them on its own?

We saw it in Austria, too. Alexander Van der Bellen was totally himself. He said: we need more Europe. And explained why. People appreciated this. The populists called him senile, a communist, a spy and a cancer patient. But lots of people helped Van der Bellen. He won. He is now president.

Europe is facing multiple threats. Some say the East-West division is dangerous. Or the North versus the South. Or immigration. Or the Russian Bear. No: the biggest threat is within. It's fatalism. European integration was once seen as the concept of the future. To escape a horrible past. Now, many see European integration as a concept of the past. As an old, tired order.

I am convinced we can restart the European engine. All we need is to get off the couch and bring it on.

The economist and philosopher Albert Hirschman found a word for the state of mind that Europe is in: *fracasomania*. Hirschman was a German who fled Europe in the 30s. He worked for the World Bank in Latin America in the 1970s and 80s. Latin America was not doing well. The ingredients for success were there, but somehow they didn't use them. Hirschman didn't find any obstacles to change - only obstacles to the *perception*

of change. This was 'fracasomania': not failure itself but a failure complex.

Europeans are suffering from something similar. The EU economy grows faster than the US economy.

Unemployment is going down. Yet all we do is complain. I know: many people are unsure about the future. They long for a warmer nest. For job security. We seriously have to do something about it. But let me be clear: we will have much less job security and even less of a nest *without* the European Union.

My idea about the future, then, is the following. First, we elect responsible leaders. That is the biggest challenge for 2017. Responsible leaders don't blame foreigners or Brussels when there is a problem. They actually acknowledge that *they* have been a problem, in the past. It was *they*, who undid internal borders in the Schengenzone, but vetoed plans for a strong Frontex – too intrusive, too expensive. *They* wanted the euro, but vetoed the political backup that would have made our currency stable, and could have nipped the Greek crisis in the bud long ago. If responsible leaders correct those mistakes, Europe will be a lot stronger. It is not difficult. We just need political will.

No one allows the EU to be a success. National leaders give her a task, but not the tools and the means to do it well. The euro is half-baked. Schengen is half-baked. The banking union is half-baked. Foreign policy is not even a quarter baked. Everybody is pulling the wheel in different directions. The result is embarrassing and awful. Everybody blames everybody. In a muddy structure like this, no one is responsible.

If we want Europe to flourish, this must change. We need clear-cut responsibilities. Europe was a giant on trade.

World-wide. And on competition and agriculture, too. Why? Because member states gave Brussels the power and tools to do it well. Member states were not in the driving seat. The European Commission spoke for all of them. This is how Europe became an economic giant, forcing others to do things *our way*.

Those were real European competences, that the EU got in the beginning. The euro, Schengen and foreign policy came later, during the '90s. Then member states didn't want to yield much power anymore. They gave Brussels a little bit, and kept most decisions for themselves. This is confusing and ineffective. No one knows who's in charge. In fact, often no one *is* in charge.

If we want people to support the EU, she has to be a success. People identify with a success, not a failure. If we want the EU to be a success, we need to identify areas where she has exclusive competences - and areas where she won't. There has to be a clear-cut difference between the two areas. If we want to keep Schengen, there has to be a strong Frontex and one asylum and migration policy as well. If we want to keep the euro, and a strong euro, we will need eurobonds and a sort of European monetary fund and stop this business with bilateral loans that have to pass almost 20 parliaments each time. These are clear choices that can and must be communicated with citizens. But do we still need an industrial policy? Perhaps not. We can scrap that. We have to look at each issue and decide. Defence, yes or no? Environment, yes or no? If it's yes, we Europeanize it. If not, we renationalize it. No more muddy structures.

The EU may end up with fewer areas of competence. Fine. The ones she has, will at least - and at last - be done well.

Geremek was a man whom I've never really known. I saw him from afar many times, in the European Parliament, in his eternal tweed jacket. I liked to listen to him. Wise men who've fought for their principles are always nice listening to – more, in fact, than some of the professional managers who are our leaders. Geremek once said: “We have created Europe. Now we have to create Europeans.” This is so true. And it can only happen if we make the Poles, Dutch and all the others proud of Europe again. If we allow Europe to deliver, people will regain confidence. This will *not* happen if we put Europe ‘on ice’, as some politicians want. But Europe ‘on ice’ is not going anywhere. It means stagnation, and a lack of direction.

People need the opposite: they need perspective, they need a future. Something to get up for in the morning. In the East and in the West. *That* is what will end the fracasomania that is eating the heart out of the European project. *That* will end the immobilism amongst Europeans. It will release a lot of constructive political energy. It will finally enable people to say: Europe, *ça bouge*.