



European Council

The President

Brussels, 13 September 2016

The Bratislava Letter

Dear colleagues,

After having consulted most of you and in order to better prepare our summit in Bratislava, let me share some personal reflections. I think it is important that we make an honest assessment of the current situation to provide the best possible basis for building our future together.

I

We are meeting in Bratislava at a particularly historic moment. Twenty-seven leaders of Europe are to discuss the future of our Union, following the first ever decision of a country to leave the EU. We all feel that in these turbulent times marked by crises and conflicts, what we need more than ever before is a confirmation of the sense of our community, which will be celebrating its 60th anniversary in a few months' time.

Brexit not only challenges us with the task of negotiating new relations with the United Kingdom. In this respect, our position should remain clear and unambiguous ("No negotiations without notification"). The Treaty provisions drawn up in case of an EU exit protect the interests of the Union. Our objective in the future negotiations should be, on the one hand, to establish the best possible relations with the UK; on the other hand, however, we should stick to the Treaty and be coolheaded, consistent, and fully united as well as firm in insisting on a balance of rights and obligations. If we do so, there will be no room for doubt that it is a good thing to be a member of the Union.

II

While waiting for the UK government to trigger negotiations, we should diagnose the state and the prospects of a post-Brexit EU. It would be a fatal error to assume that the negative result in the UK referendum represents a specifically British issue; that British Euroscepticism is a symptom of political aberration or merely a cynical game of populists exploiting social frustrations. It is true that the Leave campaign was full of false arguments and unacceptable generalisations. But it is also true that the Brexit vote is a desperate attempt to answer the questions that millions of Europeans ask themselves daily, questions about the very essence of politics. Questions about the guarantees of security of the citizens and their territory, questions about the protection of their interests, cultural heritage and way of life. These are questions we would have to face even if the UK had voted to remain.

People in Europe want to know if the political elites are capable of restoring control over events and processes which overwhelm, disorientate, and sometimes terrify them. Today many people, not only in the UK, think that being part of the European Union stands in the way of stability and security.

People quite rightly expect their leaders to protect the space they live in and ensure their security. If the belief that we have abandoned this responsibility is further strengthened, they will start looking for alternatives. And they will find them. History has taught us that this can lead to a massive turn away from freedom and the other fundamental values that the European Union is founded upon. It is therefore crucial to restore the balance between the need for freedom and security, and between the need for openness and protection. In this context, the effective control of our external borders comes first, and has both a practical and a symbolic dimension.

III

The migration crisis was the tipping point. Last year's chaos on our borders, new images every day of hundreds of thousands of people moving across our continent without any control, created a feeling of threat among many Europeans. They had to wait too long for action to bring the situation under control, such as the closure of the Western Balkan route and the EU-Turkey deal. Instead, all too often they heard politically correct statements that Europe cannot become a fortress, that it must remain open. The lack of rapid action and of a uniform European strategy have weakened citizens' trust in their governments, the institutions and in the wider establishment, already undermined since the financial crisis. Rebuilding this trust has become an urgent necessity, which Brexit has demonstrated very clearly.

We do not have too much time to spare. Bratislava will have to be a turning point in terms of protecting the Union's external borders. We must demonstrate to our citizens that we are willing and able to protect them from a repeat of the chaos of 2015. This will require the full cooperation of all the governments and European institutions.

IV

It is equally important to combat terrorism effectively. In principle we all agree, and yet there are still too many practical and legislative obstacles. Someone must give back to Europeans their sense of security. The question is who and by what means. The main instruments in this field remain at national level, but we can and must do more together. We should cooperate more closely among our police forces and other services when it comes to the exchange of information and operations. We can also do more in terms of facilitating the cooperation of internet providers in removing content which incites hatred and promotes terrorism. At external borders, we must ensure that everybody is checked against our databases, so that potential terrorists cannot enter the EU unhindered. And in each of our countries we must do more to fight radicalisation. Without genuine determination to fight terrorist threats, we will fail to stem radical and increasingly aggressive behaviour and attitudes. These had until recently represented only a narrow margin of politics and public debate in Europe, but today are becoming mainstream with growing audacity.

The promise of a ruthless crackdown on terrorism has become one of the main slogans of right-wing extremists. Furthermore, the fact that despite our best efforts it was not possible to prevent a number of attacks makes their anti-European and anti-democratic rhetoric even more attractive.

V

Our citizens also expect the European Union to better protect their economic and social interests. Especially today, in the age of globalisation, the need for access to proper information, enforcing fair rules, setting clear standards, and the reassurance that their leaders (i.e. their governments and the European institutions) will stand by them in the confrontation with outside competitors, is visible more than ever. It is obvious that free trade and global competition lie in the interest of Europeans, but it is equally obvious that they pose significant and often unprecedented challenges.

This is why, while we continue to work on future trade deals, we must guarantee and reassure our citizens and European companies that we are above all representing and protecting their interests in this process. Europe has enough arguments to be a champion of global competition, but a sine qua non condition for this to happen is to reinstate the trust of the main actors, i.e. workers, consumers and entrepreneurs, in those who represent them. In this case time also plays a key role. Failing to reach trade agreements (and we are talking months, not years) will inevitably create an impression that Brexit has sparked a process of eliminating us from the global game. Today its biggest participants, as the G20 Summit has confirmed, respect and recognise Europe's position as a trade and economic power, and an attractive partner.

VI

I am aware that the future of Europe will depend not only on how we handle the migration crisis, terrorism, and the fears associated with globalisation. Bringing back the feeling of security and order, the trust of EU citizens in their political leadership as well as rebuilding the reputation of the Union as a synonym of protection and stability, are all crucial and indispensable, but they are insufficient. Bratislava should therefore also provide a road map for other equally important endeavours (such as economic and social development, jobs and opportunities for the young, the single market, the digital agenda and investments). We should take formal decisions on the above and other areas at our regular European Council summits in October and December. We will continue our informal work as 27 also in the winter of 2017. As I have already announced, our relations with Russia will be reviewed during a separate session at the October European Council summit. In December we will return to how to strengthen practical cooperation in defence to give it more substance without duplicating NATO. Later we will also have to come back to other important issues such as the Banking Union and the further development of the Economic and Monetary Union.

VII

Following Brexit, business as usual is not an option. We can either come out of this crisis weaker and conflicted, or stronger and more united. There is no fatalism hanging over our future, everything is still in our hands, hearts and minds. The economic and cultural potential of our twenty-seven countries, the talent and education of our citizens, is more than enough to believe in Europe and its ability to compete with the rest of the world in an effective and secure manner.

Our deficits, as compared with other global powers, are visible in "hard politics" (such as defense and executive powers). We will not, however, change the European Union into a single state. Therefore, it will be crucial for the Member States to better cooperate among one another, to bring our forces together in the Union. My talks with you clearly show that giving new powers to European institutions is not the desired recipe. National electorates want more influence on the decisions of the Union. Adopting this direction would nonetheless require a change of attitude of national governments towards the European Union as such.

Today the EU is often treated as a necessary evil, not a common good. The slogan "less power for Brussels", which sounds attractive in political campaigns, should translate as more responsibility for the Union in national capitals. This responsibility for the Union is nothing other than a readiness to sacrifice part of one's own interests for the sake of the community. It also means refraining from the constant accusations aimed at the Union, which sometimes are justified, but more often than not they serve as an easy excuse for one's own failures. This was also one of the reasons behind the Brexit vote.

The keys to a healthy balance between the priorities of Member States and those of the Union lie in national capitals. The institutions should support the priorities as agreed among Member States, and not impose their own ones. This is another conclusion I have drawn from my consultations with you.

VIII

Between the scepticism of the pessimists on the one hand, and the Euro-enthusiasm on the other there is ample room for "real optimism". Critical diagnosis must be at its source. We need to do everything not to let it degenerate into a blame game, so futile and so typical of recent years, or a bidding competition for best-sounding slogans, such as "better Europe", "less Europe" or "more Europe". After all, someone might eventually cut it short with "no more Europe".

IX

Today we are not in the situation of the heroes of *The Leopard*, a novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. We do not have to change everything if we want things to stay as they are. We must rectify a number of things in order to preserve what is best. For that to succeed we need readiness to take several difficult, yet in fact simple decisions. This is not about new treaties or procedural changes. What we need is a strong political will and imagination. The time has come to rise to the challenge. In fact, there is no other way.

Yours sincerely,



Donald Tusk