

JEAN-LOUIS BOURLANGES

Member of the French Parliament, former Member of the Court of Auditors and of the European Parliament

Ali ASLAN

Finally, I am delighted to welcome, from the French Parliament of course, and somebody who knows Europe very well as a former member of the European Parliament, Jean-Louis Bourlanges. You have the floor, I am curious about your input.

Jean-Louis BOURLANGES

I am in a privileged position today: I have not been asked any specific question. Many **thanks** to you. I would like to speak in a slightly different manner: looking **concurrently** at the longer term, **on** a **different time-scale, and also** with more of a politician's perspective.

You **wove** some major ideas into your statement, and I would like, **in contrast, to stir up a bit of** political noise as the European elections are a few months away. I think it is interesting to see where Europe stands, **where the European endeavour** is with respect to our **deeper** sensibilities, how this **situation will affect** the major European deadlines.

The first thing we need to bear in mind is the profoundly contradictory nature of the changes we are facing today, since the end of the Cold War now, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. We are now seeing, after a period of illusion during which the threat faded away, a **strong surge** in all the threats, which is creating, once again, extremely strong pressure for Europe to unify. Never since the Cold War, especially the second Cold War, the one that preceded the collapse of the Soviet Union, has Europe fared so well. The European Union is being experienced, once again, as extremely necessary, due to the existing geopolitical threats:

- Russia's aggressive stance;
- the uncertainties around America;
- the Islamist threat;
- economic threats, with the emergence of China **which has chosen hard-line competition**. We are not facing the **"gentle trade" dear to Montesquieu's heart, but something more fierce**;
- ecological threats with the climate issues which we discussed with Laurent Fabius.

They really give us the feeling that we cannot overcome these issues unless we band together. From that perspective, never have the words of the disciples on the road to Emmaus resonated so strongly: "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over."

The second major shock, in contradiction with the first, and which we must take up is the total fragmentation, indefinite and unprecedented, in our political societies. This fragmentation has obviously struck the largest of these societies: the European Union. Hence the increasingly vigorous ideological attacks on that Union, against the system in Brussels. I am nonetheless struck by the parallelism between the threats of dislocation impacting the European Union and the fragmentation of our national societies. In this respect, Brexit is exemplary. We have both the United Kingdom's successful attempt to break away from the European Union and the manifestation of particularly strong centrifugal forces within the United Kingdom. The same is true in Spain, of course, with Catalonia. We actually have several nations in this situation, including those formed at the initiative of France and England: Belgium in the 1830s, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia – which were either destroyed by implosion or threatened with destruction. Everywhere, we are seeing populations recoil into increasingly restrictive ethnic values. Within our societies, we are seeing social fragmentation, political fragmentation, and crisis in the generalist parties. We are witnessing the birth of movements that lay claim to a simple slogan: 'small is beautiful' ever more frequently. In France, we have seen a peculiar form of

political sociability develop, with the Zones to Defend. That is to say, a few acres of land around an airport which are under protected status, or a power plant that should be avoided. The result is a general fragmentation of the social body.

These two movements are naturally contradictory:

- One is centripetal and fosters the reunification of the continent, the formation of a strong union on other foundations than on the open, willingly trading union of yesteryear – a more defensive union, fated to deal with a Copernican revolution. It is Europe amidst its nations and not the nations at the heart of Europe.
- The second is centrifugal. We are challenged to manage implosive forces that are causing withdrawal into identitarianism, protectionism, anti-elitism and an inability to bring out common actions.

Opposite this, we have very far-reaching upheaval on the European political scene. I will define it quite simply by saying: first of all, a deep decline – Emmanuel Macron should be more aware of this than I think he is – in European progressivism. It is being beaten back. We were approaching globalisation in positive terms. Now we are coming up against protectionism. We were defending migratory Europe, but are now asked to protect, sort and even turn away people who come from the open sea. In terms of political organisation, we put ourselves forth to defend fundamental rights. It was a very strong body of claims, and remains compelling, particularly at the Commission. However, it is now faced with competition from more agonistic values, based on the concern to protect our territories and our societies from an ever-less tolerated threat of intrusion.

We find ourselves facing conservative expectations. We want to preserve the climate, the integrity of our populations and our ways of life. We want to preserve our standard of living, the euro and security. All the plans we are seeing – there is nothing illegitimate about them: conservatism is something entirely legitimate – are conservative, including those put forth as reformatory. Reformers want to reform, but are doing so actually to preserve, in particular, the humanist legacy of the post-war period. Progressivism and conservatism are in part connected, as progressivism is now a legacy much more than it is an endeavour.

Conservatism takes on two forms. A “gattopardist” form, to borrow a term from Lampedusa: changing something so that everything remains the same. Today, this is the dominant current of thought: what do we need to change in order to remain what we are? We need more checks at the European borders, more solidarity in the eurozone, we need to have a more strong-willed and consistent policy when it comes to fighting climate change, to assert our security so as to protect ourselves from external threats, step up the fight against terrorism and defend our democratic values tooth and nail. A whole set of actions that sustain a current which I would refer to as euro-reformist: a Europe that is both conservative and reformatory.

Against this, we are seeing a falsely-conservative movement, both reactionary and revolutionary, and which is saying: “we do not recognise ourselves in the legacy of openness and multilateralism left by Europe's founders. The aim is not to preserve that legacy, but to send it on its way. What we need is a far-reaching response”. This has given rise to populist currents that play out on three levels:

- An identitarian current, meaning sovereign, protectionist, and xenophobic;
- Secondly, an egalitarian current: “We have had enough of being led by elite classes that want to drive us straight into globalisation, into everything we do not want, etc.” This is what is referred to as the populist current, strictly speaking;
- And lastly, an authoritarian current: “Democracy does not give us the chance to fight. Liberalism needs to be questioned”.

The political game thus plays out between:

- Progressivism, which has had its wings clipped;
- A reformist conservatism that is looking for a middle path;
- An ultra-reactionary conservatism that has no qualms, on the claim that it wants to preserve anything, to shake everything up.

How might this ultra-conservatism pan out in the European elections? Reactionary conservatism is very strong, but is held back by the fact that it is revolutionary and scares people. I fully agree with what Nicolas Véron was saying just now. The euro is an unquestionable success from the political standpoint; I would not say the same economically, as that is not my speciality. Everyone is rallying around the euro. First of all, the leftist movements. It started with Tsipras, who truly converted, followed by Podemos to the left, and the right-wings in the Netherlands and Austria. All those who previously stood in opposition to the euro have accepted it. We are seeing some dilution in the anti-European discourse of some of the Populist movements. Concurrent to this, from the electoral standpoint, all the forecasts being made – we, at Institut Jacques Delors, have just produced a rather interesting study on this – show that the populist movements will likely hit a ceiling at 20-25%. They will most likely not be able to form a counter-majority in the future European Parliament.

The second key characteristic of the future Euro-Parliamentary map is the end of the EPP-PES *condominium*. Why? Because both the right and the left are being deeply reshaped by electoral trends. The Left is split between a social democracy in profound crisis and anti-European populism. The social democrats will have trouble structuring the Left's ideological space.

On the right, on the EPP end, the same is happening. The EPP is deeply divided. It is having a great deal of trouble locking up the right's space. It will keep Viktor Orbán's party in its numbers, but its main objective will be to recover the Polish right. If Poland joins the pro-European side – local elections are not bad from this point of view – the Hungarians will become what they have always been in Europe, what they always meant to be, that is to say the most intelligent of the marginal and the most marginal of the intelligent! We have not reached that point yet. The EPP will have trouble remaining as powerful as it was yesterday, and the condominium it traditionally formed with the socialists will no longer be the only one in charge of the Euro-Parliamentary space.

Emmanuel Macron's hope had been to form a kind of hegemonic party in the centre. This is not going to happen, because the forces in the centre are too splintered. In fact, no one is willing to go as far as he is in the European ambition. The particular form of European conservative reformism embodied by the ecological movement is also worth mentioning, as it is clearly ascending and will play a significant part in the formation of future Euro-parliamentary majorities. As a consequence, we will live in a multiparty system that will be extremely complex because it will combine a progressive and globalising drive that remains very strong at the Commission, with a conservative and reformist drive that is more right-wing oriented and a conservative drive of the ecological type. This will probably make it possible to buck the populist grip of the deep right and left and to prevent institutional and political paralysis in the Parliament, but will not be enough to bring about the brilliant progress of which Emmanuel Macron dreamed in the first months of his five-year term.

In conclusion, we can recall that Europe's true motto, the one to which my preference goes, in any case, has always been that of the great Belgian poet Henri Michaux: "Never despair, let it infuse some more!"