



Speech by Mr Tibor NAVRACSICS

Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport

European Commission

College of Europe, Bruges

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The EU's voice beyond Brussels: some reflections on citizens' disenchantment with Europe

- Check against delivery -

Dear Rector,

Dear Professors and staff,

Dear students,

Thank you for your invitation. As Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, but also as a former university teacher, I think that paying a visit to the College of Europe is a must for me - and I trust it will not be the last one. This institution is one of the leading places to think and freely exchange on Europe. This is what I came here for.

2015 has been one of the most difficult years in European integration, and 2016 might unfortunately bring new and even bigger challenges.

Attitudes to the European project have changed dramatically. Just fifteen years ago, in 2001, the student generation sitting on these benches was the first one to withdraw Euro bank notes from cash machines. These young people were awaiting the 2004 enlargement and already asking "Who's next?". The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights had recently been proclaimed, and your predecessors were eagerly anticipating the Constitution for Europe. Irregular migration was on the front-page of

Spanish newspapers because 4000 migrants reached the Canary Islands in a year. Turkey's accession was probably the most controversial topic. And the primacy of EU law was certainly a subject of legal debate, but not a political argument to question a country's sovereignty.

The EU was seen as a big success, a project with an excellent record of political and economic achievements – although some referenda, notably during the ratification process of the Treaty of Maastricht and the Treaty of Nice, already revealed a certain degree of citizens' mistrust.

How things have changed. When President Jean-Claude Juncker speaks about the last chance Commission, few think it is only a slogan.

The Euro crisis left a worrying legacy of social turmoil, economic stagnation and political tensions within and between Member States. The refugee crisis is testing the EU's resilience, populists on the far right and the far left are united in their Europhobia, our neighbourhood is on fire, terrorism is threatening us, the EU's reputation is damaged and, most importantly, European citizens are turning their back on us like never before.

The debate on the alleged democratic deficit of the European Union is everything but new. It is actually one of the most frequently debated topics, both among scholars and in public opinion. Europeans did not wait for the financial and economic crisis to express criticism, especially since the qualitative jump that came with the Treaty of Maastricht.

However, the intensity of the phenomenon is unprecedented. Indifference has turned to hostility, uneasiness to anger. Millions of Europeans see the EU as a threat and vote for extremist parties, partly seduced by their fierce opposition to the EU. The old right/left division is often replaced by the dichotomy "elites against the common interest" with a caricatured EU as the standard bearer of some happy few.

This is toxic. We all know the EU's voice is often badly distorted. What is consensually agreed upon at EU level is presented within hours as a diktat stemming from "Brussels". And the credit for successful EU legislation is either claimed by national politicians or it vanishes in national implementation measures.

But this does not explain citizens' hostility entirely.

We need to take a good hard look at ourselves. What if we do not reach far enough and do not get our messages across effectively? What if we do not listen enough to people beyond Brussels? What if we do not understand the concerns, the fears of the citizens we claim to represent?

One of the lessons we can draw from European integration is that every crisis brings opportunities. Opportunities for reflection, for questioning and criticising ourselves.

Take the EU's capacity to reach out to those lacking an international background. Those who travel through Europe, crossing borders, to study, work or live abroad are much more likely to get a palpable sense of what "Europe" means, of its positive effects. This is obvious in a sense. But the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of European citizens are born, work, found a family and die in the same country, if not the same region. And they may not be aware of how much they benefit from Europe. How much they benefit from the investment in their region made possible by European Structural Funds, from job opportunities linked to the Internal Market, from clean air they breathe and safe products they use thanks to strict regulations, to name but a few.

And this discrepancy seems to have a big, worrying impact. While those who are mobile tend to support European integration, those who are not - a big majority - increasingly feel threatened by and reject what they perceive as a top-down organisation intent on absorbing all cultural diversity into a single mould. This may be unfair, but in politics, perception counts.

That is why our voice needs to be louder and clearer. And we have to do much more to reach out to people and show what the EU does and what it stands for.

Above all, the EU is a community of communities, made up of nations, regions, cities, villages, families - each of them with their own personality and traditions. The European identity is one more layer stressing what we have in common and identifying what we do better together; it comes "in addition to", certainly not "instead of". Preserving and cultivating this diversity is just as important for Europe's success as standing up for our shared values. Sacrificing our diversity in a globalised world would be as foolish as denying all the features that we Europeans share and the challenges that we will only solve together.

How do we regain citizen's trust and confidence? As EU policy-makers, we have the bird's-eye view. What we lack is the daily contact with citizens, and we therefore have to make an extra effort to stay alert to their concerns and fears.

Better understanding Europe's diversity and reflecting it is vital. I also believe that European policy-makers should be more open. Before defining policies, they need to look beyond their own political and academic background and capture the "human factor" – that is the views people all over Europe have, the choices they make. In other words, we need a more lucid and intuitive EU that compensates for its geographical distance with subtle and flexible tools. Politics is much more than measuring costs and benefits.

We will only capture this human factor if policies are made by people from diverse academic backgrounds. History brings lucidity, helps to anticipate and to understand a country's position and personality. Sociology gives us accurate snapshots of our societies, and anthropology provides a comprehensive view of the behaviour of women and men. If we agree that the EU needs a more accurate political compass, is it a luxury, or rather a pressing need, to take those points of view on board? How many of you, of us, are for example aware of the basic historic facts of a dozen Member States?

José Ortega y Gasset, one of Spain's most brilliant minds of the last century, anticipated in his landmark essay "The revolt of the masses" from 1930 a phenomenon that is worth bringing into the debate. He called it the "barbarism of specialisation" and refers to those perfectly mastering some square centimetres of knowledge but ignoring everything else. Is the EU suffering from it? I leave the answer open but I do not think anyone in this room regards an aggregation of micro-knowledge as a recipe for collective wisdom.

Dear students,

Throughout my speech, when I said "We", I also meant "you". Because soon, you will start assuming central positions in the EU, national administrations, the private sector or civil society. And the future of the EU will largely depend on your ability to rethink Europe. It will depend on your capacity to listen to everyone - especially those who feel left behind - before you propose, decide upon or implement legislation. And it will depend on your ability to detect and read political problems, on your predisposition to listen to different points of view.

The EU you will inherit will be judged on its merits, not on its records. Please do not shape it in your own image, do not build a narcissist EU - but one that reflects the needs, concerns and sensitivities of Europeans as a whole. Do not give the impression the EU only belongs to some happy few, because it belongs to everyone, even to those who look at it with mistrust and to those who never leave their homeland.

Dear Rector, dear students,

I have many other things to tell you. I could talk about the alarming levels of underinvestment in education, about the skills our educative systems must provide for Europe to remain competitive and, most importantly, inclusive, or about the crucial role education has to play in tackling violent radicalisation. I will save those issues for my next visit to the College – and now look forward to hearing your views and questions.

Thank you.