

College of Europe

Speech by Tomáš Prouza

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"Taking back control of the European Union"

Dear Rector Monar, distinguished professors and teachers, dear students, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor to speak at this prestigious institution that is a miniature of the European Union and which embodies the core values of European integration: diversity, freedom, democracy and unity among the European peoples.

Only 27 years ago, when I was 18, I could not imagine that one day my country would be again a part of a common European family and that Czech students will have the same opportunities to study and travel as students living just across the Austrian or German border. In 1989, when communism fell, I was 17 and my goal was to study international trade – and if I managed that, use the first opportunity to leave the communist paradise. Luckily, things changed faster than expected and I can be here today, with Czech passport and proudly representing my parent country, not an adopted country I would have to choose.

It would seem that everything is nice and rosy. But when I look at the number of crises we are facing and – more importantly – the loss of faith in the European Union, I worry. There has never been such a danger of losing our hard-won future. Three weeks ago our former president Václav Havel would have celebrated his 80th anniversary and I would like to pay homage to him by referring to his famous New Year's speech from 1990.

In his speech Havel, after 40 years of false and declaratory speeches of former communist leaders about prosperity and happiness of Czechoslovak peoples, stated very frankly: “Our country is not flourishing”. If he looked at Europe today, I'm afraid his message would be the same: Our Union is not flourishing.

When I look at the public mood throughout Europe and our slowness in dealing with the key issues, it is clear that we are standing at the crossroad, hesitating, which direction to take. The June decision of the citizens of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union was a loud wakeup call for all of us who believe in united Europe – but also a war cry for those who would like to see Europe weak and split. The Dutch referendum on Ukraine, the Brexit referendum, the Wallonian comedy on CETA all mark the beginning of another era of the European integration.

European citizens are losing trust and interest in the European project and they lack the spirit of the integration to which there is, I'm sure, no viable alternative. Politicians score more points by protectionism and xenophobia and those, who support compassion with people fleeing war, who support Ukraine or free trade, are vilified and in danger of losing their offices. And when you look at Brexit, you'll see how easy it is to capitalize on fears and hatred we all hoped were safely buried.

When I look back at the Brexit campaign, it is clear the arguments the Leavers used were at least misleading and more often outright false. However, the Leavers got the public mood right and it is not much better off at the continent. Our people also desperately want to hear that we are in control. Therefore, if the Union is to survive, we have to take back control of the European Union.

There are so many problems competing for our attention – migration, economy, Brexit, Wallonia, Syria, Russia and its meddling in the EU affairs, ... Therefore, we need to clearly define our priorities. Current hot topics should not overshadow the greatest challenge that the EU faces in a long run – its interinstitutional setting and functioning. Without any delay, we must give an absolute priority to the debate about the future of Europe and how to make the key institutional actors work better together. There is no doubt that our citizens expect us to agree on mutually beneficial solutions that will be delivered as soon as possible and in the most efficient manner. The genuine “added value of Europe” can be reached only if the EU institutional set-up is well balanced and synergic.

In recent years, we have witnessed steps that could lead the whole European project into a deadlock. Contrary to the past positive experience, fragile consensual policy making has been put aside in several crucial moments and the EU has decided to move forward disregarding guidance of the European Council and opposition of a significant number of member states. One of the questions we face is whether and how much should the Commission act as an autonomous “political body” without listening to the concerns and opinions of the member states and their citizens. The Commission should stick to its traditional role as “guardian of the treaties”, helping to reach often a very difficult compromise within the EU institutional bargaining. It should focus on trust building instead of competing with the European Council. The Treaty of Lisbon made the European Council a full-fledged EU institution with a single but crucial task: providing the Union with the guidance for the future and defining the general political directions and priorities. And that should be universally respected by all institutions.

On the other hand, it is clear that member states also have to carry out their responsibilities and respect common rules. Blaming the EU for all evils at national level has become widespread and tempting activity among populists in all over the Europe. It is so easy and so silly at the same time and there's no easy way back, as long-time EU basher David Cameron found out when he tried to become more EU-positive during the referendum.

So, what is the way forward? We should build a broad interinstitutional consensus and then translate it into specific actions publicly presented as “common solution”. Otherwise we will gradually undermine and potentially destroy our unique integration project to which most states, including the Czech Republic, have no viable alternative.

We must be open to discuss the future of the European Union. But we need to be clear that the future does not lie in the revision of the treaties. There is no time for a long and complicated process of treaties revision, especially in these turbulent times.

The demanding and difficult process of treaty revision would only turn our attention away from what should really matter – better and more democratic Union that quickly delivers what the citizens expect. We need to find a new equilibrium for the Union within the current treaties. We must close ranks and come up with issues and solutions that unite us in the first place. Reviving old and often failed recipes and outvoting each other is nothing but short-sighted and counter-productive.

The growing distrust and nationalist mood around Europe poses major threat to the European project. To restore confidence and trust of our citizens, it is crucial that the EU improves its capacity to act and delivers tangible results in areas that matter to our people. We need to build on the process started five weeks ago in Bratislava – let the European Council to provide the EU with political guidance, general political directions and priorities – and a clear roadmap to deliver on those priorities.

In order to listen more to its citizens, the EU should listen more to the national parliaments. Their enhanced role, political dialogue with the Commission and the principle of subsidiarity should be placed right in the centre of the debates about the future of the EU. And the parliaments need to be listened to, not simply disregarded, especially if they trigger a yellow card against a Commission proposal. Speaking of the interaction with the national parliaments, I would like to praise the Juncker's Commission for its strengthened emphasis on direct personal contacts between the Commission and the member states. In 2 years of the Juncker Commission, there have been more visits from Commissioners than during 5 years of the Barosso Commission. With this activity, the Commission contributes to build trust among citizens and strengthens the democratic legitimacy of the EU institutions and should be developed further. If we want to strengthen the case for the Union, we should also rethink the role of the Representations of the Commission in member states.

Let me slowly conclude with the following. There's no doubt that the EU finds itself at the crossroads. The Brexit referendum marks an end of one era. We are facing a number of serious challenges, migration crisis, growing propaganda pressure from Russia and Islamic terrorist organizations, civil war in Syria or terrorist attacks in Europe, which will considerably affect our future.

And it is precisely the future of the EU that should get our prominent attention and should become our top priority. I firmly believe that the process of reflection on the future of the EU should stand on three pillars: inclusiveness, trust and added value. We need to act collectively to regain the capability to act and to find solutions for the key challenges. This means that we

inevitably have to stick to the strong culture of compromise. But let's be clear: compromise is something else than giving in to blackmail as we have seen with the Walloonians on CETA.

The cooperation should be based on trust between the member states and the member states and the EU institutions. We need to make sure that the member states do carry out their responsibilities and the institutions do not overstep their powers.

Last but not least, our citizens have to be assured that the EU is able to provide prosperity and security. They need to see the genuine added value of Europe in their daily lives.

Dear students, I would like to conclude by addressing you directly – the generation of young Europeans for whom the benefits of European integration is evident every day. You can travel across the borderless Europe, you can pay in euros and thanks to European exchange programmes you have friends all over Europe. If we want to take back the control of the European Union we have to make it again attractive. Recent crises showed that the European integration cannot be taken for granted. It is a project that needs to be taken care of and your role in it will be crucial. You have a potential to take Europe again closer to the citizens, to your friends, your parents, your grandparents. Who else should do it if not the students of College of Europe? Be inspired by the words of your patron John Maynard Keynes who famously said: „The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping the old ones.” We'll have no future if we remain stuck with the old ideas.