Bigger, better, braver: Can Europe defend and deliver?

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In November 1999, when I was serving as the Prime Minister of Slovakia, I appealed to then US President Bill Clinton, requesting that my country should be admitted to NATO—the most successful military alliance in history and the one that had stood against the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. Our neighbours in Czechia, Poland and Hungary had already started their accession negotiations with both NATO and the EU in 1997. Slovakia, however, was excluded from this process due to violations of basic democratic rules by the government of then Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. At that time Slovakia was in a state of economic quagmire. Traditional sectors (the defence industry, mining and heavy chemicals) were dying, and no new ones were being created. Moreover, Slovak society was suffering from a lack of strong democratic institutions and the absence of the rule of law. Therefore, Clinton responded to my request by saying that we had missed the boat and that we were now politically and economically isolated from the other countries in Central Europe. Nevertheless, after implementing a huge programme of political and economic reform, Slovakia joined NATO and the EU in 2004, along with other Central and Eastern European countries. We had managed to regain the trust of our Western partners and had overcome one of the biggest challenges in Slovakia’s history.

In recent years I have given a lot of thought to Slovakia in the European context, especially in the search to find answers that would enable us to advance Europe’s security and prosperity. I am convinced that many of the principles that proved to be effective on the path to our domestic reforms in Slovakia could also help our Europe to defend democratic values, as well as deliver them outside the EU’s borders. The world of today is different from the world at the turn of the millennium, but in today’s Europe we are also facing some of the biggest challenges in our common history. It seems that in the last few years Europe has moved from one emergency to the next, without finding effective and long-term solutions to its challenges. This is certainly due to the global financial and economic crisis. However, it is undoubtedly the case that a few specific issues remain Europeans’ top concerns.

First, while the EU member states’ economic interdependence has boosted growth and prosperity over the last 25 years, issues such as budget deficits and macroeconomic
imbalances are far from being solved at the European level. Moreover, the euro, which initially seemed to be a great success, is today in trouble and is destabilising the positive achievements in the European single market. Institutional and long-term regulatory reforms should thus be carried out to create a stronger and more resilient economic and monetary union for future generations.

Second, since 2004 the EU has grown dramatically, and our new neighbours have generated instability and complex challenges for European security. This is due to our incapacity to work as a whole and find joint solutions to our common problems. On our Eastern side, EU member states have failed to work effectively as a coalition to respond to the Russian hostile influence in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as within some EU member states. On the other hand, the many EU summits devoted to issues related to economic migrants and political refugees from the Mediterranean region have not been able to find a credible solution to the problem. We have to be aware that it is our responsibility to look for answers to the challenges posed by the twenty-first-century world. As in Slovakia in 1999, today the EU needs to emerge from this crisis by maintaining its collective faith in universal values such as democracy, the rule of law and economic freedom, and by creating new ways to achieve durable prosperity. I believe that we are reluctant to undertake the reforms our European project very much needs because they could be painful and hurt our politicians’ chances of getting re-elected. This plays into the hands of populists. But we need to develop credible and long-term solutions to make the EU capable of delivering for and defending our citizens.

This issue of the European View provides abundant food for thought on long-lasting and collective improvements to the European project. The first section provides important contributions to how we can shape the European project and make the EU capable of defending its values in an increasingly globalised world. For instance, the contributions of both Loredana Teodorescu and Sara Brzuszkiewicz ask whether our measures to tackle illegal migration and radicalisation are effective enough. The authors propose solutions that go beyond emergency measures, including strengthening the operational capacity of Europol and further cooperation with third countries. Other articles, such as Kaloyan Simeonov’s, address prosperity and growth. These topics need our fullest attention as it is crucial to respond quickly to the technological revolution, which is not only transforming our economic models, but also challenging our economic unity. As Finland’s Finance Minister Petteri Orpo stresses in his article, it is time for a strong EU that is capable of representing its member states and achieving well-being for its citizens more fully than each member state can do on its own. The current affairs section gives an overview of long-term external challenges, such as the US withdrawal from the Iran deal and the political instability in northern Africa. Several contributors, including Jakub Janda and Daniel Schwammenthal, argue for the need to adhere to our democratic principles when cooperating with non-EU countries. This is particularly important, as a strong EU must be capable of spreading its political and cultural values worldwide.

I conclude with a reminder that today we must clearly distinguish those matters that have real value for our citizens and be steadfast in our pursuit of them. We followed these
principles in Slovakia in 1999. In 2018 we need to do the same in the EU and in its member states to ensure that Europe does not miss the boat to a brighter future. Dear readers, I invite you to keep these principles in mind and engage with the articles in this issue of the European View.

Author biography

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