

MICHAŁ BONI

Recovering Democracy in the EU¹⁴

I fully agree with Heather Grabbe's assessment of the world's situation and her indication of climate change as one of the most important in the European Union. I am also full of doubts and very aware of the threats when I look at the European Union institutions. It is a very important question: how can EU institutions work better, react faster, and take responsibilities in a much more adequate way regarding the many challenges? How can they make decisions in a way that is inclusive for citizens?

We need to remember that the principle of solidarity is crucial for the EU and the EU heritage and institutional memory. I agree, we could name it probably better as: "shared common interest" or "common responsibility", but on the other hand we have the rule of sovereignty. And the rule of sovereignty and the idea of sovereignty is growing up in many countries, as an expression of their independence, which is especially meaningful at the populism time. But in the European Union from the very beginning the principle of subsidiarity was established as a model to find some solutions at the broader level without touching any key problems related to sovereignty (the description of competences – what for member states, which problems should be solved at the European level exists in the Treaty) and ambitions of some or all countries. The rule of subsidiarity should balance the specific game between the principle of sovereignty and the needed principle of solidarity. And now, I think – what is important – is to redefine the rule of subsidiarity. And adjust this rule to the modern needs and expectations, to the reality.

Why and how?

Because life is going on and the new challenges are rising up. Three points are crucial and should change our understanding of the new model of equilibrium between the rule of sovereignty and solidarity.

Point one. Earlier, it was clear publicly that the core of the EU is related to the economic dimension: the European Single Market was a key reference point. Now, the significance of the fundamental rights, the role of common values started to be more visible and important. What is obvious – to make some practical steps with assessment of the real implementation of the fundamental rights in all member states avoiding the noise, that it is contrary to the rule of sovereignty.

¹⁴ The title added by the editors.

Point two. Taking more challenges the European institutions became more aware of the role of the inter-institutional cooperation: between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council. The practical format of this cooperation means – trialogue discussions to find common solution (for legislation especially). Of course, after common decisions of all partners, which means all member states – they should defend the solutions, not making the game that: it is not our decision – it is Brussels!!! This kind of attitude is undermining the trust, the confidence of citizens to the European Union.

Point three. In the light of the future challenges – it will be more required to work together and find common solutions for building the common Europe. It is the unique opportunity to build the broad background for the European future competitive advantages in all areas.

When we discussed in the European Parliament cyber-security issues, it was clear to all of us that security is under the competences of nation-states. But it turned out, after many discussions, that member states agreed to go beyond the sovereignty principle, because it was clear that with regard to cyber-threats the only solution lies within the European Union. It is in fact a global threat, but at least we can have common solutions at the European level. A similar thing was, when we discussed the challenge of migration. Migration is also under the competences of nation-state. But it is not sufficient, we agreed, and some so solutions were established with the co-operation between the European Commission, European Parliament and representatives of the member states within the European Council.

When we have worked on the European Rights and Values instrument (support for the local civic organizations directly coming from the EU institutions, avoiding some political interferences, if they exist in some countries, unfortunately being on the way to the model of authoritarian regime), it was under the Austrian presidency, and they said: “We have a problem with the Hungarian delegation. They say it should not exist, because it undermines the nation-state’s governance.” But the representatives of other countries said: “It is important to have this solution. So, we should go on”. Finally, the solution was approved in trialogue.

I think that in some situations the common word of representatives of those European institutions is essential. But additionally, it is also addressed to the special kind of EU institutions as the European Court of Justice. For instance, there were and there are many problems with Poland and the Polish government and the interpretation of the rule of law, which is fundamental for the justice and democratic order. Until the October of 2019, Poland accepted all announcements, all rulings presented by the European Court of Justice, although there were many problems with real implementations of the ECJ recommendations. In addition, I remember the speech of Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orbán in the European Parliament, who said: “Look, if there will be the ruling of the European Court of Justice, I will approve it”. So, we have some strong institutions in the European Union and we need to deal with it.

It is crucial to avoid the downsizing of the EU, as it was indicated by professor Andrzej Rychard. Today, we have discussed the liberal democracy concept

and threats to the liberal democracy and how we can defend liberal democracy. It is important to understand, that democracy does not only mean – the results of elections. The democracy means: that majority (after election) should take care on minorities, should involve all partners to solve common problems. The democracy means – something vivid, involving and including people giving them the feeling to be really influential.

My view is that it is not only a problem of defending liberal democracy, this is a problem of recovering democracy. It means, that we need to involve citizens, we need to create a good pattern for participation, we need to discuss participatory democracy opportunities and we need to offer many possibilities to citizens to participate in decision-making processes, including consulting, possibility to present their view. And it should be related to the principle, that citizens are the best source of knowledge. I hope, that it is the proper instrument to overcome the threats of disinformation, fake news as a real threat to the democratic order.

Democracy based on political parties and games led by political parties should be enhanced by activities of citizens. It should be the complementary model: traditional representative democracy with full respect to all rules, and new waves of participatory democracy giving the feeling of inclusiveness.

Then it will be easier to start a discussion on European citizenship. In the European Parliament of the last term, the Constitutional Committee discussed some solutions for the future of the European citizenship. It should be developed. With participation of citizens, with support done by all social groups, it will be easier to stand vis a vis many new challenges in the European Union. I want to present some of them.

First, we need to express precisely how to co-operate on climate issues, on the idea of green Europe and green Globe. And understand more deeply, that the New Green Deal means also the strong links between the environmental issues and justice challenges (inequalities). On the other hand, we need to consider what is human-caused and what is not human-caused, what is reversible or not reversible. And how we can use the European financial sources and innovation tools – to counteract the climate changes in the short, mid and long-term perspective. Because the threats are higher than we have expected two or three years ago, I think it is very good that Frank Timmermans is responsible for that and that it will be one of the key priority for the EU.

Second, the crucial challenge of the future is democracy. We need to ensure the recovery of democracy.

The third issue is digitalization. We are talking about digital threats and the fair rules for digital market. We need the workforce to be prepared for the quickly coming times of artificial intelligence and full automatization of some manufacturing processes, industries and services in all areas. But this is not the only challenge. We need to understand how important it is: to take control over technologies. How important it is to create policies that will be based on a human approach, technology human approach. It is crucial for the friendly development of the artificial intelligence and algorithms, for example – not against people, consumers' experiences,

privacy protection (the significance of the GDPR – the European solution, but as a global reference, now) and cybersecurity requirements. We should have some control. There is a big discussion in Europe, also in the European Parliament on transparency and on explicability, which means: how to explain to ordinary people how those machines, algorithms, devices work. It is very important not to exclude people from the understanding of those challenges. And when we are looking at digital challenges, we also need to look at something that is called strategic autonomy of Europe. This means, that we need to analyse the risks and security level of all components in our digital services, digital products, digital activities, which are brought by the companies outside of the European Union. It does not mean, that I want to be suspicious in reference to all countries, but I think we need to find some technical solutions to ensure safety, because the cybersecurity threats are growing.

And the last point. When we are talking about digital issues, we need some kind of big programme, like building digital literacy across Europe, addressed to both the young generation and to the elderly. To all. It is not only the question of skills, it is a question of attitudes and competences. Because we can imagine in the perspective of five years, that we not only face artificial intelligence that could replace a worker on the job market, but artificial intelligence with which we could keep and create some interactions. We need to be ready, it is a mental question, a psychological problem.

And of course, when we are talking about democracy, about environmental issues, about digital issues, we should also focus on some demographical challenges. We need to create some kind of intergenerational co-operation and exchange of positions and views. Digital revolution can help meet all of us, all generations. Because this is an illusion that the young generation understand everything, and we do not. So, this is a possibility for some future co-operation. And another issue here is migration. We need to consider, what kind of impact migration would have on the demographical balance of the European Union in the future. In Poland it is clear: we have two million Ukrainians, we have one million Ukrainians working, and Polish employers say: “we need much more people”. This requires of course a new attitude, acceptance and tolerance and openness towards people from different cultures. It requires the integration policies. It is easier in the relations between Poles and Ukrainians, because there are some common roots of our cultures.

Finally, I want to say that I agree with all the pessimistic view of the future of the European Union presented during this conference. On the other hand, I hope that there is something new. It comes from the interpretation of the stronger and bigger turnout in the elections to the European Parliament this year. I remember discussions before the elections, the fears regarding the support for the radical right parties. But now, there are good chances for the cooperation between centrist parties in the broad sense.

Moreover, thinking with hope about the future, we need to send our messages from all discussions and debates to politicians and to political elites, because they need to be well-informed as it was not so well done in the previous times.