

“Democratic Security in Times of Crisis – the Role of the Council of Europe”

Speech by Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, at the DGAP, Berlin, 5 July 2016

Populism on the rise

Most of you will be familiar with the concept of democratic security. The world now has much experience to show that democracies are far less likely to go to war with each other, and that states which contain checks on the abuse of power, which promote dialogue and which protect fundamental freedoms are more stable and secure.

You will also be familiar with many of the traditional threats to democratic security: corruption; politicized judiciaries; the absence of free media; the alienation of minorities. Basically structures and practices which allow power to be misused and which erode tolerance within our societies.

These ideas are relatively well-established – even if “democratic security” is still often treated as secondary in foreign policy circles: hard security’s little brother.

But there is perhaps another threat to Europe’s democratic security which we should better understand. A political one: populism.

It is certainly not new on this continent – Europe’s upheavals have almost always been driven by adept populists and impressive demagogues. But it is back – and it is all around.

The kind of populism which tells people that they no longer need international institutions or international law. Even though this is not true, because those laws and institutions exist to promote the prosperity and co-operation on which stability and peace depend.

The kind of populism which promises to return us to some sort golden age – before globalization, before the invasion of technology, before the time of mass migration. Even though this is also not true, because you cannot turn back the clock – and to pretend you can only feeds anger, division and unrest.

We see this across Europe today.

We see nationalists, extremists and xenophobes gaining support across Council of Europe member states.

We have seen government after government promise quick fixes to the refugee crisis, finding new ways to tighten up their borders – from confiscating refugee’s assets to tougher rules on family reunification – even when such measures might contravene international law.

At the end of May we saw your neighbors come within inches of electing Europe’s first far right leader since the Second World War – a vote which will now need to be re-run.

Brexit and the Problem of Institutionalized Populism

And we increasingly see the most worrying development of all: the mainstream imitating the margins. Responsible politicians chasing populists.

Indeed, this is what we have seen in the UK.

The Council of Europe, of course, respects the referendum result as the democratic will of the British people.

However, it is increasingly understood that the outcome was, in large part, a protest vote. The reasons for that protest are complex and rooted in the evolution of Britain’s society, economy and political system over the last twenty years. But it is also clear that institutionalized populism had a major part to play.

Euroskeptics on the Conservative benches in Parliament. UKIP – now a credible political party. An Opposition which struggled to find a loud and proud pro-European voice. Large parts of the media with a clear agenda: to help pull the UK out of the EU.

And, in a country where Europe has been talked down for many years, can we really be surprised when a frustrated and disillusioned public are then open to laying the blame for their problems at Brussels’ door?

The UK is not storming out of the EU, it is stumbling out. And it is a wake-up call for all of us in Europe: a cautionary tale to other democracies – particularly mature ones – about the creeping dangers of pandering to populism and allowing lazy stereotypes to become ingrained in your political culture.

Time for Europe to Show its Best Side

So how can Europe stem this tide of growing populism? How do we stop Brexit having a knock on effect on other countries and other institutions?

The truth is it requires action on many fronts.

Much of the answer is about giving people reasons to feel hopeful about their future – whether through jobs, public services or political empowerment.

It is about mainstream politicians having the courage to tell people the truth, even when they fear it is unpopular. And that goes for telling the truth about migration, too: about the degree to which the free movement of people can and should be “controlled” in a prosperous single market, and the many benefits it brings to open economies.

And it’s about the media allowing those truths to be heard, fairly and objectively.

These responsibilities fall to national authorities and media establishments – and they are therefore not my business.

But it is my business, as the Secretary General of the Council of Europe – Europe’s oldest intergovernmental body and a close partner to the EU – to call on Europe’s institutions to now show our best side.

The first opportunity for this will be the renegotiation of Britain’s relationship with the EU. We firmly support our EU partners throughout this process. They have a difficult dilemma: how to give the UK a good deal, which keeps it close and which optimizes trade, but without undermining the foundation of the Single Market – which is that everyone plays by the same rules.

I have some experience of this: I was involved in setting up Norway’s EAA, and I can tell you that the parties will only find a good solution if they can be pragmatic, based on their common interests, and if they are prepared to innovate. This is what Jacques Delors was able to do when the Berlin Wall fell and he needed to find interim arrangements which would eventually pave the way to Austria, Finland and Sweden joining the Union, and to find what was, at that time, a credible alternative for Norway. There was no pre-made solution, so he invented one.

And, more broadly, Europe's institutions, including the one I run, must now take a good look in the mirror to ask ourselves where we really add value to the lives of the citizens we serve.

At the Council of Europe, we are doing this in a number of ways:

One of our biggest reforms has been the Court showing greater regard for national discretion in cases where there is no European consensus or the issue is very sensitive – for example the banning of religious dress and symbols. This has led to the greater use of the so-called margin of appreciation.

We have scaled down activities where we add little value and upped those where we have more – not least fighting terrorism and helping stabilize Ukraine, which has security implications for the whole region.

And we are doing much more to demonstrate the ways in which the European Convention on Human Rights – a 65 year old treaty – can help resolve modern dilemmas. For example, there is no one set of rules for protecting freedom of expression on the Internet – a major modern dilemma – and no sign of governments agreeing one any time soon; but the case law of the Court can provide an invaluable guide.

I know that we need to carry on down this path – and perhaps we need to look again with fresh eyes at what this means. And I know that there are many in Brussels who are equally committed to reform, looking, for example, at the degree to which national regulation should be harmonized in order to sustain the common market: a big question which should, in my view, be revisited.

In terms of what else we can do: it is an open question and I will be interested to hear your views. But I am clear that tackling populism is now the urgent task for responsible and internationalist forces across Europe – and one which can no longer be ignored.