

WE OWE THE EUROPEAN DREAM TO CITIZENS

AN INTERVIEW WITH
REINHARD BÜTIKOFER

The European Union is far from perfect, from a Green perspective, yet at times when it is threatened, we must rally to its defence as an idea and as a project. This is because it offers the most promising path to making fundamental Green values – sustainability, solidarity, solidity – a reality for European citizens.

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: Today we see Europe and the EU being attacked, mistrusted, and loaded with negative emotional charges. Why?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: There is a growing anti-European, nationalist, right-wing populist camp that makes fighting European integration one of the core elements of their ideology. Secondly, we have the camp that wants to defend the European dream and build on the advances that the European integration project has made over the last 70 years. I am in this camp, not because I disregard the failures and mistakes that we have to own up to, but because we can only make the EU better if we don't let it break apart. Then, there is a third camp that says: yes, we're for Europe, but the EU is all rotten, one-hundred percent wrong, everything is going in the wrong direction, and we can't have that. This third camp is the least credible.

If you are a devoted nationalist, I will fight you. If you are a pro-European, I will try to convince you that it is because we love the European project that we have to transform it and change it. But to tear down what we have today in order to build a more brilliant Europe – that's not going to happen. If we tore down the EU, if we said we have to start all over, but with completely new principles, that would just be preparing the victory of the nationalistic reactionary forces. We

can only build our real dreams through transforming and reforming and, in some dimensions, also deeply changing what we have in front of us. Sitting on the fence is more than a political crime, it's a mistake.

So what are the forces of disintegration at work today?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: There's not just a single root cause. What we experience right now is the effect of multiple overlapping developments. For a long time, the idea of uniting Europe was a guiding star that was always looked to in times of difficulty. This guiding star is not directing European developments anymore because European unity was achieved, basically, in 2004 with ten countries coming into the EU and overcoming the Yalta division. I strongly believe that it was a strategic mistake of the pro-European forces not to start, at that moment, the discussion about where we go from here. We didn't see the need to define a new vision that could take us forward.

This new vision is all the more important because, under our feet, two important developments are happening as we look on. One is internal. The cohesion of our societies is being undermined. Everybody sees it. The vast discrepancies between the very poor and the very rich have grown over time. Disintegration is also visible in the lack of opportunities for

the adults of tomorrow. Parents cannot offer their kids the same kind of perspective that they had. Disintegration created weaker cohesion, and between the different countries that resulted in a lesser capacity for compromise.

The second development concerns the greatly changed international environment. Obviously, the power relations and the economic relations on the global stage are changing fundamentally. We have a continental drift. And Europe is not at all in as powerful and as central a position as it was 30 years ago. This results in new challenges to the EU.

By the change around us and within our communities, the ability to continue building the European project was impacted. Less ability to cope with the outside, less ability to cope with the challenges inside. We don't see clearly now that the world doesn't stand still around us. And we have not realised well enough or early enough how much the internal disintegration in our societies will translate to the European level if we don't stop it.

And what about some of the basic building blocks of the EU, such as the Single Market and the Monetary Union?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: Obviously the internal market and the Monetary Union were not ideal constructions. From today's angle you can say they were fair-weather constructions.

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Helmut Kohl did say, for instance, that the Monetary Union should go along with a political union. It was assumed at the time that this might be strengthening Germany too much. But now we're suffering from the fact that we don't have this political union to the level needed.

Arguably, the Eurozone suffers from three different weaknesses. The first concerns weakness in the solidity of common economic governance. The second regards the weakness of explicit European solidarity. Of course we have "solidarity" organised through the European Central Bank (ECB), but we don't have a common understanding that solidarity has to be a basic element. The third element is that we are pursuing old growth policies when we should be building a transformation union towards a sustainable economic development. Solidity, solidarity and sustainability must go together. Economic resilience can only be achieved through a Green new deal. We need a new approach towards the future of our economies by integrating economic progress on the basis of greening and social inclusiveness.

Can the Green New Deal be a force for integration?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: Absolutely. Because it addresses some of the core deficiencies of our economic system. When people start battling over European economic governance and what it should look like, they often ignore that the basic challenge of constructing a transformation union. Some say we need a transfer union, others say we need a stability union. But the transformation union that we need is not at the core of the debate. This is where we as Greens must continue battling.

The European Union has to be guided by the ambition to create a new way forward, not just for us, but for the global community, in defining how economic progress and sustainability within the limits of the planetary boundaries can be reconciled. And Europe has all that it takes to be a prime player in that regard.

But is it possible in today's European Union with its political landscape to have that very transformation? Are there not forces that prevent it?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: Historical shortcuts don't happen very often, and I am afraid we're not granted an exception here. So you have to build the forces of transformation, you cannot just imagine them. You have to nurture them and bring them together, and that's what we do as Greens. We combine those movements wherever they play on local, regional, national, or European levels.

On the other hand, it is not fair to depict the EU as an institution that has utterly failed. Yes, we are falling short of what we would need for transformation. I agree with that. But there's no standstill. If, in 2010, the Union hadn't managed to overcome and leave aside the orthodoxy of the 'no bailout' clause, the EU would have broken apart years ago. Old orthodoxies were overcome with insufficient pragmatic, makeshift and on-the-go solutions. There are, after all, no textbook solutions for the greatest democratic experiment in world history of creating a transnational alliance of sovereign countries to solve their very deep problems together peacefully.

Let's compare our present economic crisis to the one in the 1930s. There is a great historical difference. In that time, the economic con-

traditions boiled down to and boiled over into nationalistic and chauvinistic mobilisations against each other, and ultimately, into war. Today, we manage to keep the contradictions at a manageable level. I'm not saying that the EU is always good at finding the right solutions in a timely manner, but we're not standing still.

But still, in light of the rise of populism and the far-right in many European countries, it is clear that the threat of nationalism and inward-looking regression remains.

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: The nationalistic and populist temptations will not go away for some time to come. Regarding the economic necessities Greens are well equipped. The direction is defined by the three "S": solidarity, sustainability, solidity. It wasn't wrong to demand reform in the crisis. It was wrong to shape the policies under the paradigm of austerity.

What other factors of disintegration can you identify?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: Let me highlight a possible factor of integration. In surveys from Eurostat, citizens of the EU expect the Union to improve security – domestic and foreign. It's obvious from the terrorist attacks in recent years that without stronger coordination and cooperation, it will be very hard to

increase the level of security. We will continue fighting against unjustified demands like passenger name record. But that doesn't relieve us all of the challenge of pushing for police cooperation across Europe.

The same applies to external security, and there is a link between external and internal security. The Europeanisation of domestic and foreign security issues will be one of the main challenges in the time ahead. I'm not talking about a European army. I oppose that. I'm talking about practical cooperation.

There are diverse initiatives in Europe that put democracy at the centre of their project. Democracy has always been an essential dimension of Green thinking. Can democracy be the core of a political project for Europe?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: From a Green perspective, the two core motivational forces of our movement – the two souls – are fighting for the common good, in particular as defined from an environmental perspective and defending the individual's right to self-determination, dignity and to a valid role as a societal actor. So it's a certain tradition of liberalism and individualism and a certain socialist and conservative tradition of the fight for a common good

that together form the Green core identity. This cannot be achieved without democracy. Democracy is the time and space, so to speak, in which we try to achieve those ambitions.

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Presently, the EU urgently needs re-legitimation through more democracy. There are three major issues that we have with European democracy at this moment. The first is that of lobbyists: the pervasive recognition that

there is not equal access to the decision-making process, and that big corporations are more 'equal' than others. Secondly, in the nation state, European policies are often not sufficiently controlled or overseen by domestic parliaments and by the public. There are many states where the national government goes to the Council of the EU without engaging with their parliament beforehand or afterwards. Thirdly: the need for more democratic oversight over the EU's economic governance, in particular within the Eurozone. Those are the three major fronts on which we have to fight for European democracy.

What about alliances and cooperation for democracy and beyond?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: Greens have always been open to and will continue to be open

to collaboration, to alliances with whoever would be willing to join forces. But on the basis of Green values, alliances must be principled. The Greens don't want to be exclusive owners of progressive ideas – we want to share them as widely as possible, also learning from others, because we want to make them into a reality.

It is also important to look for movements in many corners of society. There are movements within the economic sector, where small and medium-sized enterprises are opening up to a green transformation of the economy. Look at Alexander Van der Bellen of Austria – the New President of Austria – and his openness to all sectors including the private sector and entrepreneurs; it is of high relevance for all of Europe that this person was able to become the focus of a very broad alliance against the populists. Look also at Baden-Württemberg where Winfried Kretschmann managed to pursue, successfully, and with increasing electoral support, a policy of economic and social transformation that gives great motivation to people far beyond that area.

Why should we make the case for Europe?

REINHARD BÜTIKOFER: I'm not just making a case for some abstract "Europe", I'm making a case for the EU. What some of the most energetic critics of the EU hate most about it is not its failures, but its resilience. The energy

that is making this resilience possible is the energy of our European citizens. European citizens are not giving up, at all. Nor should we. Giving up on the EU would imply killing, for the next two generations, the hope of implementing the European dream. So this hope of European citizens makes it imperative for us to continue working. The European dream is more inclusive than the American dream. It is one that is built on the basis of respect for diversity. It's more a dream of freedom than the new Chinese dream. It's built also on the respect between nations, small and large. This European dream, and the fact that our citizens expect us to deliver on that - that is the basic reason we can't give up. It is an obligation!



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