The Future of the European Union

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ABSTRACT: The European project known as European Union has brought during the years lasting peace, democracy and respect for fundamental human rights and liberties, prosperity and welfare for its member states and peoples. The current challenges and transformations of EU redefine the project and different scenarios were proposed from this perspective by the European Commission and a number of political European leaders. This is why the future of the European Union became one of the main topics under the Romanian EU Presidency of the Council in the first semester of 2019. Each of the main 4 priorities of the Romanian Presidency of the Council reflects important dimensions of the integrated vision related to the profile, role and weight of the future European Union. The Inter-parliamentary conference organized in Bucharest in the beginning of April 2019 brought therefore a substantial contribution to this vision through the Declaration adopted by the members of the EU national parliaments on this occasion.

KEYWORDS: European Union, Romania, future, global role, cohesion, democracy, growth, security, enlargement

1. Introduction

The European project known as European Union (EU) has brought during the years lasting peace, democracy and respect for fundamental human rights and liberties, prosperity and welfare for its member states and peoples. A number of current political, economic, security and values crises EU has to face generated the need for reaction and political solutions establishing as a strategic goal a future strengthened and global role of the European Union.

The current challenges and transformation processes of EU actually redefine the project and different scenarios were already proposed from this perspective by the European Commission and a number of political European leaders. This implies the need for a comprehensive dialogue and public consultation, for accommodating different visions, perspectives, ideologies or types of interests, political or civil society expertise or assessments and so on. Definitely, a complex and complicated process, that needs to be kept within an integrated, transparent and democratic pattern of consultations.

2. The current European process for defining the future of EU

The new EU Treaty of Lisbon from 2007 already at that time signaled the inability of a "united Europe" to decide, for instance, on the establishment of a genuine common foreign and security policy, a common defense policy, the appointment of a real EU Foreign Minister and so on… (Corlatean 2016, 11). Later, on June 28, 2016 the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini presented the EU Global Strategy on foreign and security policy to EU leaders during the EU summit in Brussels (European External Action Service 2016). The strategy, under the title Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe (European Commission 2016a), offers a strategic vision for the EU's global role. It was considered that in these challenging times, both for Europe and globally, the strategy needs to highlight common ground and to present a common way forward (European External Action Service 2016). The essence of this strategic document was expressed at that time by the EU High Representative in the following formulas: "The purpose, even existence, of our Union is being questioned. Yet, our citizens and the world need a strong European Union like never before. In challenging times, a strong Union is one that thinks strategically, shares a vision and acts together. This is even more true after the British referendum. We will indeed have to rethink the way our Union works, but we perfectly know what to work for. We know what our principles, our interests and our priorities are. This is no time for

uncertainty: our Union needs a Strategy. We need a shared vision, and common action" (European Commission 2016, 04, Foreword by Federica Mogherini).

On 01 March 2017 the President of the European Commission, Jean- Claude Junker, launched a White paper setting out setting out possible paths for the future of Europe (European Commission 2017). According to this document, "we face…many challenges, from globalization, to the impact of new technologies on society and jobs, to security concerns and the rise of populism, and we must ensure we are not overwhelmed but rather that we seize the opportunities that these trends present" (Ibidem). This is why the White paper offers five scenarios for the Union's evolution, depending on the choices the Union will make. The Foreword of the document, signed by President Junker, underlines the essence of the European Commission's vision: "This White Paper is the European Commission's contribution to this new chapter of the European project. We want to launch a process in which Europe determines its own path. We want to map out the challenges and opportunities ahead of us and present how we can collectively choose to respond" (European Commission 2017). These five scenarios (European Commission 2016b) are the following:

- **Carrying On:**
  • The EU27 focuses on delivering its positive reform agenda
- **Nothing but the Single Market:**
  • The EU27 is gradually re-centered on the single market
- **Those Who Want More Do More:**
  • The EU27 allows willing Member States to do more together in specific areas
- **Doing Less More Efficiently:**
  • The EU27 focuses on delivering more and faster in selected policy areas, while doing less elsewhere
- **Doing Much More Together:**
  • Member States decide to do much more together across all policy areas.

Currently these five scenarios, but also some other supplementary hypothesis are subject to public political or civic debates, before a political decision will be taken. One of the key elements is represented, for instance, by the strong interest of a number of EU member states, including Central Eastern European countries, of course also Romania, to maintain the cohesion and a unique European project, while avoiding a future double speeds Europe. That means without new dividing lines within the part of the Continent which defines today the European Union.

This is why the future of the European Union became one of the main topics under the **Romanian EU Presidency of the Council** in the first semester of 2019.

Each of the main **4 priorities of the Romanian Presidency of the Council (**Romania2019.eu) reflects important dimensions of the integrated vision related to the profile, role and weight of the future European Union:

- **Europe of convergence**; *the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union will aim to bring a contribution to ensuring convergence and cohesion in Europe, in order to achieve sustainable and equal development opportunities for all citizens and Member States, through increasing competiveness and reducing development gaps, promoting connectivity and digitalization, stimulating entrepreneurship and consolidating the European industrial policy*;
- **A safer Europe**; *the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union will aim at consolidating a safer Europe through increased cohesion among EU Member States in dealing with the new security challenges that threaten the safety of citizens and through supporting the cooperation initiatives in the field.* For example, in the field of combating terrorism and radicalization, ensuring a comprehensive approach towards migration, consolidating the Schengen area or enhancing cybersecurity;
- **Europe, a stronger global actor**; *During its mandate as Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Romania will support further consolidating the global role of the EU through promoting the enlargement policy, the European action in its neighborhood, further implementing the Global Strategy, ensuring the necessary resources for the EU, and implementing all of the EU's global commitments*;

- **Europe of common values**; the *Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union aims at stimulating the solidarity and cohesion of the EU through promoting policies on combating discrimination, ensuring equal chances and equal treatment between men and women, as well as through increasing the involvement of the citizens, in particular the youth, in the European debates.* Combating racism, intolerance, xenophobia, populism, antisemitism and discouraging hate speech, respect for fundamental human rights and human dignity, solidarity and social justice are set out among the main objectives established within this priority (Ibidem).

3. European parliamentary Declaration on the Future of EU

The parliamentary dimension of the Romanian EU Presidency of the Council included a number of important parliamentary conferences organized in the first semester of 2019 on topics like European affairs, foreign affairs and security and defense common policy, common agriculture policy and cohesion and last but not least the Future of EU.

The Inter-parliamentary conference organized in Bucharest on 1-2 of April 2019 brought therefore a substantial contribution to this debate for a coherent vision on the Future of EU. The conference was attended by political representatives of the EU national parliaments, the European Parliament and its political groups, the European Commission, parliamentary and governmental representatives of candidate, aspirant or associated countries from the Balkans or EU Eastern Partnership, from the Council of Europe or United States of America. This prestigious European event, entitled "Towards a stronger, more cohesive, inclusive and relevant European Union on the global stage," was meant to offer a European parliamentary contribution, but also food for thought for the informal European Council scheduled on May 9 2019 in Sibiu (Romania) on the same topic through a Declaration adopted in advance by the EU national parliaments (Declaration of the Inter-parliamentary Conference 2019).

The conference was structured in 4 panels plus a final session of Conclusions and for the adoption of the Declaration. The narratives of the panels were briefly as follows:
- Session I: *Policies of the future. Debates with representatives of European political parties* (Session I: *Policies of the future*; (Declaration of the Inter-parliamentary Conference 2019).
The European political groups from the European Parliament were called upon to present
their vision of the major European challenges, like the reform of the European Monetary System,
cohesion, enlargement, asylum policy reform, security and migration.
- Session II: *The society of the future. Citizens and values in the era of the fourth industrial* Revolution (Session II: *The society of the future;* Ibidem).
The following items were submitted to the debate: issues of the labour market from the standpoint of European legislation and policies; new labour market – new social public themes; skills and education in the Age of New Digital Revolution; human rights and ethical issues in the Age of Digital Revolution; investments in development of new skills, education and training (Ibidem).
- Session III: *The economy of the future. Is there a need for a reform of the economic model?* (Session III: *The economy of the future*; Ibidem).
The main items raised were: economy of the future and the Fourth Industrial Revolution;
sine die postponement of the economic paradigm after the 2008 crises; the Economic and Monetary Union in the trap of the dominating economic model. (Ibidem)
- Session IV: *European Neighborhood: Balkans. Eastern Partnership/ Euro- Atlantic relations* (Session IV: *European Neighborhood: Balkans;* Ibidem)
The key issues were proposed as follows: Eastern Partnership and the possibility of
acknowledging a European perspective for those partners having European vocation and proving progress in the fulfillment of the criteria, mainly for the Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine; a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the countries from the Balkans; EU- US relations, having in mind that the transatlantic partnership was based all the time on solid political, cultural, economic and historic ties, underpinned by common interests and values. (Ibidem)

Finally, the conference adopted the text of the *Declaration on the future of European Union* (Declaration of the Inter-parliamentary Conference 2019, p. 1) a positive result, difficult to be foreseen before this event, having in mind the differences between the political European families on some of the fundamental topics, but also the European electoral campaign, ready to start at that time and the delicate issue of Brexit.

Essentially, the document refers to the European Union as a "model on the international arena", because of its historical contribution to the "lasting peace, prosperity and welfare for its members throughout decades", but also for guaranteeing "freedom, democracy, human rights, gender equality and the rule of law as fundamental values" of EU (Ibidem).

In the same time, the members of national parliaments from the member states acknowledge the fact that "the European Union is now facing new challenges- increasing disparities within and between member states, structural limitations, economic and social changes generated by the fourth industrial revolution, climate change, conflicts in the neighbourhood of EU, migration pressure, the rise of competing new global powers and attempts to weaken the influence of the United Nations in defencing peace and preventing global conflicts" (Ibidem), but also the result of the Brexit referendum. This is why "the need to intensify the reflection over the current situation, its roots and the necessary reforms" generate the need for concrete political solutions for overcoming these challenges, and even more, fore reaching the common goals of achieving "a safe and secure Europe, a prosperous and sustainable Europe, a social Europe, a stronger Europe on the global scene" (Ibidem).

One important statement was made by this Declaration: "A stronger democratic legitimacy and consistent political will" will be needed in order to "take forward the reforms and to promote ambitious solutions for building on the success of European Union, most notably the Single Market and its four freedoms, and to address the current shortages" (Ibidem). This is why the success of this vision relies on the support of the European citizens and requests first of all the need to regain their trust. From this perspective, the Bucharest Declaration is making reference to serious challenges like public manipulation, populist threats and fake news campaigns, including in the context of European elections.

It is important to underline some of the key lines of the position adopted by the EU national parliaments:
-    the European leaders have the duty to listen and to respond to the expectations and concerns of the citizens and to engage in a permanent dialogue with the national parliaments. This is the way for strengthening democratic legitimacy of the EU (Ibidem, p. 2);
-    the Bucharest conference expressed support for the main objective of the Romanian Presidency of the EU Council - promoting cohesion as a common European value (The program of the Romanian presidency of the Council of the EU: 1 January-30 June 2019), emphasizing the need to apply this principle in political, economic, social and territorial terms. "Closing the gap between European member states and regions is the best manner to prevent the already growing euro-scepticism" (Declaration of the Inter-parliamentary Conference 2019, p. 1).
-    the future of EU can be built only based on a solid economic foundation; financing growth and development, enhancing competitiveness, these are driving forces of a prosperous Union;
-    the enlargement policy is one of the successful common policies. A credible accession perspective, not only for the Balkan countries, that are already the beneficiary of a rather clear road map, but also for those states from the EU associated countries' package (Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine) it' s important to be acknowledge at the EU political level;
-    the proper management of the aspects related to EU security, borders or migration remain a first line priority;
-    a key target for redefining the European Union is a new social contract with the European citizens, based on a new ambitious and inclusive EU agenda. (Ibidem)

4. Conclusions

Important elements for a refreshed political vision on the future of the European Union were launched starting with 2016. The above mentioned European parliamentary contribution was followed by the informal European Council organized also under the Romanian Presidency of the EU Council on 9 May 2019 in Sibiu. The Summit adopted the Sibiu Declaration (European Council 2019a, *The Sibiu Declaration*) and hosted a debate of the Heads of states or governments on the EU's next strategic agenda for 2019 to 2024 (European Council 2019b, *Informal meeting of heads of state or government, Sibiu*). They exchanged views on the challenges and priorities for the EU for the years to come. The discussions in Sibiu were divided into two parts, the first focusing on the external dimensions and the second on the internal dimensions.

Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, announced publicly on this occasion an important step forward for the renewed EU project: "We will see the results of this discussion in June (2019), when – as the European Council – we will adopt the EU's priorities for the next five years, also known as the Strategic Agenda." (Ibidem)

The strategic agenda will be used to plan the work of the European Council, and will provide the basis for the work programs of the other EU institutions. The current agenda (European Council 2019c, *Leader`s Agenda, Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 – outline*) was agreed in June 2014 by the European Council. It focuses on five priority areas:

- jobs, growth and competitiveness
- empowering and protecting citizens
- energy and climate policies
- freedom, security and justice
- the EU as a strong global actor

In this context, it is worth to mention a few but important commitments out of those 10 assumed by the European leaders in Sibiu:

- "We will defend **one Europe** - from East to West, from North to South";
- "We will stay **united, through thick and thin**. We will show each other solidarity in times of need and we will always stand together. We can and we will speak with one voice";
- "We will continue to **protect our way of life, democracy and the rule of law";**
- "We will always uphold the principle of **fairness**, whether it be in the labor market, in welfare, in the economy or in the digital transformation. We will further reduce disparities between us and we will always help the most vulnerable in Europe, putting people before politics";
- **"We will protect our citizens** and keep them safe by investing in our soft and hard power and by working with our international partners";
- **"Europe will be a responsible global leader**."

As a general conclusion, despite the huge complexity and sensitivity of the topic, the debates and already some important results show the attachment of the European actors, civil society and its political representation, for redefining in a positive manner the European project. Definitely there were and will continue to be important challenges, like populism, euro-scepticism, extremism and so on. But the historic value of the United Europe will for sure prevail and we can be sure that concrete political solutions will be found and properly implemented for guaranteeing a solid, cohesive, democratic and prosperous Future of the European Union. And, why not, an important global role for the Union.

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