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We Can Provide Answers Only If We Act Together: As Europeans

The EU is a project committed to peace and prosperity in a globalized world. To keep this project alive, we must learn to talk about Europe more positively and shape the mechanisms of political decision-making more effectively

by Christian Kullmann

There's only one possible response to the results of the European election: The EU must become even bolder and more enterprising internally in order to stay strong externally. That's the only way this unique economic and peace project can be permanently protected from threats—including those coming from its populist opponents within.

One important aspect of the European election should be emphasized first of all: The high level of voter participation in Germany and in many other countries demonstrates that European democracy is working. People take Europe and European politics seriously and consider them important. The fact that nationalistic and anti-Europe forces will also be represented in considerable numbers in the European Parliament is certainly a serious challenge for European democracy. However, it does not change the fact that the pro-Europe parties dominate in the European Parliament. Democracy is very much alive.

And it has challenges to meet. That's because Europe is facing tremendous changes. The political and economic developments in America and Asia are having a direct impact on us. We need answers to the questions that these changes are bringing with them. And we can provide these answers only if we act together as Europeans. No country, including Germany, can do that alone.

At stake are our values, our interests, and our future role in the world. Our challenge is to balance varying goals in order to cooperatively achieve a good outcome. That's what we need to do inside Germany and within Europe as a whole.

For more than five decades, the European integration project has not been called into question. It has not been loved everywhere, but it has at least been tolerated. As long as the economic situation was favorable, business and a shared currency fulfilled their purpose as a binding element. But then the financial crisis that began in 2008 thrust Europe, and especially the euro, into a deep crisis. The dispute over European debt drove a deep wedge between the EU members, and the rigorous course toward stability led to harsh social upheavals in some countries. Many of the anti-Europe parties that have now been voted into the European Parliament owe their ascendancy to these political developments.

The wave of migration and Germany's decision to open its boundaries have also led, both here and abroad, to a loss of trust in shared European solutions. We could and should have regarded these crises as an opportunity to work even more intensely on European integration and to learn from our mistakes. Instead, many member states have

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succumbed to nationalistic rhetoric that more and more often advocates rejecting joint action and promotes mistrust of the EU. Brexit is yet another momentous destructive element.

TRUST AND FRIENDSHIP INSTEAD OF MISTRUST AND HATE

Of course this mistrust is not a new phenomenon. It could even be regarded as an opportunity to move forward. That's because suspicion of one another was also prevalent at the time when this community of states was first established. When the Treaty of Rome was signed in 1957, there was little trust between the former warring nations. The determination to form a community was not based on affection or mutual understanding. It grew out of the painful realization that exclusively nationalistic actions lead to catastrophe—and it also grew out of the far-sighted political action of a number of committed Europeans. There was serious concern that without this union people in one country would once again shout, "We come first!" No European country should ever again try to oppress another one through its military or economic might.

Only through the creation of the European Union and through the positive experience of sharing and acting together have deep trust and friendship arisen over the years to replace the mutual mistrust that had previously existed for centuries. The European Union developed into a region of freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. The fact that the memory of this unique development has faded after less than 70 years, and that the EU no longer exerts a fascination beyond national boundaries as the greatest peace project of all time, is a cause for concern.

In addition to the EU's function of safeguarding peace and freedom, an equally significant aspect is the fact that our current prosperity is based on its success. In the period since the foundation of the European Union, the prosperity of its member states

has tripled. The establishment of the European single market more than 25 years ago has increased the gross domestic product by one third in Germany alone. In terms of economic well-being, the EU states have moved into an outstanding position among all the industrialized nations worldwide. This prosperity is based not least on the success of globally operating companies such as Evonik. The single market is massively expanding our sales opportunities. It's not a coincidence that the EU is responsible for the highest percentage of worldwide exports of industrial products. A duty-free international market with an annual volume of more than €14 trillion is open to us. The single market results in intense Europe-wide competition that has a positive effect on our prosperity and drives us to outstanding performance on a global scale.

Moreover, international competition is taking place not only between the EU's individual member states but also, and much more intensely, between Europe and other regions of the world. Meanwhile, the economic power blocs have been shifting very significantly for years now. China has caught up dramatically in terms of its economic output, and today it stands almost at eye level with the USA and the EU. This rise will continue. In the foreseeable future, China will have not merely caught up with the current growth rates of the EU and the USA but overtaken them. We need to work hard to maintain our standing in the global market. But we will succeed in this enterprise only as the EU, not as independently operating industrialized nations. Germany on its own is simply too small to be able to play a serious political and economic role in the future global concert of the major powers.

A look at demographic developments demonstrates this very clearly. According to forecasts by the United Nations, the global population will increase by almost one third between now and 2050. Today Germany's share of this total is barely one percent, and it will continue to decrease in the period un-

til 2050. Only if we work together with our European partners will we be able to maintain a certain level of geopolitical relevance.

The basic requirement for a well-functioning and prospering European Union is the active approval of its population. An EU that is perceived solely as a cumbersome administrative apparatus in Brussels does not have a positive long-term outlook, because it is not helping to create a European identity. How can we once again strengthen people's faith in the project that is the European Union?

For one thing, we have to learn how to talk about Europe more positively. The common practice within the member states of declaring political successes as their own and ascribing failures to the EU is counterproductive. Those who publicly discredit and disparage the European project are playing right into the hands of the populists on the left and the right. This is a challenge not only for the politicians but also for the media, social institutions, and businesses.

For another thing, the EU's political decision-making mechanisms must become more effective. In the White Paper on the future of Europe, the outgoing President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has taken a path that includes expressing self-criticism regarding the current mechanisms. Concentrating on selected areas of policy even more than before in order to reach quicker results is the right approach. In order to increase efficiency, the principle of majority rule should be applied to decisions made by the member states, rather than requiring all too often that the important decisions made by the Council must be unanimous.

Only if the EU is a powerful unity that is capable of reform will it be able to hold its ground in the outside world in the future. And only then will it be able to develop the charisma that will inspire its citizens' continued or renewed enthusiasm about this project, on which our future well-being crucially depends. —