

Protect and survive

Voters are rejecting globalisation, openness, and the central doctrine of Europe, says **Luuk van Middelaar**. The EU must focus on protecting those left behind by integration

After the Brexit vote, there has been a temptation in Brussels to blame British insularity for the outcome, with the hope that some policy tinkering will suffice to bring other national electorates in line. This is a dangerous illusion. The EU needs to radically rethink the balance between the freedom and protection it aims to provide. Voters won't be fooled by ultimately empty bureaucratic slogans such as "Europe of results", "big on big stuff, small on small stuff" or "better Europe". The distinction "freedom versus protection" offers a better tool for defining a political response. It reveals real dilemmas. It demands sincerity, not platitudes.

It would be a mistake to say that the "Leave" camp won the 23 June referendum merely because of lies, propaganda or a smear campaign against Brussels. The result was not simply down to British voters behaving irrationally, or because the UK press is in the chains of the likes of Rupert Murdoch, or thanks to the dawn of fact-free politics. With lies and propaganda alone, you do not convince 52% of people to vote against their economic self-interest. The British public expressed something else with this vote, which may be perfectly "rational", once you broaden the scope of the analysis. It's not just about the economy.

The Leave slogan, "Take back control", was so effective because it was indistinguishably about both sovereignty and identity. The fact that identity politics is beating economic interests has come as an existential shock to the EU. The reason is that it contradicts the EU's central doctrine, the basic tenets of European integration. Since the "Coal and Steel" days, the system has been built on the ideas that economic interdependence will create grateful populations and that integration is a one-way street towards "ever-closer union". In a way, the Brexit vote was unthinkable. But it's happened. So the doctrine has to change.

It doesn't really matter whether people no longer believe economic warnings given by "experts". The referendum result is



Luuk van Middelaar is a political theorist and the author of "The Passage to Europe"

obviously part of a wider Western phenomenon of voters rejecting the logic of globalisation, with its open markets and open borders. The Left focuses on trade (the proposed TTIP deal between Europe and the United States, the EU, the euro) and the Right on immigrants (variously Muslims, Mexicans, Poles and Romanians). But as illustrated by US presidential contenders Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, the net result is the same: a battle between the “extremes” and the “centre”. This face-off means danger for Europe, as the Union is one big democratic space with battles being fought at every single election across the continent. Although other battlegrounds exist, such as Austria, the Netherlands or Italy, the crucial frontline state – the place where Europe is under real pressure – is France. The country is of systemic importance because of its size, its political system and its current state of shock. The French presidential elections in spring 2017 must not be lost to populist extremes. As elsewhere, this means winning back the centre, the swing voter. It requires a message of unity, of movement – and a new strategy.

Related articles on www.europesworld.org

- Europe’s new populists are frightening – but they won’t last, by Daunis Auers
- Responding to Europe’s populist challenge, by Philippe Maze-Sencier
- Brexit is an opportunity to be exploited, by Robert Cox

“ The EU needs to radically rethink the balance between the freedom and protection it aims to provide ”

To win back the centre, the Union must find a new balance between its work in favour of economic freedoms and opportunities and the role that is asked of it as a “protector”. The Brexit vote, the French election and other upcoming polls show that people either appreciate the freedom, openness and opportunities the EU provides, or they fear the disorder the EU produces in terms of migration, competition for jobs, or loss of national control. There is a split between the “movers” – the entrepreneurs, young people, students, the rich – versus the “stay-at-homes” – people who rely on welfare-state arrangements, the elderly, or those who dislike foreigners. This isn’t a matter of “the elite” against the “people”, but pretty much a 50/50 split, as shown both in the UK referendum and the Austrian presidential elections. What’s important is that the EU must not focus on its own 50%, with more of the old “market” stuff and some extra communication. It must reach out to the other half too. Otherwise we risk – in only a few years’ time – a civil war in which the EU side will be outnumbered. Alongside the old “Opportunities Europe”, we must build and communicate “Protection Europe”.

A better European balance between freedom and protection can mean one of two things: mitigating the disruptive effects of freedom, or providing order. The former is essential for social and economic security. Since the EU cannot credibly claim to replace welfare states without becoming the “super-state” voters abhor, it should at least stop undermining existing national or local places of care and protection. Three topics spring to mind in this respect. The first is to build on the UK’s “new settlement” from February 2016 and the principle of an emergency brake on free movement. Second, find a solution for the Posted Workers Directive, not least in view of the French elections. Third, handle the granting to China of Market Economy Status – by 16 December 2016 according to World Trade Organization rules – with greater care, to square the sensitive balance between freedom and protection in international trade.

Aside from respecting existing forms of protection, the Union can do more to produce order. Since the Brexit vote, the themes of internal and external security have rightly been highlighted. The June 2016 decision for a European system of border guards is useful, but what matters now is implementation. Another “border issue” is enlargement. At some point, leaders must decide for how long they want to continue playing the hypocritical game around Turkish membership. They must realise there aren’t only geopolitical considerations involved, but also costs in terms of the Union’s capacity to regain people’s trust.

The first signs are encouraging. In his letter inviting leaders to the Bratislava Summit in mid-September, European Council President Donald Tusk addressed the issues head on: ‘People quite rightly expect their leaders to protect the space they live in... [it is] crucial to restore the balance between the need for freedom and security, and between the need for openness and protection’. This is not surprising, since the security theme fits the Pole’s profile as liberal realist. More remarkable was European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker’s implicit endorsement of the same line of thinking in his State of the European Union speech on 14 September, both for what he said (about border guards, border controls and action against Chinese dumping) and for what he omitted (not a word on TTIP in a 50-minute speech).

The phase of denial seems to be over. In the months ahead European leaders need to build concretely on this new balance between freedom and security. ■