FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG

**"The EU tends to take its failures out on Poland and Hungary"**

***Prime Minister, the current conflict in the EU could be titled like the popular Polish comedy: "Money is not everything." What are the values for which Poland and Hungary are ready to risk EU billions and turn other EU countries against them?***

I would ask the other way round: What are the values for which the European Commission and the Parliament create a situation where the principles of the European Treaties can be circumvented? It is as if German legal acts were suddenly placed above the Constitution.

***The stone of contention for you, in the present legislative situation of EU, is a planned system of "conditionality to protect the EU budget". Brussels wants to protect the rule of law and the separation of powers in Poland and Hungary. What is wrong about it?***

Our main concern is that this mechanism can be used very arbitrarily and for political reasons. Today someone doesn't like the Polish government, and we put them in pillory. Tomorrow it could be the government of Italy or Portugal, so we will take the funds away from them. This is a paradox: This mechanism circumvents the treaties. It is supposed to protect the rule of law but by itself it is a fundamental violation of it.

***The former mayor of Warsaw, the liberal Pawel Piskorski, criticizes the mechanism as a backdoor revolution which will strongly centralise power within the EU. It might result in stock market turbulence, an investment freeze, a deep crisis in a country. It would be a great danger if some day people like Marine Le Pens became the majority in the EU. Do you share this view?***

The process is dangerous for many reasons. The EU Legal Service and the European Court of Auditors have already established that: The mechanism creates the risk of legal uncertainty. A wise law must be universal, not particular. This mechanism is an expression of particularism. It can be abused. Someone might use it with fatal consequences for the EU. Once that gate is open, no one will be able to close it.

***Both your Hungarian colleague, Viktor Orban, and you fought against the dictatorship before 1989. You yourself were physically abused by the state security. At that time, your dream was that the Soviet occupiers would withdraw and your countries would join a united Europe.***

That’s right. At that time nobody could imagine that the Iron Curtain would fall. But the persistence of the Polish “Solidarity” movement and the consistent policy of the US led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. After that, we have worked to build a free, strong and united Europe. But our allies sometimes have little understanding of our history and our difficult path, what was rightly noted by the Prime Minister of Slovenia in his recent letter to EU leaders

***The unification of Europe took place in 2004 and has greatly helped many countries in economic terms. But it seems that something has gone wrong. When was that and what was it?***

We don't see it that way. It was a win-win situation. In Poland, everyone can see the great progress that has taken place here since 2004. Western Europe has also benefited greatly from EU enlargement. That is precisely why we feel responsible for the future of the EU.

***But there is a clash between the two parts of Europe. Is it caused by similar factors as the clash between East and West Germany?***

Germany's post-war history is marked by division. That is why the Germans, who know that this is the “legacy of communism”, can better understand the eastern countries. All people are different in many ways. Mutual understanding and cooperation are crucial. We are a Europe of fatherlands, and this is how it should stay. I don't think that a huge transfer union would be acceptable to the majority of EU countries.

***In Poland you can hear the following opinions: The west is no longer so attractive as it was before 1989. It is shaken by crises and has lost its sense of direction. Is that your impression too?***

The EU is acting like a marriage in crisis. It has the financial crisis behind it. Brexit is experiencing growing imbalances, which the Bundesbank is watching carefully. And it tends to take its failures out on Poland and Hungary. It is high time to examine your conscience: What went wrong? Hasn’t for example, the euro led to ever deeper differences? What has it brought to Italy, which has been in stagnation for more than twenty years now?

***Appeals are coming from Italy to cancel the debt of this heavily indebted country. Would you support that?***

These appeals primarily concern the Coronavirus-related debts. I would not reject something like this from the start, because this “black swan” of the virus and the unexpected additional expenditure are not representative of the situation of one country only. To get out of this unprecedented crisis, it would also be a good idea to put aside any ideologically motivated attacks on the sovereignty of individual countries, made under the pretext of the "conditionality" of EU funds, and quickly move on to the reconstruction programme.

***You have actively supported the integration of Europe, for example as head of a major bank in Poland. When did EU scepticism begin for you personally?***

The common market is a huge asset. Definitely for Germany, definitely for Poland. That is the main achievement of the united Europe. And there is still a lot to be done in this area. But we in Poland also know what an order imposed by some central authority means. This is what the Soviet system looked like: A distant Central Committee, a fictitious independence and equal rights for the "partner countries" against actual dependence, exploitation and neo-colonialism. A sham democracy in which people cannot live in harmony with their values. This is only a reminder of the times that fortunately have passed. But one should learn from it.

***Apart from Hungary, who are your allies in the current defensive battle?***

We are engaged in a battle against the pandemic. The debate on the controversial EU mechanism is difficult. This is all the more difficult and important because its outcome will influence the future direction of the EU. We will be defending the Europe of the fatherlands against the bold ideas of the integrators who are acting according to the "one size fits all” motto.

***Several ministers in your government have spoken of a "culture war" that is dividing Europe today. It concerns the issues of migration, internal security, definition of the family, the role of the church and secularism. Could it perhaps be that Polish concerns about the EU relate to these areas of policy?***

Culture war is a very powerful word. But there is no doubt that we have significant differences in these areas today. I think that the respect for diversity should also include acceptance for the specificity of each culture in the Member States. This is one of the fundamental principles of the EU. The Poles see many things differently from the Germans or the French, and the Germans are different from the Spaniards. As the head of the government representing the Poles, I am seeking to obtain guarantees that Poland's specificity will be respected.

***If Poland and Hungary maintain their veto, the majority of EU countries could set up a Coronavirus recovery fund without them, and Poland could lose billions of euros.*** ***What will you say to your voters about this?***

We are fighting to make sure that no country, neither today nor tomorrow, is denied funding based on an arbitrary and non-transparent mechanism. This is a matter of fundamental trust on which the European law is based. We must not allow wrong regulations, which are potentially very destructive for the entire EU, to be passed alongside the good Corona fund.

***Is there still room for a compromise now?***

Every euro from EU funds must be rightly spent. By everyone, by the way. Out of each euro that Poland receives from the EU, 75 cents go back to Germany, to Western Europe, to hundreds of companies like Siemens and Hochtief that do their business here. There must be no corruption or misappropriation of EU funds. By the way, my government has been very successful in fighting corruption.

***Would it be a good proposal for compromise to put the Article 7 procedure on the rule of law in Poland and Hungary to a vote in the European Council and thus conclude the matter?***

Yes. It is good to follow your own rules. But let us see first if the Article 7 procedure applies in this case.

***Donald Trump's presidency was a time of irritation and uncertainty for the West. It seems like enough time has passed to ask you: Are you happy about Joe Biden's victory?***

Poland and the United States share mutual respect, values such as the love of freedom, but also common interests. It's a permanent alliance. I am sure that the cooperation with President Biden will develop as well as the previous one.

Interview by Gerhard Gnauck