

Transcript of the interview with Mr. Amjad Bashir, MEP (European Conservatives and Reformists Group)

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Introduction

In the framework of the European Governance project “*Divide et compromise: the quest for improved European Governance*”, the Centre for Geopolitics & Security in Realism Studies (CGSRS) has launched an interview series with European actors – of different political sensitivities and from various European institutions- to bring together their visions for European Governance reform given the deep cleavages that have progressively undermined the EU’s decision-making capacity.

Methodologically, as primary sources of European Governance, the interviews are semi-structured and the questionnaires vary to a degree. Core questions on cleavages in the main thematic and geographic axis of the project are common. The other questions account for the specificity of the interviewees’ functions. Whenever the interview has been conducted in a language other than English, the original and the version translated by the interviewer are published. Not all posed questions have been answered due to either the interviewees’ personal reasons and/or lack of time. Therefore, the CGSRS has decided to publish only the answered questions.

Amjad Bashir, British Member of the European Parliament for the European Conservatives and Reformists political group, shared his views on the challenges of European Governance on October 17, 2017.

VM: Germany and France have different views on Eurozone reform. Berlin speaks in favour of a European Monetary Fund with the aim of strengthening the existing sovereign rescue fund. By contrast, Paris proposes a Eurozone budget and a finance Minister. Do you think these two different concepts could converge into a single reform package on the Eurozone?

AB: The real problem with the above mentioned proposals aimed at improving the so-called “eurozone governance” is that none seems to address the root cause of the issue. Calls for a “EU Finance Minister” or Eurobonds are a side-effect of the inability of political elites across the EU to ensure fiscal responsibility at the national level. Contrary to common belief and abundant rhetoric from the media, especially from the left, austerity is not a common practise in Europe! Many EU Member States, especially in the Eurozone, have been struggling for decades to keep their finances in order. Greece may be the most obvious example, but there are several others facing similar long term risks. Chronic deficits and mounting debts are the norm, rather than the exception.

When political elites in France or elsewhere call for Eurobonds and more spending from “Brussels” (e.g. in the form of a higher EU budget), we need to remind citizens that this translates into more debt at the expense of future generations. Solidarity and mutualisation of debt appear in mainstream media headlines almost everywhere in Europe.

Somehow, we need to remind ourselves of simple home economics - no one can live beyond their means - not forever.

The calls for endless financial transfers or printing of money entail moral hazards: countries in need of support risk seeing no need to promote sweeping, inevitable reforms for as long as someone else is willing to cover the losses at the end of the year.

The European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR) is a staunch advocate of fiscal responsibility and devolution of authority as closely as possible to citizens. It is much easier to monitor how public budgets are spent downwards (e.g. toward the local/regional level) than upwards (e.g. Brussels). By transferring increasingly more authority to Brussels to authorise or reject national spending we only augment citizens’ resentment and alienation from the European idea.

VM: *Emmanuel Macron* has proposed to organise “democratic conventions” about the EU before the end of 2017. (A few days ago he mentioned before March 2018.) The events would bring EU citizens closer to the Union, and develop their feeling of belonging to the Union. The European Commission has also organised several public events. Nevertheless, these meetings are only places for debate, not for reaching decisions. How can the EU

promote more effective citizen participation in future EU governance decision-making? Is this desirable?

AB: The citizens and the civil society can have their voices heard through various channels. These include; the European Parliament, their National Governments sitting in the Council, the Committee of the Regions, the European Citizens' Initiative, etc. Democratic Conventions will not bring great value added, unless their outputs are legally binding. Otherwise, we risk creating yet another irrelevant structure.

VM: Defence and Security (D&S) figure prominently throughout most of the scenarios of the "White Paper on the future of Europe", presented on the 1st of March, as one of the few fields that will facilitate greater integration in the EU. The European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, has called for establishing a "Defence Union" by 2025, and a majority system for some foreign policy decisions. Do you see D&S in the EU indeed moving along this path?

AB: The call for "more EU" in Defence and security via an EU army is rather utopian at best, counterproductive and inefficient at worst. Defence and Security are policy areas where the UK has consistently been pushing for greater efforts and more cooperation among the EU Member States through NATO. The British PM has confirmed the UK's unconditional support of collaboration in her recent Florence speech. However, for many decades most EU Member States have failed to meet their NATO targets on national Defence spending.

Further, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali are only a few illustrative examples of a lack of consensus across the EU-28. This begs two essential questions: 1. If a European army were to be created, where would it be deployed? 2. Who would pay for this?

Whereas the first question is rhetorical, the second boils down to a dilemma of financing an EU army. This could be achieved either through the existing EU budget (at the expense of other EU priorities), through an increase in national contributions (highly unlikely), or via slashing national defence spending.

VM: Consensus among Member States on the degree of integration in the EU is needed. However, deep cleavages exist among Members who support more and/or better integration and those who prefer to keep the EU as loose as possible. These divisions make it difficult to reach a consensus. If you had to identify the 2-3 deepest cleavages in the EU, which would you pick?

AB: Perhaps the biggest obvious cleavage is between federalism and inter-governmentalism.

However the underlying cleavage is between proponents of big and small government.

Our Group opposes federalism because it is bound to lead to the creation of costly, duplicative and ineffective state functions at the EU level. This is not meant to imply that intergovernmentalism per se is the right way forward. As mentioned earlier, there is great merit in seeking to decentralise and deregulate from the European to the national and from the national to the local/regional level, whenever possible. This is the only way for ordinary citizens to feel a sense of ownership over decisions affecting their lives.

VM: What alternative methods could be used to reform European Governance (besides treaty reform)?

AB: In Brussels we seem to be fixated on ways of improving decision-making “made in Brussels.” However, we need to remind ourselves that Europe also should be looking outward rather than only inward! The rest of the world is on its way to reap the benefits of free trade and free markets. Look at Africa and Asia, especially some of their fastest growing parts. Instead of determining how to protect ourselves against “unfair competition,” we should be bolder in embracing opportunities for collaboration in trade and investments. Doing so would give consumers more choices in an ever seamless, globalised world. We can create as many additional supervisory authorities and committees scrutinising the various EU Member States’ performance in taming their chronic deficits; we can attempt to pass more regulations to prevent the shared economy and other breakthrough paradigms from innovating. Stifling innovation, limiting consumer choice, and protecting cronies will not in the long run get us far in the global competitiveness race.

VM: Europe today is faced with more protectionist US policies, while at the same time China and emerging economies are using their growth to assert themselves in trade and foreign policy in Europe. What two priorities do you think would allow the EU to rethink and to strengthen its foreign policy?

AB: Indeed, there are many lessons learnt from Chinese foreign and trade policy in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere.

As mentioned earlier, Europe should adopt the challenging goal of opening itself to the rest of the world. Instead of allocating a disproportionate share of the EU budget to farming

subsidies, more products should be allowed into the EU from anywhere in the world, when possible. This, in my view, is an alternative way to gain friends anywhere in the world.

This being said, free and open trade cannot come at the expense of oppression and cruelty. The EU should refuse to engage in trade and investment talks with any oppressive regime in the world that fails to respect rule of law and human rights. For instance, recently I advocated against the continuation of trade talks between the EU and Myanmar until what the UN has called “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” - in other words, the plight of the Rohingya - is brought to an end.

VM: In your opinion (and to follow up on the previous question), which are the other main «mobilizing » projects gathering consensus within the EU as a way forward for European integration?

AB: While others see opportunities for progress and prosperity through “European integration”, I remain firmly sceptical. At the risk of repeating myself, the EU has more to gain by passing fewer regulations and by ensuring that European citizens enjoy rule of law and genuine freedoms across its Member States.

I believe that the EU has enough powers and institutions already. There is hardly any evidence for the need to create others. One has to think of the various parts of the EU decision-making machinery that are nothing more nothing less than talking shops.

VM: How can the EU mitigate Eastern European Member States’ concerns that closer European integration will discriminate against them? For instance, the refusal of Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic to comply with refugee quotas unanimously agreed upon in September 2015. The latest example are Polish objections to EU proposals to reform the Union’s posted workers directive (although by the end of September, the Polish Prime Minister declared that a compromise on the EU’s “posted” workers directive could be found).

AB: There are several policy areas where all EU Member States stand to benefit from supporting each other. Take a country like Estonia as a best practise. A pioneer of digitisation and public sector efficiency, Estonia offers around 98% of its services online. From an e-residence card for businesses to a copy of a driving license; these and many other procedures can be emulated throughout the world. Isn’t this a great use of taxpayers’ money?

On the other hand, all of our Eastern neighbours feel deeply concerned at the growing influence of Russia in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation.

Concerning immigration and refugees, we need to take our thinking to a different level. Whilst it is true that the West is the final preferred destination of many immigrants, it is high time that we consider the initial push factors behind immigration.

As a British Conservative MEP I have been a keen advocate of the boldest possible political, societal, and economic reforms in Africa, Middle East and Asia. Financing infrastructure projects and delivering humanitarian aid utilising the EU budget is a noble cause, indeed. But, these do not and cannot effectively root out poverty and lack of opportunity.

“Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime”. By helping to build sound governance and inclusive institutions in many parts of the world we can allow hundreds of millions of citizens the freedom to compete on equal grounds irrespective of religion, ethnicity, or size and position in the market (rule of law) in their native countries.