

INTERVIEW



DEFENDING EUROPE

Veteran MEP **Pervenche Berès** talks to Julie Levy-Abegnoli about reconnecting the EU with its citizens, Barroso's betrayal and the key issues that must not be overlooked in the upcoming Brexit negotiations – should they happen

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Looking at public opinion on Europe, it's clear that something needs to change,” admits Pervenche Berès. “Of course, trust is earned. We need to look at the mistakes that were committed and try to figure out the reasons why people have disengaged from Europe.” The veteran French Socialist deputy believes part of the problem lies with “excessive trust that the markets will constantly bring more progress and more ways of redistributing wealth.”

For Berès, a clear example of this is Brexit. “The UK's Brexit referendum result is, in a way, the perfect demonstration of what hasn't worked in Europe. Britain is a country that trusted the markets and pushed economic liberalism to the extreme. Europe was blamed for everything that was going wrong in the country, but what actually went wrong was that the UK suffers from a lot of inequality and many

people missed out on the expected benefits of globalisation.”

An MEP for over 22 years, Berès has seen the EU evolve through many milestones, or “revolutions”, as she calls them. The first of these was the reconciliation of Europe, she says, followed by the introduction of the single currency and the spread of globalisation. She has also witnessed considerable change within Parliament, an institution she says, “has become more powerful. There are more MEPs now, and we are more involved than ever in policymaking. But our work has also become more difficult.”

While this is partly down to deputies handling more technical dossiers, it is also largely to do with the House's new set-up following the last European elections. “We are now a tri-partisan institution, between →

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Conservatives, Progressives and Europhobes. This is a clear sign of how people in the individual member states are feeling and shows the rise of populism.”

Berès, who leads the French Socialist delegation in the European Parliament, has been a long-time, and passionate, supporter of the EU. While she regrets the British decision to exit the bloc, she says the result of the 23 June referendum must be respected – though not at any cost. “The British have made a choice, but we must fight to make sure that this doesn’t lead to the destruction of the EU that we remain committed to, which we nevertheless must reform.”

“The UK isn’t exiting Europe – physically, it will still be just on the other side of the Channel, so we will have to figure out a new relationship between London and Brussels. Still, this cannot be along the lines of what UK Prime Minister Theresa May announced, simply in the UK’s interest. This has to be a negotiation between both parties, and we must be careful of what the consequences of a deal will be for the EU.”

A particularly touchy point is the single market, and whether access is feasible considering the UK’s wish to curb the number of EU migrants entering the country. Many policymakers have already warned that there can be no access to the single market without accepting the free movement of people, something Berès agrees with. But, she says, there are other key points that must also be considered. “We must ensure that in responding to British demands, nothing is done to slow down or complicate achieving economic and monetary union and deeper integration of the Eurozone.”

A crucial point that will have to be discussed alongside the fundamental freedoms, says the French MEP, is fiscal policy. “If the EU carries on with its fight against tax evasion and tax fraud, but lets the UK develop into some sort of giant tax haven, there will be a huge imbalance,” she warns.



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Of course, none of these discussions can take place until Theresa May invokes the Lisbon Treaty’s infamous article 50, something Berès admits the UK Prime Minister doesn’t seem in any rush to do, effectively blocking the start of the negotiations. This, she argues, “is neither in the UK’s nor in the EU’s interests. We need to keep up a certain rhythm and

get ourselves out of this uncertainty. Markets hate uncertainty.”

Theresa May is not alone in exasperating Berès and other deputies. Over the summer, former European Commission President José Manuel Barroso infuriated policymakers from across the political spectrum when he took on a job as a Brexit advisor at Goldman Sachs, the bank that helped

Greece mask its huge deficit in order to join the EU, and was subsequently blamed for Athens' debt crisis. Berès says the appointment is "scandalous and a betrayal of the European ideal. Barroso doesn't need to go to Goldman Sachs to ensure a steady income. It's one thing to go work for a bank

after having served as Commission President and following a cooling off period, but going to work for Goldman Sachs is an entirely different matter."

"How can we reinstate trust in the European institutions when those who have gained a certain expertise and built up an ex-

tensive list of contacts, by presiding over the Union's highest institution – the one intended to watch over Europe's interests – then go and use this knowledge to benefit an organisation that has only ever cared about its own financial gain?"

Elsewhere, there has been a growing backlash against the EU-US transatlantic trade and investment partnership (TTIP), with French and German ministers claiming the trade deal talks were effectively dead and demanding that they cease. Berès says she has tried to approach the negotiations with an open mind, but she has always had doubts over the deal, and supports calls to suspend the talks. "Why are we spending so much time and energy on these talks," she wonders, "when what Europe really needs is to strengthen itself? The reasoning was that the deal would boost trade and therefore growth, but Europe itself has huge growth potential. We must make the most of our own resources, especially in terms of ecological transition, which will be a lot of work and a great source of added value."

Next week, MEPs will convene in

Strasbourg for the first plenary session since the summer break, and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker will deliver the annual State of the Union speech. This year, the speech will mark the half-way point of the current legislature, taking stock of all that has been achieved so far and

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all that remains to be done.

For Berès, who previously chaired the Parliament's influential economic and monetary affairs committee, and, later, the equally powerful employment and social affairs committee, the main priority should be investment. The

€315bn Juncker plan was a start, she says, but she wishes to see even more investment – to the tune of €1000bn. However, she stresses that, "the money can't just come from anywhere – we can't use 'easy money'. We need smart and green investment, to encourage sustainable development and job creation."

Another key priority is the fight against fiscal and social dumping. "Ensuring that multinationals pay real, proportional tax in the countries they make a profit is an absolute priority. There can be no free movement of profits. And on social dumping, we must ensure that the posted workers directive works." Berès also intends to spend time working on improving the functioning of the Eurozone, and is currently co-rapporteur on a budgetary capacity for the euro area. She believes the Eurozone needs tools to avoid asymmetric shocks, which she says could prove lethal to Europe's economy. Other focus areas for the months ahead include making the most of the Youth Guarantee to fight youth unemployment, as well as security and defence.

Clearly, these are busy times ahead, and they are set to be extremely challenging given the growing hostility towards the EU. Nevertheless, Berès hopes that her colleagues, as well as politicians across the Union, will "have the courage to defend Europe. We must rebuild trust in our institutions, and those political parties that support the European project must say so very explicitly." ★

