

The European Union in crisis

– A plea for a new dialogue on European policy

Incentives paper

The German Commission for Justice and Peace is currently dealing with the perspectives of a common European foreign and security policy. The following incentives paper was developed in this context and it shall encourage the requested dialogue on European policy in Germany as well as on a European level.

I. Dealing with the „refugee crisis“ as a symptom of the EU crisis

Not later than 2015 the international issue of refugees reached the heart of the EU. Whereas the years before the issue of refugees had been considered to be a problem of the European states bordering on the Mediterranean under the guise of the Dublin Agreement and was thus somehow regionalized, this strategy which had been dishonourable for some time has failed with the increase of the number of refugees in 2015.

In a new way the question of a common European foreign and security policy arises; now in the context of dealing with the issue of refugees. Here the European states are facing a considerable diversity of causes of flight in view of combating the causes of flight and as far as dealing with the refugees in Europe is concerned they are also facing a significant diversity of European answers.

In a situation calling for increased joint efforts an erosion of the European solidarity with the risk of a dissolution of the European Union can be observed. This becomes obvious by the gradual undermining of the Schengen Agreement through the reintroduction of checks at internal borders and by the lack of willingness to jointly respond to the challenges. The result of the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum has highlighted and at the same time intensified the EU crisis.

The re-nationalisation tendencies of politics and the erosion of the European solidarity, which already started when dealing with the issue of refugees in the last years as well as with the financial crisis, show that we are not facing a problem of political and administrative organisation in the first place.

The central challenge the EU and the European societies have to cope with is the necessity to determine their own position in the global or European context and to undergo a deep social and political transformation for the sake of their identity and their own ability to act.

The issue of refugees underlines this challenge in a special way. Especially in the debate on our relationship to “foreigners” the question of the conception of ourselves, of our cultural roots and the limitation of our own possibilities becomes obvious, particularly in the (mostly imaginary) relationship to Islam. In this context, questions of social cohesion, of fear of social decline and fear of loss, as well as of concrete competition for resources, e.g. in view of jobs and affordable housing have to be discussed seriously.

Considering the fact that due to global trends we are not dealing with a short-term challenge, all European societies affected feel latently overtaxed, even if the number of refugees in most European countries is still manageable. These social concerns partly are based on real problems, partly on established patterns of perception and increasingly on (right-wing) populist agitation. Temperatures perceived and temperatures measured are merging. The current challenges put European societies under considerable social psychological stress.

When handling the situation from a political and cultural point of view, the different societies show various approaches. These differences, which present a significant barrier for the creation of a joint policy, have to be taken seriously and one should try to understand them, because they reflect social identities and experiences which must not be ignored because this would strengthen the opposition against the European project. Should a common policy be developed this will only become stable if it is compatible with the different social processes in which the identity of the respective societies are discussed.

In the current situation people are often tempted to transfer their own feeling of unease to others. So in the German-Polish context a remarkable readiness can be observed to project the own feeling of unease in view of the challenge onto the others and to fall back on „familiar“ national interpretative patterns to (unconsciously) safeguard one’s own identity. If these dynamics are not interrupted the relationship may suffer serious damage and the common ability to act may be jeopardized.

The same dynamics also appear frequently in the relationship with the EU. It has become clear that not everybody can resist the temptation to imagine the EU as the other, as something that overwhelms and alienates us, and to react with anti-EU sentiment. The remarkable force of this imagination, which is used in an alarmingly successful way in the East and in the West by right-wing populist actors, reveals the depth of social insecurities and the virtual absence of a European society which politically and culturally includes the national contexts in all their exciting heterogeneity.

II. A plea for a new dialogue on European policy and the development of a pan-European transformation perspective

The EU crisis is – even if it has become obvious by a series of global problems – essentially of a political and cultural kind.

The answer to this crisis has to face the global challenges and the resulting necessities and limits of European cooperation as well as the question of the political and cultural prerequisites of the European ability to act.

If the EU wants to meet these challenges successfully in the long run, a stronger equalization of material living conditions and of social standards in the EU is necessary as well as a common policy to improve global living conditions. The possibilities of this kind of a common foreign and security policy are tied to internal prerequisites which have to be ensured through new efforts. So in the sense of strengthening social and political cohesion a self-critical analysis of political and cultural binding powers as well as dealing with existing tensions is necessary. The states as well as the different social forces including religious communities are called upon here.

However, the misconception should be avoided that the European idea as a new mega story probably leading to a superstate could and should abolish and replace the national contexts. In fact a European culture of dialogue is needed where the respective individual aspects can be brought up and developed as an integral part of the whole. The European idea constitutes itself essentially in a discursive interrelationship which makes it possible to experience that the respective individual aspects – which are often controversial – cannot be taken into consideration without their counterparts. In this context the historical experiences of violence made in Europe, which in many ways shape our current self-images and perceptions especially in their diversity, have to be addressed, too. For this reason we need a renewed European dialogue in which these experiences and cultural imprints are explained and related to each other in a constructive way. This is demanded by an intelligent post-conflict rehabilitation as well as by the prevention of violence.

A continuous dialogue based on shared experiences and values can create a productive commonality from conflict-ridden relationships. Generally speaking this kind of dialogue culture is open and reaches beyond the European framework, although there are limits as far as the practical capacity to act is concerned. The dialogue has to aim at deepening mutual understanding and strengthening confidence and at promoting awareness and acceptance of the complex challenges, the joint development of a European transformation perspective including concrete reform proposals for the EU.

This requires a significant increase and a systematization of European exchange and dialogue programmes.

Today the European idea is challenged by protectionist policies trying to revert to national contexts and to strengthen the national capacity to act at the expense of joint perspectives. These policies may indeed offer some kind of reassurance for the respective societies, but for the medium-to-long term they will probably undermine the prerequisites for what they pretend to protect.

European societies are facing the challenge either to help to shape the transformation based on global developments or to find themselves in an unproductive defensive position which will visibly narrow their own scopes for action.

In view of this situation it is indispensable to seriously deal with the frequent opposition to the necessary transformation. After the painful and not yet digested processes of the 1990ies an obvious weariness of transformation can be found in the new EU member states. Even the most successful transformation process is always accompanied by experiences of loss which have to be dealt with. In such processes the temptation to withdraw to “one’s own area” becomes obvious. Repeated not empathetic drastic measures which were taken on the way to EU accession will hardly be feasible. Successful change demands an inner acceptance by the societies affected. This can only be gained by a high degree of participation, transparency and a fair balance of interests. In many countries this reluctance seems to be due to a lack of confidence in their own ability to reconcile the necessary transformation with social cohesion (see France). A European initiative could strengthen social and political forces needed by the countries to overcome their internal crises.

After the transformation experiences of the 1990ies and the financial crisis and its consequences the European project has lost attraction. In contrast to the situation at the end of the confrontation between the two blocs today there is no transformation and development perspective which could rely on large majorities in European societies. In addition, the EU’s general promise of prosperity has lost credibility and the binding forces of the European peace project have decreased due to generational reasons. Against this background a new justification of the European project is needed.

The joint development of a transformation perspective for European societies is essential in this context. The Agenda 2030 with the UN Sustainable Development Goals could offer a first pioneering approach to this transformation perspective. As a first step we refer to our previous demands to introduce cross-border social security systems and minimum living wages and to give all young people access to education and training (cf. Goals 8 and 10 of the SDG).

III. Our contribution to the European dialogue on the development of a transformation perspective

From our numerous dialogue experiences we know that normative orientations as offered by the Catholic social doctrine are indispensable. The principles of solidarity, personality and subsidiarity are of particular relevance especially in view of the development in the EU and in European societies. In its concerted actions on “Combat racism – invest in young people“ (2012), on the financial crisis (2010 and 2013), on youth unemployment (2015), on increasing racism and xenophobia (2015) and on fair taxation and poverty (2016), Justice and Peace Europe (JP Europe) has shown how a dialogue based on perceived pressure in the European societies in the South, the North, the East and the West of Europe and on an ethical orientation not strengthening individual interests but the common good and which underlines respect and

safeguarding of human rights for everyone instead of supporting state interests, can lead to sustainable and viable solutions. This contrasts to short-term reactions shown in day-to-day policy making. The same can be said about the peace policy declaration of the COMECE made in the course of the preparation of the new foreign policy and security strategy of the EU.

Repeatedly we have made the experience that it is important also in view of normative orientations to resist the temptation to normatively overwhelm our counterparts instead of convincing them due to the respect for others. Accordingly the Church faces the question on how to make a valuable and significant contribution to the debate and how to make the most of her transnational nature as a resource for the benefit of all.

Before long the German Commission for Justice and Peace will:

- Engage in European political dialogues in Berlin and Brussels,
- Organize a European dialogue on right-wing populism,
- Explore the European challenges, which were presented by populist movements, during the JP Congress in December 2016,
- Continue the European and international cooperation on decent work and social dialogue of Catholic organisations and the ILO with partners and the COMECE,
- Strengthen and accompany the ecclesiastical dialogue and reconciliation work of the Maximilian Kolbe Foundation in Europe,
- Reflect with the European partners on the development of new dialogue formats and extend cooperation where necessary.

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