

Interview with Albin Kurti: The problem of Europe Today is Its small ambitions

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1. The one thing that many, if not most people, agree upon today is that the European Union is in crisis. But it seems it has been a crisis since its very conception – being ultimately nothing but a neo-liberal project that *inter alia* sought to generate some internal and cohesive political force through the implementation of a common currency. But now with phenomena like Brexit – and all the other dooming potential exits – and with popular anti-EU mobilizations, this crisis seems to have generated a new thrust, or did it not? Could you tell us what is your understanding of this: is the EU in a crisis right now? What are or would be potential legal, political and economic implications of it?

In my understanding, the European Union did not begin as a neoliberal project. If we look back into the history, it began with three initial pillars, as a foundation of this idea or project. First, it was the premise of peace through the anti-Fascist struggle. This coincided with the 5th anniversary of the victory against Nazi-Fascism (in 1950) which as such, in a not-so-surprising manner, privileges Schuman's declaration, against that of Chamberlain's proposal in his "peace for our times" speech. So, the difference is crucial: contrary to peace *with fascism*, it changed the course into a new stance, which can be formulated like peace as the *struggle against* fascism. This is very important.

The second pillar is that of the welfare state. It was no longer possible to even imagine economic growth and development without social justice, which above and before everything, at the level of the state, consisted on social security and progressive taxation. The third one concerns the common defense project. Based on these, I would not argue that the European Union is, in its beginning, a neoliberal construction or project. On the contrary, my claim is that the idea of European Union, albeit not being the ideal leftist project in itself, was hijacked by the neoliberal idea, decades after it was initially created. And, this hijacking is something we should think and analyse. What I have in mind here is rather a simple idea: what were the conditions, within the EU itself, which allowed for the project to be turned into a neoliberal vessel, rather than take a further leftist turn? I think that the idea of some leftists who see the solution in exiting the EU (and, we have all kinds of ideas of exits today: from Brexit, to Grexit, Frexit, and so forth), is too much of an easy solution. Yes, they want to abandon the EU, but where are they heading to? To the nation-state form? I do not see this as a viable solution and an emancipatory position or idea. Rather we can learn a bitter lesson from neoliberalism: we *can* indeed re-appropriate a project, which in its essence, is not neoliberal. Appearing radical today is the easiest political position; what is a very difficult task is to engage in the most difficult job of changing the actuality of our

present, in which, the EU is of essential importance. The crisis of EU and the crisis of the left today are not two different things. The crisis of EU, in a large part, is a crisis of the left itself. If I am to use a rather obscene term, the “reformation” of the EU is in fact the reformation or reinvention of the left in Europe, which cannot be carried out and accomplished by using old methods because it is not only about ‘reforming’ the ruling ideas. In my view, this is the most difficult task today: reinventing a (new) theory of organisation for and of the contemporary left.

2. Does this have implications for how we (should) conceive of the “idea of Europe” after all – or how to distinguish between Europe and the EU?

The European Union will become *Europe* and will reach its decisive congruence with itself when the Western Balkans will be fully joining or included into the EU. This has certain implications. First, it means that the EU should change, both in its structure and its aims, that is, in its ruling ideas. Second, and at the same time, the implications weigh directly onto the Western Balkans countries, where the majority of the people want to be part of the EU. Both the EU and the Western Balkans are very important for one another. If we would agree that there is a distinction between Europe and the European Union, then this difference has a name: it’s called Western Balkans. To formulate this in different way, through flirting with Hegel, I would say that Europe reaches its notion when the Western Balkans will fully join the European Union.

3. Do you think there is anything one might identify as emancipatory in the EU as it exists or as “promise”, if one may use this term, it came with? Can this idea be appropriated by the or a Left, we are here thinking for example of the initiative DiEM25, one of whose chairman is Yanis Varoufakis or would you suggest a different path is needed?

I think that the pan-European form of organisation is crucial today. Think about the major problems we are confronted with in our epoch, or of the way of the functioning of capitalism as such. Nation-states are structurally incapable of confronting and dealing with them. I want to take the obvious example of the (ongoing) refugee “crisis”. This was the most obvious example of how nation-states cannot confront such problems. Or, climate change: no matter what measures a particular state might be able to take, they have little impact, if they are not at least organised at the continental level. This is a crucial problem and task, which we have

to think about, and in my view, this has to be done rather fast. I fear we are losing our momentum.

We have to think how democracy will function and be applied here, all the forms of decision-making, and so forth. For this reason, we need as many pan-European movements as possible, be them from the centre left and left, social-democratic, and the greens. So we need initiatives which unify different organisations in Europe, because we cannot allow, once again, for the right-wing forces to hijack this structure. Paradoxically, they are already the most successful pan-European alliance today. They are very coordinated, they help each other, they are growing on a continental scale, within the European institutions, by undermining the EU itself. Of course, we have to bear in mind that it is especially the Russian Federation and China considerably who are arguably the main adversaries of the European project. So, since it looks like they have been very successful in appropriating notions of *freedom* and *equality* (of course, with a clear nationalist and xenophobic spin), we cannot allow them to do the same with that of *solidarity*.

4. To follow up on this, some have argued that it is precisely through its very failure that the EU generated a vision, a potential of or a potential perspective on something else, on another European Union. Do you find such a reading convincing?

I will simply follow what I said above. The crisis of the EU is not so much a socio-economic crisis, as much as it is a (serious) crisis of ideas, visions, and commitment. We must not accept the thesis which says that the EU is poor or impoverished, I think the opposite is rather true. Rather than having a crisis of material and social conditions, knowing that welfare in the EU is neither low, nor bad, and that not only compared to the other countries of the globe, we should argue that the crisis of the European Union consists at the level of idea of welfare itself. What do we mean today by the welfare state? Welfare is certainly not reducible to the fight against poverty, but above all, it is the struggle against inequality, which today is reaching rather worrying heights. I mean, there is a simple empirical fact which proves that the EU is not impoverished: the majority of refugees today see Europe as the place to go, precisely because of the quality of life provided in most of the EU countries. Of course, I am well aware that this is a result of a long process of accumulation of capital, and so forth. Welfare policy should not be only a domestic one, but it should be also part of the foreign economic policy of the EU. That approach will make the EU stronger and provide more overall benefit to the world. What I mean here is that Europe should not become neither a “fortress” nor an “inn”. Europe should become not only a responsible, but also a determining actor in the

contemporary epoch, not only as a mediator or an entity to balance in between economic and military superpowers, but also in bringing its vision in the world.

5. Many have written on the relationship between the European Union and Europe. One of the puzzling aspects of this relationship is rendered by the dilemma of whether the Europe (its spirit, etc) can survive within the “suffocating” confines of the (legalistic, highly bureaucratic) EU. What is your take on this? Is there a clear-cut distinction between the two (and can or must there even be one)?

I believe that true, democratic changes come from below. All the existing legal and bureaucratic “restraints”, all the administrative and procedural difficulties, are there to confirm the need for a movement from below and toughen it for the struggles to come. I do not see legal restraints and restrictions as problematic, of course they do exist, they are the norms of that which exists, of the real. The struggle for change is also the struggle for changing these restrictions and confines, or differently put, the struggle for change is the struggle for changing the status of the actuality.

6. Slavoj Žižek is among the rare contemporary Marxists who openly makes a “leftist plea for “Eurocentrism.” This is obviously a very dangerous move, to say the least. He means by it that what the European heritage stands for, what is universal in it, is something that exceeds the confines of Europe, because it truly is universal (and for example rather than also becomes manifest in the Haitian revolution, the anti-colonial struggle of India, etc). What is your view on the “European legacy”? The point being that even in the struggle against European colonization, this very struggle had to be conceptualised according to principles that were articulated, even constitutionally as part of the Enlightenment project (equality, justice, freedom, etc.). And does one have to be a Euro “centrist” to defend such universal “values” or is there another way to do this? And if so, are there any contemporary strategies, techniques, maybe even ideological options at hand to revivify and stand to this legacy (or is this too much to ask right now)?

I also believe that in Europe there is a lot of history and tradition for the upcoming challenges. Those who accept this notion of the poverty of Europe, have to be very cautious or wary, because it might merely be the poverty of their knowledge and studies of the history of Europe, and not the poverty of Europe itself, *à propos* the challenges of the 21st century. At the same time, I think that the world is impatient to learn what is happening with and in Europe,

more so than it is ready to admit. Politicians and intellectuals alike from all around, keep an eye on Europe, to see what is happening here. But, all this ‘attention’ should not make us very happy. Rather, it should make us aware of the responsibility that we have, that is to say, that even in the 21st century, the fate of Europe, determines the fate of the world, much more than the Europeans and others appear to be ready to know or accept.

Here I want to endorse Žižek’s idea and thesis. I do not belong to those who see Europe only as the cause of colonialism, imperialism, Holocaust, and so on. There is another side to Europe, which, sadly, the contemporary left in general refuses to see. Here I am thinking of the birth of the modern subjectivity through the Cartesian *cogito*, the notions of equality, democracy, the birth of feminism, the French Revolution, and so on. I mean, even if we look into the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, the demands for freedom and self-determination were articulated in the discourse or spirit and the vocabulary of the Europe as such. This is exemplary in the work of Franz Fanon, which, in my view, definitely deserves a thorough re-reading. Or, another case is the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 for independence, which happened shortly after the French Revolution. The demands of Haitians were not for an “alter civilisation,” or return to what was authentic before colonisation. In a rather strange way of formulating it, the Haitians embodied the values of French Revolution more profoundly than the developments in France in the aftermath of the Revolution. In a sense, the ideas of French Revolution were best materialised in Haiti.

7. The past of Europe seemed to have been determined by the past of the particular and individual European nation states. Some of them had an intense common history (of enmity but also of interaction and non-monetary exchanges, for example, France and Germany). Could relying on these common histories provide a different orientation for the future of Europe (and maybe even of the EU)?

In the previous centuries, the problem of Europe has been excessive ambitions of the individual states. This was expressed both in the excessive ambitions of particular states within the continent, as well as with the ambitions directed and carried out in the other continents. However, the problem of Europe in the 21st century seems to be completely different. Today, the shift or the change is reductionist, that is to say, the problem of Europe are the small ambitions of its joint enterprise, which is called the European Union. And, to avoid any possible misunderstanding or misreading: I am far from celebrating or pleading for the return of

that period into the present historical epoch.

We, here in the Western Balkan want to join the EU, but at the same time, this means that the EU should have more self-confidence, and simultaneously, it has to raise the ambitions for itself. This means that in the past, there were individual authoritarianisms of particular states, which wanted to exercise their hegemony and domination, and in this sense, while doing so, they unified Europe in a tragic way. But these authoritarianisms (and I am using this term very cautiously) have had the neurosis of the others around them, they were confronted with them, so to speak. But today, authoritarian regimes in the Balkans should not be tolerated, while having the neurosis of Brussels in front of them. In this way, by the way of raising the ambitions for themselves, the European Union will manage and succeed in incorporating the Western Balkans within itself, as well as succeed in the struggle against growing authoritarian tendencies.

8. One peculiar phenomenon one was able to witness more or less recently is what one may call a “nationalist international” - that is right-wing nationalist movements (like the Front National, the AfD, Wilders, as well as in some of the Balkan countries), especially in Europe and inside the EU found together to create an alliance mutually protecting their respective particular national interests. This also seemed part of Steve Bannon’s declared strategy for the European continent. Such a nationalist internationalism or internationalism of nationalists appears to have hijacked the concept of internationalism in times in which otherwise there is nothing international but the movement of capital (in its diverse forms). How do you see this development?

I am inclined to understand the success of the far-right parties and groups, and the far-right ideology in general, only in the light of the failure of the left. The rise of the far-right is not a recent phenomenon – historically, it rose when the left failed. And, I think Walter Benjamin’s overly quoted thesis holds true: the rise of far right is strictly conditioned by the failure to seize the moment for emancipation. If we look at the responses to the financial crisis of 2008, the left, generally, couldn’t offer a viable vision or an idea on how to move forward. The gap created here, was successfully filled in by the right. Even if we look at the majority of the leftist positions, I am almost ready to argue that a good part of the contemporary left is holding conservative positions, by the way of clinging to concepts and ideas which did not generically belong to them.

And there is no other path in our situation, as a way out from this conundrum, except of the rebirth of the leftist project. And, by the rebirth of the leftist (or, even of social-democracy) project I do

not mean the one represented, say, by Gerhard Schröder, but let’s say, by Ferdinand Lassalle. So, when I say we need to return to the history and the tradition of Europe, this in-itself implies the tradition of the left. This is a very rich tradition, which can be very useful today for us.

Here I think we are faced with another problem, with regard to the far-right or even (neo)fascists (if we accept this term, although I have my doubts about its accuracy. I am not fully convinced we can use this notion to the contemporary far-right). They should be criticised and fought and opposed. The mistake we make is that we all too often only complain about the situation in which we are. We cannot allow nor afford, at any cost, to degrade the critique and opposition, to complaints and lamentation. Politics is not just presentation, representation and mediation. Politics is a struggle.

9. Alain Badiou has decidedly argued that today more than ever political emancipation must be international, and therefore declared Marx to have been almost a science fiction writer who anticipated this important dimension of contemporary politics. What criteria, coordinates, aspects of a contemporary internationalism can we identify - especially in difference to its previously mentioned nationalist appropriation?

I strongly believe in international cooperation and solidarity between the leftist parties, movements and organisations. But I think that this doesn’t mean abandoning local and national struggles and challenges. I believe that it is possible to confront problems and challenges in the countries and/or municipalities where we live or work, but at the same time, we can and must express international solidarity for each other’s struggles. This is very important, I think. Solidarity is not an abstract act, so to speak. It has clear material conditions and consequences. To be empirical, I would say that it is measured by active engagement in the struggle of the other, kilometres travelled, money spent, et cetera. Just like politics, it is also a matter of pragmatic organisation, and not only at the level of discursive war. In this way, international solidarity, in my understanding, has to do with material, logistical and effective transcultural exchanges. Real and genuine solidarity is very costly. Political opinions about other countries or about the struggles in other countries are not political *per se*, unless there is a material causal link to be established, say between my position, and the foreign element. I think this is a very important thing to bear in mind.

10. To return to one of the elements of the European legacy (and its inner dialectic): the Age of Enlightenment. Do you see a contemporary significance of the Enlightenment heritage,

especially for a renewed understanding of Europe and maybe even of the EU? We are not thinking about the clichéd representation of some regions of the world as back-ward, say Islamism as anti-Enlightenment and Europe (and Western Religion) as representing the Enlightenment tradition. We are rather thinking of the Enlightenment as being specifically and problematically European, liberating but strangely deemed to enchain those who endorse it most. So, in different terms, what is there to be learnt from the dialectic of Enlightenment for contemporary European politics, if anything?

I think it is not correct to argue only that the geographical Europe should become a political EU, but the political EU should become a historical Europe. In this sense, the heritage of Enlightenment is very valuable and important. Enlightenment is hope. It is the return of ideals in politics and politics-making or upholding the general interest above the individual one. It is very important for maintaining ethics in politics, something which, very sadly, is being abandoned in today's world.

I do not think it is sufficient to say that different countries are different. Different countries *are* the same world, same planet, but they are or exist in different time. So yes, there are backward societies, countries and economies. We are not different countries, reducible to different cultural essences, but we are the same world, with countries that exists in different times. Here I think the idea of solidarity is of crucial importance: those who are in need, should be helped out, and if I may say, in a fast-forward procedure.

11. Brexit seems a strange kind of symptom for things happening on a national but also international level in Europe today. Strange, because it does not seem disconnected from the harsh financial restrictions the EU under the aegis of Germany and under the label of austerity imposed on Greece. It is clearly difficult to argue that Great Britain is in a similar situation than Greece was. But it is interesting that the Brexit contenders often sounded as if they perceive the situation of Great Britain to be one in which the British people are exploited and suppressed in an almost worse than Greek people were (maybe because in many official representations the Greeks were at the same time depicted as being lazy). Do you see any links between these two phenomena or are they two unrelated, equally unsettling symptoms of things going wrong?

When the now former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, said that in his mandate, there won't be enlargement of the European Union, of course, the result was

Brexit. Although, I must add, in saying this, he didn't think of Great Britain at all. He thought of us, the Western Balkans. But whoever tries to place him/herself above the project of EU, as an author who tells who and where it will be enlarged, or will not be enlarged, will end up with a "Brexit." I think this is a violent imposition. We are in a moment or in a situation in which we do not make the European Union, but it should make us, if we are serious about it. If you do not enlarge, you shrink. When you do not want to incorporate Western Balkans, you lose Great Britain. This is incomprehension of the seriousness of the European Union by its leaders, because the EU cannot have authors, like they would like to think. The European Union is such serious enterprise that if it is not to move forward, it will definitely move backwards. The European Union is way too important to be capable to handle or be in patience with the status quo.

12. Apart from Brexit, some regions, like Catalonia, or countries that are part of a larger governmental zone, like Scotland, flirted not with the idea of leaving the EU but exiting their respective existing governmental integration - attempts that strangely seem in the case of Catalonia seemed to have brought back the idea of national liberation, even though in a quite toned-down manner, or the idea of administrative and political autonomy, especially with regard to problematic political decisions of Great Britain (i.e. Brexit) in the case of Scotland. And some argued that this might ultimately create new political agents within the European political territory that - if they were recognized as such - might actually pose less of a nationalist threat than a surprisingly emerging chance to transform the EU from within (under the condition, obviously, that Scotland and Catalonia would be recognized as autonomous states and as members of the EU with voting rights). What is your view on this? Where does Kosova enter into this, if at all?

The European left made a big mistake that it didn't get involved in the matters of the self-determination of the people and nations, and in the national questions in general, because they are not outdated problems. I even think that the left cannot understand itself if it considers that the national questions or problems will be solved by not mentioning or neglecting them. So, regarding the questions of Catalonia or Scotland, I have the impression that the left did not engage in thinking the correct answers to these problems. I believe that many deviations and deformations that we have experienced come from this very vacuum that was filled in by someone else. For me, the self-determination as a concept and a right is completely legitimate when it comes from below, wants liberation, and aims at equality. I think that the left has a good possibility in appropriating

the notion and the concept of the “nation” from the right; perhaps in the same manner as we should do with the state. They are both too important to be abandoned by the left.

It seems to me that the left has almost lost the battle with regard to the actuality of the nation-state. As I said earlier, I am very well aware of its material and structural limits, but we need to think why its form is “returning”, as the European Union is going through a serious crisis. Probably in the future, there won’t be nation-states at all, perhaps not even states nor nations, but this is not our actuality. Yet, in history, not every repetition is the same. If one lives in the future, s/he loses the present, and then that future, too.

Several times during history Europe was unified under the umbrella of a single nation-state. That unification was occupation. Now it should not fail by uniting all states together. This unification should become liberation.

I think the left has to carry the struggles on both levels, because one cannot compensate neither substitute the other. The left has to win at the level of nation-states and at the level of the EU as well. Sometimes I fear that the left uses the idea of pan-Europeanism, in order to avoid the harsh reality and hard work of winning at the state level. We need to rethink and recuperate the idea of the state, and with that, the nation-state.

13. In 1986, the Portuguese novelist José Saramago wrote a novel called “The Stone Raft” in which the Iberian Peninsula breaks off from the European continent and this creates all kinds of problems, not only political, administrative, or economic ones but also problems that pertain the very idea of being or becoming a European subject. At least with parts of this story, one might be reminded of the old concept of the exodus - well, here this would be one version of the exodus that at first appears as if it were a natural disaster and of which it is unclear if there will and can ever be a return, but which nonetheless might change things for the better. Might there be a politics of exodus conceivable for the contemporary European context? A politics of exodus different from the strange politics, if it is one, of exiting the EU (not implying, if you excuse the obscenity, that the creation of terminological monsters like Brexodus would immediately be any better than the Brexit)?

Emigration, or exodus, represented an interesting adventure, full of unexpected events, when it happened in the United States, in *terra nullius*. A big melting pot happened then. But today, wherever you go, you go *somewhere*. You don’t go *nowhere*. You go to a consolidated or existing state. There are no longer *terra nullius* in this planet. What happened in the US centuries ago, now is possible

only on another planet. Maybe we can escape to other planets, but you can no longer go somewhere, and begin from the beginning, in a “new land”, be it promised or not, marvel in it because you escaped from the miserable old, and you embraced the new in which only the imagination can be the limit. We do no longer have this situation, or this “luxury”. There is no possibility to go nowhere!

14. Let us touch on a rather “sensitive” topic. Today, academia is almost obsessed with the topic of anti/de-colonialism. Žižek has, we believe, rightfully criticised this approach, claiming it to be liberal, or not radical enough (as all things liberal). The catch here is, and we are very well aware of the sensitivity of this topic, especially since, Kosova has been waging an anti-colonial struggle. In the tradition of Frantz Fanon, how do you see this? (to clarify, Žižek is not only sympathetic, but also fully embraces Fanon’s legacy). And, in Kosova, during the first decade of the 2000, the question of colonialism has been one of the pillars of the intellectual life in the country. And, do you see any similarities between the case of Kosova and those of Latin America or Africa?

Anyone who struggles against oppression and exploitation, that comes from anyone, can learn and benefit a lot from the anti-colonial tradition. It is just that this tradition, both the theoretical texts and practical struggle, have to be studied very closely, on the one hand, and to analyse your situation concretely, on the other hand. And, from these two “sources”, positions and activities that you will commence can be shaped and take form. We, in Kosova, have benefited and learned a lot from this “synthesis”, where on the one hand, we studied the works of Fanon to Albert Memmi, and on the other hand, we’ve had the United Nations, whose mission in Kosova we were confronting, in the name of its nominal values. Just as we opposed the EU mission in the name of the values of the EU itself. So, we took the value principle to oppose the deviant actualisation in the country. In a way, through struggling the EU mission for law (EULEX), we have strengthened the EU, by the way of imposing (even if this was at a very minimal level) the return to their basic principles and foundational values. No matter how paradoxical this might appear.

Here I want to add just one remark. Talking about decolonisation is a very tricky thing, not because one is opposed to it, but because of what do we understand today by it. Decolonisation, in my understanding, is not cultural, nor the celebration or recognition of different identities, or even as a pretext for the return to pre-modern or ancient forms of social organisation. Unfortunately, I see this tendency, which is inherently a-political, to be more and more present. Decolonisation should

be thought and conceived in modernist terms or spirit. It has to do with history (of oppression and exploitation) and socio-economy (of people's lives and relations) rather than culture (as a play of identity and difference).

15. You won the snap parliamentary elections in Kosova and you are set to form the next government. That will be a challenging task, given how profound and systemic problems in that country are rooted, from economy, unemployment, public debt, negotiations with Serbia, et. It is quite a challenging task to say the least. To put it in somehow naive manner: is this a situation you and the Movement can administer and change?

It is true that sometimes we feel like we have ascended on top of a hill, but only to discover that there is a much bigger mountain ahead of us than the hill on the top of which we stand. But, what can one do in a situation like this? One can smile briefly, look at the mountain and do what he does best: one aims to reach the mountain, continue marching forward. So, when the challenge is about fighting crime and corruption, inequality and economic backwardness and underdevelopment, we have our program which requires a lot of will and courage. It also requires a people, which after it has voted, stands on its feet. More than ever we need to be close and stand with the people. And, unlike the past, where the people approached the government which was corrupt, now we will have a government without corruption which will approach or head toward the people. But this government needs a people who will stand on its feet. We need a new culture of governing (and I am well aware of its 'culturalist' connotations), the will for change and the proper program for change, to be tied in an inseparable way. Maybe here, very briefly, I can present the main pillars of our governing program.

The first pillar is that of Developmental State. That implies the abolishment or dismantling of the Privatisation Agency of Kosova. Following this, we will create a Sovereign Fund, which will manage public and state-owned enterprises and properties. Part of this pillar will be the creation of the Developmental Bank, which will have low interest rates, and long greys periods, to support small and middle enterprises, which constitute about 98% of the entire industries in the country. We will link professional education with labour market to bridge skills gap, and, of course, a progressive tax will be introduced.

The second pillar is the Rule (state) of Justice. Above all, this means the ruthless struggle against crime and corruption. This should and will be done through the adoption of an anti-mafia law, the confiscation of illegally obtained properties and wealth, etc.

One of the biggest challenges here will be the struggle against the oligarchs, which have suffocated the potential for the economic growth and development.

The third pillar is the Social State. Some of the measures and policies that will be taken here are: guaranteed employment for the young, in a period of one year. Scholarships for students, building more kindergartens, elementary and high school infrastructure, benefits for students and pensioners, etc.

16. And, the very last question: is there a hope for the EU in the Balkans?

Whenever there is courage, there is hope. There is courage in the Balkans amongst its people, there should be a bit more courage in the EU and we should become what we are: the same continent.

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