



An open letter to all Europhiles

Catharina Sørensen

Dear fellow Europhiles,

Sauve que peut, in the hope that you will then have a chance to save the EU later.

Denmark's new foreign minister Anders Samuelsen (Liberal Alliance) goes under the label 'eurosceptic' in a country that already sports opt-outs from the euro, defence and justice and home affairs. He champions a 'different EU policy', one that will probably bring to an end his country's decade-long pledge to be as close to the EU-core as possible.

Still, Donald Trump's advisors should not put Denmark on their list of countries most likely to withdraw from the Union.

Samuelsen will not cut ties to the EU. That would be political suicide in a continental country of 5.7 million people, 75% of whom agree that Denmark is better off inside, rather than outside the EU. Besides, Samuelsen is convinced that the EU is 'a necessity'.

Earlier this month he set out his EU-vision in the daily *Politiken*. Samuelsen wants a strong but lean EU, one that is reformed (unspecified, but you can be sure Danish demands include welfare restrictions for EU migrants) and focused on 'core business'.

Core business, as seen through a pair of red and white glasses, is only really certain to mean trade and the environment. Non-core business, judging from the persistent opt-outs and political mood, could mean Schengen, closer economic union, defence and perhaps even justice and home affairs (Samuelsen personally advocated giving a 'no' to justice cooperation in a December 2015 referendum) – precisely what many other EU countries today consider core business.

We have yet to see if Denmark will adopt a recalcitrant approach to negotiations in Brussels as part of Samuelsen's divergent EU politics. But even if we don't, Brexit has fuelled strong voices in every corner of the continent who insist on putting the brakes on integration to stop migration, end austerity, keep their countries safe, empower citizens, reverse the train of globalisation, etc. It will always be 'brake time' somewhere in the EU of 2017 – but, despite Trump's gut feeling, the member states are unlikely to throw in the towel. If nothing else, the EU survives precisely because it is 'a necessity' to many countries.

If this seems like a sad state of affairs to Europhiles, it could even be a threat to the Union. Sticking together out of necessity is never the best strategy for a healthy relationship, and it is the last thing the EU needs to exit crisis mode.

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Catharina Sørensen is head of research at Think Tank EUROPA in Copenhagen

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If member states appear to be keeping their seat at the table just to say no, then please, Europhiles, throw in the towel yourselves. Stop indulging in nostalgia and embrace a true multispeed Europe. The willing and the able – which may only be a handful of the original six and a few others – must move ahead and develop the attractive economic and political union that the EU was on track to become two decades ago, and that a majority of Europeans have backed all along. Call it enhanced cooperation if you wish, but the bar, the room for manoeuvre and the level of ambition must be high. The consequence of failing to take action now is to passively witness the EU slide down a slippery slope to oblivion.

Among the willing, simple but firm criteria (to include public support) will decide which countries qualify for membership and which have yet to introduce reforms.

Among the able, tough political decisions will have to be taken.

While the EU of the willing and able get the chance to prove that closer cooperation is indeed worthwhile, the EU of the 27 would continue at a pace that respects the resistance to supranational integration manifested in several countries.

As to the willing and unable, and the able and unwilling, they will be equally anxious about a new core, but today's union would still be there – and perhaps there could even be a place for the United Kingdom somewhere in a multi-tier Europe? And who knows, public opinion may somehow get this better than the relentless search for the lowest common denominator that risks becoming the dominant feature of a big, yet meagre, union. The EU must develop an effective core precisely in order to avoid further fragmentation. In the end, its success could be the necessary draw to induce member states to reconstruct a more cohesive continent.

As for Denmark, once again, to be in or not to be in, that is the question... Looking at the continued high public support for the EU, however, it is perhaps one that should be directed primarily at the increasing number of politicians whose pronouncements are beginning to sound more eurosceptic than those of their electorate.

To conclude, therefore, with a word of caution from the President of the European Council:

The challenges currently facing the European Union are more dangerous than ever before in the time since the signature of the Treaty of Rome. (...) [One] threat is the state of mind of the pro-European elites. A decline of faith in political integration, submission to populist arguments as well as doubt in the fundamental values of liberal democracy are all increasingly visible.

“United we stand, divided we fall”: letter by President Donald Tusk to the 27 EU heads of state or government on the future of the EU before the Malta summit, 31 January 2017.