

European interview

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# “Europeans have learned that they need to build their strategic autonomy”

Interview with Arancha González Laya, Spain's Minister for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation

## **Donald Trump's presidency will leave its mark. What do you expect from future relations between the United States and Europe?**

Over the last four years we have experienced a kind of breakdown in our collaboration with the United States, which was an essential traditional partner for us. We have somewhat lost the soul of the transatlantic relationship. We therefore need to «reset» it, to build a new common agenda. In the past, this agenda was built around the fight against totalitarianism and the extension of democracy in the world. We then worked together to give impetus to globalisation. Now we need a new common project that must «re-humanise» this globalisation. On both sides of the Atlantic we are showing more or less the same symptoms, i.e. a globalisation that speaks of economic transformation, competitiveness and technological change, but which leaves many people behind, giving rise to a very great concentration of wealth, that is causing pain and breaches in our systems. We need to bridge these inequalities. If we rebuild these transatlantic links, we will be stronger to push for cooperation with China, India, Latin American countries, Africa on all the issues that cannot be dealt with at the national level alone, such as climate change, migration issues or the regulation of technology.

## **But the multilateral system is under serious attack. How can a massive return to protectionism be avoided?**

We must begin by explaining why Europe defends multilateralism: it is not because it is naïve, but because multilateralism protects. Some people want to erect barriers. But nationalism does not protect, protectionism does not protect. What protects jobs is the fight against unfair competition, what protects

our citizens is investment in education, in health, in technological skills or in better taxation. We live in a world of interdependence. If we want to fight climate change, it is not enough for us Europeans to decide to reduce our emissions; if we all do so, and at the same time we stimulate innovation, research and the development of new technologies, it will be much more effective. If we want to resolve this Covid-19 pandemic, the aim must not be to vaccinate only Europeans, but to ensure that everyone can be vaccinated. These are some examples of the virtues of multilateralism: we must use it as a learning tool. But this is not enough; we must achieve results, as was the case with the Paris Agreement on climate change. We must now work with the United States to bring them back into this agreement.

## **These discussions take place in a very anxiety-provoking context. How can we reassure citizens?**

There is indeed a sense of loss of control in the face of the scale and speed of change. But there is nothing inevitable about this, we can very well provide answers, take measures that help us transform our economies without leaving anyone behind. This is what we are trying to do in Spain by preparing a plan to revive and transform our economy, co-financed by European reconstruction funds. This plan focuses on four fundamental areas: digital transformation; decarbonisation of our economies - Spain is a high-risk country from a climate point of view -; the fight against extreme poverty by establishing a universal minimum income; and equality between men and women, because discrimination has an enormous cost, not only socially, but also economically.

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**Donald Trump has profoundly damaged international relations. But didn't he also help Europeans to assert themselves?**

It is true that the Sino-American rivalry and the lack of a transatlantic project have forced Europeans to look in the mirror. And the image they saw was that of a Europe that had always advanced on the basis of alliances and was afraid to trust in its own autonomy. We have understood that we have to be more offensive. We were offensive in international trade, when the Americans decided to shut down the WTO's appellate body and not to appoint new members: the Europeans first did what they had always done, trying to convince them to work together to reform the dispute settlement system. But when they realised that the Americans had no intention of moving, they decided to build a new appeal system outside the WTO. When the US decided to withdraw from the Iran agreement, and threatened to sanction European companies that used the dollar in their business dealings with Iran, Europe realised that it had an obligation to push for the internationalisation of the euro: it therefore created an instrument, INSTEX. The European Union continues to build the multilateral system. It is much more complicated than if everyone cooperated, but we have learned that we have to build our strategic autonomy.

**The idea of European strategic autonomy is not unanimously accepted in Europe. Is it really central to Europe's ability to exist on the international stage?**

Absolutely, because it is an expression of the European Union's desire to be a fully-fledged international player and to have a standard-setting role. Strategic autonomy is not strategic autarky; we shall have to continue working with other countries. Strategic autonomy means that we want to have our say that we don't want to simply become the battleground between the Chinese and the Americans. Strategic autonomy in defence does not mean that Europeans are going to withdraw from NATO; but we can and must have an area of defence cooperation within the perimeter of the European Union. Strategic autonomy in technology does not mean that we are going to exclude American, Chinese, Japanese, Indian or other companies from the Community market;

it means that we want to lay down the rules they have to comply with in order to operate in our single market. We used to have two factors of production, labour and capital, now we have a third one called «data»; we have to decide how we want to monetise them. Europe has already legislated on private data. We now need European regulation on industrial data, which are the basis of artificial intelligence, electronic commerce and financial transactions. Data which are currently monetised without control.

**In which areas might we imagine European leadership?**

First of all, there is climate change: it is a subject on which the European Union has real legitimacy because European citizens want it to act as a leader. Then there is technology and its regulation. Finally, there is solidarity: we want to be a leader in international development cooperation and the protection of human rights and values.

**There is a contradiction between this resolve and the multiple breaches of the rule of law that we are witnessing in Europe. Does this not weaken our determination to take a stand on the question of values?**

Absolutely. That is why we are developing instruments internally, to demonstrate that what we want for the world is also what we want for ourselves in Europe. It is a question of coherence. We are not perfect, but we must have the resolve to be credible and, to do so, we must fight against violations of the rule of law within the European Union. This is what we have decided to do with a new mechanism that will enable us to link the disbursement of European funds to the respect of European values, including the fight against corruption. We have also just mandated the European Commission to make regular reports on the situation of the rule of law in each Member State; we are leaving it to a supranational institution to give us some kind of self-scrutiny on the rule of law. In Spain, the Commission has been able to access all the information it needed; we have nothing to hide, and if we have things to improve, it is considered good to receive recommendations.

**Is a powerful Europe a real subject, or a French fantasy to recover its lost grandeur?**

Europe may not be aware of it, but it is a power. That is why it is so attractive, why it carries so much weight in multilateral relations, why so many countries or regions want to enter into trade agreements with it. Europe is unique because it is not one country but a union of countries. So its expression is sometimes a little different. But that is also its strength, the fact that its Member States have voluntarily decided to unite so that they can exert their influence in the world.

**However Brexit might weaken the Union on issues like defence, power and autonomy ...**

That's right, the European Union is smaller without the UK. But the UK is going to be much smaller outside the European Union; that's not much consolation, but it's a reality. This departure is the result of a will expressed in a referendum. But I think the United Kingdom is beginning to understand that outside the European Union it is very cold.

**How do we overcome identity reflexes and make European diversity an asset and not a weakness in the face of our partners?**

This is a very important issue, which we are also working on in Spain, because the strength of our young democracy depends on our capacity to accept our diversity and to manage it in order to build a foundation of unity. It is a project of power and strength in diversity, and this requires an enormous amount of conviction, consensus-building and respect for others, which must be built in terms of citizenship. We can speak one language or another, we can have one feeling of belonging or another, we can be from the north or the south, we can love this football team or that one, but we all have this condition of citizenship that we must use as a cement. This diversity is a resource; let's use it to the benefit of all. Spain, for example, is located in the extreme south-west of Europe. Because of its history, it has very special ties with Latin America. Because of its geographical position, it has very close ties with

the African continent, with which it has not had any conflicts. It must be able to use these relations to build a bridge between these regions and the European Union. If we add up all the privileged links that the Member States have throughout the world, we find a source of the European Union's power.

**High Representative Josep Borrell is Spanish. Does he have a specific relationship with his country?**

It is first of all a source of pride, and the fact that we speak the same language, that we know each other, necessarily makes things easier. But if he were of another nationality, we would have the same respect for the function itself. The External Action Service, the High Representative, is the institutions, and the institutions help by procedures and transparency to achieve legitimacy. But we cannot simply place our external policy in the institutions; we must also share a project.

**What image do you retain of the pandemic: solidarity or the exacerbation of selfishness between States?**

Initially, Europeans approached the pandemic as a health crisis, so it had to be dealt with at national or regional level. But this illusion only lasted a short time, because it very quickly became clear that the pandemic was impacting on three major European Union policies: mobility, and therefore the Schengen agreement; the internal market, when some Member States began to restrict exports of medical equipment and medicines; and economic and monetary union. Spain then decided to invest in a common response, and the Europeans quickly built this response, in less than three months, in the form of a recovery plan that provided for the issue of a common debt. We hope that this decision will not be an isolated act, but rather that it reflects a change in attitude towards European integration. We must build this structure based on solidarity and responsibility. And therefore on trust.

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**Europeans have not always been able to agree regarding a new migration policy. What is your point of view on this?**

Migration is a good example of how to combine responsibility and solidarity. The right balance needs to be struck between several elements: the development of legal channels for migration to Europe; the fight against trafficking in human beings, acting where criminal networks operate; much closer cooperation with third countries, of origin or transit. We believe strongly in the development of the European Union's neighbour-

hood, both to the east and to the south. Finally, we must scrupulously respect the commitments we have made internationally in terms of refuge and asylum. So we need an intelligent combination of these four ingredients, with mechanisms that allow us to deal with the issue of irregular migrants in a humane, responsible and supportive manner. This is a complicated issue; otherwise we would have already solved it.

*Interview realised by Isabelle Marchais and translated by Helen Levy*

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