

European interview  
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## «Europe will not survive if it does not evolve»

**In his speech at the Sorbonne on 25 April, Emmanuel Macron said that Europe was «mortal». Do you share this existential concern?**

Yes, Europe is mortal. It is important to remember this, especially at a time when its values are under attack. They are under attack from outside, if we think of the war in Ukraine, the challenges posed by Russia's interference and the actions of foreign powers trying to influence our democratic elections. But they are also being challenged from within: we see it in the European Parliament and in some Member States, with governments trying to oppose or undermine the foundations of the European Union. These attempts could succeed if we are not strong enough to counter them. Imagine a European Union in which we could no longer move forward, in which we could no longer define new projects, despite not being satisfied with the status quo. There are areas in which we might need to go further, such as defence, and areas in which we might need to allow for more national flexibility, such as agriculture. If we don't question the situation, if we don't manage to set a course, we shall be heading for disaster. Europe will not survive if it does not evolve.

**Against this backdrop, the forthcoming European elections will be particularly important. And they could result in a clear upsurge for the far right...**

The far right is on the rise, not everywhere, but in France in particular, as well as in countries such as Portugal, which until now have been relatively unaffected by this phenomenon. In Italy, it has shifted from one party to another, in a system of communicating vessels: Giorgia Meloni is riding high, but she is taking votes from the League (Lega). This development is clearly worrying. The more extremists there are in Parliament, the more

complicated it will be to build or find compromises to advance the European cause.

**Even if the majority remains pro-European, should we expect the next Parliament to become more right-wing?**

The pro-European right is sometimes tempted to imitate the far right because it thinks it can win back its electorate. However, the French example has clearly shown that this does not work. Moreover, pro-Europeans are in the majority in most of the Member States: now they must go out and vote. Abstention is a huge problem because it allows extremists to win more seats. I do not agree that we should take it for granted that the far right will get stronger in the next elections. Look at Germany. When people heard about the AfD's (Alternative für Deutschland) conference on «remigration», the plan to expel all foreigners and German citizens of foreign origin, there were massive demonstrations in the streets, and awareness was triggered among the population. As a result, the far right is declining in the opinion polls. We have to fight, because if we give up, we have already lost. All democrats obviously stand in solidarity with our colleague Matthias Ecke, who was attacked in Dresden. This shows that democratic gains are under pressure. As democrats, we support each other in the face of extremist attacks.

**The Renew group, to which your party the FDP (Freie Demokratische Partei) belongs, could lose its position as the third party in the hemicycle. Is one of the reasons for this the divisions within the European liberal family?**

I do not agree with the narrative that Renew is divided. All the political groups are divided and Renew is no more divided than the others. The Socialists are divided on agricultural issues, the Christian Democrats on economic issues, not a

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single group in the European Parliament agrees on everything. And that is normal, because MEPs come from different countries, different cultures and different national situations. Renew is present in 24 out of 27 countries, so sometimes there are divisions within the group on certain issues, and some MEPs do not vote in the same way as the rest of the group. But it is extremely united on the fundamentals that led to its creation, namely a very humanist approach to politics and a belief that Europe should be competitive and economically strong.

#### **What makes the FDP unique within Renew?**

As elected liberals, we have a particular position; whereas in some countries there is a social liberal party and also a right-wing liberal party, the FDP unites the two. We are generally further to the right than our French colleagues on economic issues and further to the left than them regarding social questions. We place high value on freedom in both an economic and a societal sense. For example, we are in favour of same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, we are in favour of liberalising cannabis, and we have rather liberal positions on immigration. On this subject, we are in favour of economic immigration to make up for labour shortages. We also have a humanitarian responsibility towards those who are persecuted in their own countries and fleeing war. But we must send back those who do not respect the rules of our countries, who do not have the right to stay or who do not want to integrate, as well as criminals.

#### **You are standing again in the European elections. What are your priorities for the next term?**

The first is to take Europe forward regarding defence. This is obviously closely linked to the war in Ukraine, because this has highlighted that we are still partly dependent on aid from the United States. But we do not know what will happen in the forthcoming American elections. I believe, and this is the FDP's programme, that Europe must be more sovereign when it comes to military capabilities. This means

more investment in this area, more cooperation between Member States, including in the training of troops and soldiers in the use of drones and other new technologies. The first objective would be to be able to rapidly deploy troops in the field, but in my opinion, we should go further and set ourselves the long-term goal of creating a European army. Such an army should then be equipped with a common command placed under the control of the European Parliament: this would probably be an unthinkable prospect for the French, but it is shared by the German political parties who want a European army. Germany has a complicated history, and one of the lessons it has learnt is that we must not place all the power in the hands of one person who decides everything.

#### **Emmanuel Macron supports a European preference for military purchases in Europe and defends the idea of a European defence loan. What do you think of these ideas, which are not by any means unanimously supported in Germany?**

The question of a European loan remains complicated for the Germans, because for us the European Union should not go into debt. Having said that, the idea of a European defence loan requires debate, because we need investment and therefore money. As for a European preference for military purchases, we could subscribe to it, but not immediately, because the most important thing right now is not to buy European but to help the Ukrainians. If, for example, we need to buy arms or munitions and they are not available in the EU, then we should buy them elsewhere. But in the long term, if we can achieve sufficient production capacity in Europe and perhaps even support European champions, let's go for it. I do not believe, however, that we should abolish all competition in the armaments sector. Airbus would not be as good as it is without competition from Boeing. I would also say that «European preference» should not end up as «let's buy French» or «let's buy German». Behind all this is an industrial strategy that should not be guided by national, but by European interests. We need to speed things up and

find a common path. Member States, however, have different sensitivities on the subject: four of them are not members of NATO and neutrality is part of the Irish Constitution. To move forward more quickly on defence, we need to see if we can't, as we did with the euro or Schengen, deepen cooperation with many countries, but not with 27.

#### **What about the Franco-German dimension?**

We cannot do without it. Europe will only move forward if France and Germany agree and show the way.

#### **Is Europe up to the requirements, the risks and the challenges posed by the war in Ukraine?**

Europe reacted quickly, and well. But it must not slacken in its efforts; it must continue. There are strategic and military needs, such as the Patriot or Taurus missiles, for which we must do more and respond to the requests of the Ukrainians. In the end, the Ukrainians are defending our European Union and our freedom. I don't believe at all in the theory that if Putin were to win in Ukraine he would stop there. No, he would not stop there, he would continue, including in EU countries. Our colleagues in the Baltic States are afraid, deeply afraid. Putin is uncontrollable, so nothing can be ruled out. That is why Ukraine must absolutely win this war.

#### **In addition to defence, you mentioned other priorities for the next term of office ...**

The second one is competitiveness. We need to be very clear on this point: it has not been a priority during Ursula von der Leyen's term of office. We need to change our approach on this issue and tackle European bureaucracy, excessive documentation and reporting requirements as a matter of priority. We shall need proposals from the European Commission after Ms von der Leyen's departure.

#### **Are you suggesting that Mrs von der Leyen might not be reappointed to head the Commission?**

Look at the Sorbonne speech, Emmanuel Macron wants to change the narrative of Europe. When he wanted to change the narrative of his government, what did he do? He changed Prime Minister! And there's the answer. The EPP will retain the Presidency of the Commission. But I'd be happy to have someone else in the job. Mrs von der Leyen is very good at representing the European Union on the world stage, but her first task is to advance European law, and she has not focused on the right priorities. Admittedly, she talked more about defence when the war broke out in Ukraine, which is a good thing. But she has failed to change course on competitiveness issues, and she has let Frans Timmermans[1] continue as if nothing were wrong. Companies from third countries, particularly multinationals, are not investing enough in Europe because the rules are too strict. So, in the long term, we run the risk of losing jobs, particularly in industry, and of losing income, and therefore the opportunity to invest in social welfare, education and so on. So, the lack of foreign investment in Europe is a real problem. One of the major challenges of the next mandate will be to apply the rules we have adopted. For example, we need to see whether the implementation of the Green Deal is in keeping with expectations, or whether we need to reassess the rules. Regarding the end of the internal combustion engine in 2035, for example, we should see whether the projections come true, and ask ourselves what we have to do if they do not. Will we have to distribute more aid, invest more in research, impose constraints on Member States? Electric car charging points are mainly being built in three countries: the Netherlands, Germany and France. What are the countries doing? What do we need to do to make it work elsewhere? There is a real East/West divide on this issue.

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**Should we not rethink the common trade policy to adapt it to new geopolitical constraints?**

Europe's economic success is based on trade. So, the right response cannot be to have less trade. On the contrary, we need to forge trade agreements with our strategic democratic partners around the world. If we don't manage to do this with the United States, Canada or Australia, it will be a failure. It is imperative that we move forward on this.

**It is not necessarily a question of trading less, but of doing it differently, by insisting on mirror clauses, reciprocity, fair manufacturing conditions, etc.**

We need to improve the rules and conditions of production in terms of labour law, ecology and the fight against climate change. But what does a mirror clause mean — asking third countries to apply exactly the same rules as the European Union? It is a little naive to think that this would be possible. A great deal of progress can already be made with the certification of production conditions. We also need to combat unfair competition, such as that from Chinese electric cars, which are heavily subsidised. But China is the biggest market in the world, and it is important for our companies to be able to export there. I wouldn't say that everything is simple and easy when it comes to trade, so we have to try to resolve the problems by relying on the WTO and the international rules to which we have subscribed. Another factor weighing on European competitiveness is the excessive price of energy. As a German liberal, I agree with Emmanuel Macron on the nuclear issue. The does not mean discussing old power stations that have been closed down, but about a new way of producing electricity, thanks to smaller plants that use technologies in which Europeans are at the cutting edge. Fear of nuclear power is deeply rooted in German society and there is currently no appetite to invest in this area. Other countries have decided to hedge their bets on it. That is their right and, alongside renewables, it is an option that should not be neglected in Europe

because it is a carbon-neutral form of energy. Even though we should not ignore the problems of the waste it produces ....

**And your third main priority?**

The third aspect is the defence of the rule of law against those who wish to damage the European cause. We have to tell the truth: far-right parties do not want to serve the people of Europe, they do not want to serve the European cause, they want to serve their own interests or those of certain third countries. In this respect, they represent a real danger within our continent itself. We must not close our eyes to this. It is very important for the European Union to guarantee the fundamental rights of European citizens, whether with or against their governments. We achieved a major victory during this term of office with the adoption of the conditionality mechanism, which makes it possible to block European funds be granted to states that do not respect fundamental rights and the basic principles of democracy. The countries that are breaching the rule of law in the Union right now are Viktor Orban's Hungary and Robert Fico's Slovakia. I would say that not everything is rosy in Greece either, with members of parliament being spied on by their own government and the freedom of the press diminishing. The situation is not yet comparable to that in Hungary, but we need to be vigilant.

**Europe could be enlarged over the next few years to include new countries. Is it ready for this?**

We cannot proceed with further enlargements without first making the necessary institutional reforms. The European Union will not be able to welcome other countries as it stands while it is already not functioning correctly with 27 Member States. In particular, we need to get rid of the unanimity requirement. We also need a stronger European Parliament, which can better control the Commission by being able to investigate and summon the Commissioners. We can draw inspiration from

many other national parliaments, which have greater rights vis-à-vis their governments than we do.

**Is it fair to say, as some believe, that Ukraine was promised membership of the European Union too quickly?**

No, because it was the right decision to grant Ukraine candidate country status. This means that

we shall be able to help it better. But it will take many years, even decades, for Ukraine to join the European Union.

*Interview by Isabelle Marchais*

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