

On Wednesday, 25 June 2014, on the eve of a critical EU Summit, Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras spoke at a dinner in Brussels hosted by the AJC Transatlantic Institute. The event was attended by Ambassadors, MEPs, senior EU officials, the media and leaders of civil society.

Fighting Our Common Future

Dear friends, Two decades ago, a simplistic, but very attractive theory prevailed world-wide: It claimed that, as the world comes closer, as the international markets and the internet bring people together, this will resolve, almost automatically, all problems of the past: There is not going to be any war, any bigotry, any discrimination against anybody.

As societies become more dependent on each other, the theory went on, people will come to know and appreciate more their peers across the borders in many occasions even the borders will become irrelevant and the negative stereotypes will be brushed away by better communication and better understanding. Or so the story had it. But things didn't work that way. Nations didn't disappear. On the contrary, today we have about 50% more national states around the world, than what we used to have twenty-five years ago! Indeed some national states integrated with others, especially in Europe.

But even this did not change their basic priority of defending their national interests. They only adopted to do so collectively, along with others, rather than on their own, against each other. They realized that it was in their national interest to provide for better security collectively, rather than individually. They realized they had much better prospects of long lasting growth and prosperity, if they integrated their economies, rather than trying to compete in the world individually. And they knew they would improve their world influence, if they pulled their resources together, rather than try to do it separately, each state on its own. So, on the one hand democratic states remained committed to their national interest! But on the other, they reshaped their agendas, to allow for new opportunities and to face new perils, in a new, more demanding, competitive world environment.

The old menaces of humanity, however, are still here: Wars still happen and they are very bloody. Civil wars are, unfortunately, high on the agenda and they are getting really ugly. Societies still fall apart. Borders are still disputed. Racism is here, reappearing in its old ugly face or taking new faces, equally repulsive. Economic crises torment nations or whole regions. Waves of refugees still threaten to destabilize societies around the world. Is History repeating itself? Are we still getting some of the same? Is there no prospect for a better world? Is there no glimpse of Hope? My understanding is that the world is changing, but nothing good will ever come automatically. Yes, there is room for Hope! But we have to fight for it. We have to win it every step of the way. Not just pray and wait for it. We have to build a better world, not just expect it to happen.

So did we learn something in the last few decades? Yes, we did: We learned that globalization is not going to solve all our problems on its own. We need to establish our new world on a number of founding principles, that should not be taken for granted.

* Firstly, democracy! It is much more than a word. It is certainly more than a list of constitutional principles. It is based on respect for the individual, trust to the collective will of

each society, with universal rules of justice applying to all. It is also based on incentives for ethical standards: honesty, responsibility, sincerity.

* Secondly, solidarity: We have common enemies to fight: Populism, extremism, racism of all kinds, terrorism and social deprivation. And we specially have to act together, in order to save our middle class. From Aristotle, to Diderot and Max Weber, there is a unanimous understanding that a strong middle class is the stable social basis for a functioning democracy. We cannot let our middle classes be wiped out. We cannot be indifferent even when this happens to our neighbors. Because when middle classes collapse, the foundations of democracy are undermined. And this can be detrimental to any individual democracy, but also contaminating beyond any country's borders. Last century, in the 20's and the 30's, democracies in Europe started falling one by one. Eventually, they were completely wiped out by a new devastating War, in the aftermath of a world economic Depression. European nations found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle, of less hope, more hatred, less trust to each other, more fear from their neighbors, less self confidence and more mutual suspicion. We all know where this lead to. This pattern should never be allowed to swallow us up again.

* Thirdly, of all the evils, three are the most deadly we should relentlessly defend ourselves against: Extremism, racism and terrorism. Democratic societies are based on individual freedom. We cannot even attempt to sensor peoples' beliefs or peoples' emotions. But there is no tolerance for racism! There is no tolerance for terrorism. And there is no tolerance for extremists advocating the break of the rule of law. Democracies persecute actions, not convictions. And democracies are strong enough to fight their enemies without becoming like them.

--We know how racism starts: Firstly, with the emergence of negative stereotypes against a specific group of the population. Then, we have abusing such stereotypes to systematically treat members of this group as "scapegoats for all evils". Then we have extensive discriminations against them. Then we have open persecution and incrimination of their identity. And lastly, we have holocausts! We cannot allow things to evolve in such a hideous manner. We have to stop racism, before it starts and certainly before it gets out of control. All kinds of racism are unacceptable. Anti-semitism is intolerable! Equally intolerable and unthinkable are all kinds of genocides.

We owe, at least that much, to the memories of the victims of Auschwitz and Dahau: never to allow such horrendous crimes to take place again. And never to forget them! By the way, we are now enhancing our law against racism in Greece, with strict references given to Genocides and the Holocaust. Such bitter memories should be carved on stone! So that our societies never forget. It is not only an obligation to the innocent who perished then. It is also an obligation to the present and future generations who have to remember and protect themselves, from the repetition of such atrocities.

In short, there is absolutely no tolerance for racism. As simple as that.

--There is no tolerance for terrorism either! Citizens cannot live under fear. Democracy is based on Freedom. And public security is a necessary prerequisite of Freedom because there is no Freedom where fear prevails. Whoever advocates terrorist acts, or defends them, is not upholding the responsibilities of Democracy. We have to be clear about it.

--And finally, there is no tolerance for breaking down law and order. Democracy is about the rule of law, binding for everyone, with no exceptions: Rich and poor, “big shots” and ordinary citizens alike, the opposition and the government! Nobody is above the Law! If the rule of law is not observed by everyone, it breaks down. If it does, democracy is seriously fractured. Upholding the law is not a legalistic exercise. It is an ethical attitude: reflecting respect for the democratic order and trust to society’s collective will. Democracy cannot stand without such a public ethos. Socrates taught us a lot of things. Probably the most precious is the one he taught us with his own life: While in prison, waiting for his execution, he was offered a chance to escape. He refused it outright! He also had to observe the law! And he drank the poison. He died once. But his example became immortal for eternity, as an ethical foundation of democracy.

* There is a fourth requirement: sustainable, long term growth! Without it, democracies and open market economies will not last long. You can certainly have growth without democracy for some time. But you cannot have democracy without growth for a long time. Growth is the breeding ground for democracies to prosper. The opposite allows enemies of democracy to emerge.

Ladies and gentlemen, Seventy years ago, Greece fought passionately against the Nazis. It paid a very high toll in human casualties, let alone the devastation of hundreds of villages and provincial towns across its territory. 10% of our population lost their lives in just a few years! It was a nightmare, and we will always remember it as such. We have recently gone through a prolonged recession that hit hard on our society, in particular on our middle class and its prosperity. It generated unprecedented levels of unemployment, especially youth unemployment. It impoverished a large part of our population. It has been tough for most citizens and very bitter for all of our society. In fact, just two years ago, many “outsiders” were predicting a Weimar Republic type of collapse in Greece with extremism gaining over and crushing liberal democracy. But we proved them wrong! Extremism gained some ground, but never gained the momentum.

Today, extremism of all kinds has started losing steam. Social cohesion, although seriously traumatized, eventually withstood the pressures. Democracy, although taking a lot of beating by populism of all kinds, stood on its feet. Economic recovery has started! Unemployment reversed its trend and growth is approaching. Greeks withstood very trying moments with courage and dignity. The fight is still on. We are not done yet. But we are gaining ground. This is a fight of hope against fear this is a fight of liberal democracy against extremism and populism. This is a fight of our new United Europe against the ghosts of our past. This is the fight of human freedom and dignity against terror and tyranny. This is an uncompromising fight: Democracy will prevail. But to do so, we have to convince our peoples about four things:

--Firstly, that democracy is not a breeding ground for extremism. It is what guarantees freedom, justice and social cohesion.

--Secondly that Democracy is not the breeding ground for populist opportunists it is the home of free citizens practicing democratic ethos.

--Thirdly, that Democracy is not the breeding ground of social deprivation, but the launching pad of growth and prosperity.

--And lastly, that reforms keep democracy alive and the economy functioning. Reforms are not an “ordeal” for the people, but a salvation for our societies. Four concepts sum up our agenda for the “brave new world” we are facing: Freedom, justice, social cohesion and growth promoting reforms! Or alternatively: Democracy and solidarity among democracies, fighting together against extremism, against racism, against terrorism, against stagnation! We cannot choose some of these “enemies”. We must fight against all of them! And we cannot do it separately. We can only win them together! This is the roadmap to our future. It is not easy. We have to fight every step of the way. And we can make it! By the way, this is not lying ahead of us. It is already happening! We are in the middle of this battle. We are gaining ground. And we will win it to the end! Thank you