

The following extract is taken from

Driving the EU Forward
Straight Talks with Maroš Šefčovič

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PROLOGUE

Why this book?

To be at the heart of the European Commission, with a chance to shape the future of our continent, is exciting. And, at times, frustrating.

One of the most frequent criticisms of the EU is that it is remote and out-of-touch with the realities of citizens' everyday lives, that decisions are taken in 'Brussels' with little or no perceived democratic link or accountability.

As Commissioner in charge of administration and inter-institutional relations, I have taken a number of initiatives to boost both representative democracy, through greater parliamentary oversight and participatory democracy, via the strengthened involvement of citizens in setting the EU agenda.

But very early on I also came to realise how difficult it is for the vast majority of our fellow citizens, those with no direct contact with the EU institutions, to understand how the EU functions, and how they can relate to it.

Part of my daily work as a European Commissioner consists of giving 'straight talks' to a wide range of audiences – including students, journalists, NGOs, parliamentarians and government officials – explaining what it is I do as a Commissioner and how the EU impacts their lives. But people expect more – and quite rightly so. They need to know what can be done for and, most importantly, by them. They need to take ownership of the EU project.

The EU system is complex and therefore easily misrepresented by populist parties and some of the media alike. This complexity can sometimes act as a deterrent to citizens. But this complexity need not be an insurmountable obstacle, if the mechanisms are clearly explained and the purpose of EU policy discussed more extensively and collectively owned.

I am hoping that this book will help people understand how the EU works, what has been achieved, the main challenges ahead of us and – most importantly of all – what can and should be done to reconnect the EU with the people of Europe.

Why now?

We are at a pivotal point in time, where the involvement of citizens is more than ever key to the successful development of the EU. 2014 is a year of changes. In the months leading up to the European Parliament elections, EU politics and the EU project have become hot topics. For the first time, the issue of the relationship between the results of the elections and the choice of the next President of the Commission has been on the agenda, with each European-level political party putting forward a lead ‘candidate’ for the presidential role. While this relationship is, at the time of writing, a ‘work in progress’, there can be no doubt that the rules of the game are changing, and in the direction of more democratic accountability.

All this can help move us away from the perception of a ‘bureaucratic’ type of European integration, to a more ‘democratic’ type. But this comes with a condition. Our fellow citizens need clear political alternatives to be offered to them. Pro-European forces must show distinctly and distinctively what it is they offer their electorates. They need to show in particular how their respective programmes can provide a response to the economic and social situation which is causing great distress to many in the Member States.

For we simply cannot afford to let Eurosceptic or, even worse, anti-European parties dictate the political narrative. I say this because in the last few years I have witnessed that there are fewer political leaders actually engaging – even critically – in the defence of the EU project, however it may be defined.

We are risking a lot more than we may imagine: younger generations are not necessarily fully aware of the dark chapters

we have closed thanks to EU integration – world wars, hatreds between nations, state-sponsored racism, anti-semitism, totalitarianism, fascism and genocide. I say this very deliberately: if we don't watch out in these turbulent times, anti-European forces could well take us back to the darkest hours of protectionism and nationalism and, as a result, to a weaker, less progressive, less tolerant and less free Europe. That Europe, I can tell you, is still fresh in the minds of people like me who – little more than two decades ago – were living behind the Iron Curtain. I shall come back to that experience later on in the book.

I must add, also, that in looking at the options ahead of us we should always take into consideration the 'cost of non-Europe'. And I say this because we don't necessarily make this salutary 'mind switch'. What would we do for instance, what price would we and our companies have to pay, if our goods could not circulate freely in our 500-million strong market? How would we react if we could not travel, study, work or settle in other EU countries, if we had to endure border controls again? What if we had to change currencies each time we went to a different Eurozone country (with a strict limit as to how much money we could take with us)? And if we had to resort – as in the past – to endless battles of competitive devaluations between our national currencies and experience soaring (imported) inflation as a result? And these are but a few examples...

The European elections, and beyond

With this in mind, pro-EU forces must take the lead. There is no alternative. Not just as a 'one-off' in the 2014 European Parliament elections, but in political campaigning in all our countries in the months and years to come, we need to speak up for the actual and potential achievements of our collective efforts, the successes achieved together, the relevance of the EU to the lives of each and every citizen, the ways to involve people further

(directly or indirectly) in the decision-making – and we must offer solutions as to what should be changed or improved in the near future. Our message to EU citizens should be clear: we are working for and with you. And we need to do more still. We need to show that the EU is able to respond to our citizens' concerns, and that their votes do matter; we need to demonstrate that they can have an impact on the future, depending on who they choose to represent them.

Through these 2014 European elections – with parties for the first time putting up candidates for the post of President of the Commission and with future Commissioners themselves standing for election (all of this thanks to sheer democratic pressure going beyond Treaty requirements!); through members of the College being designated by the people's representatives; and beyond 2014, through national, regional and local elections and the participation of these representatives in EU policy-making, at all levels of democracy, we can work together towards a more democratic and political union.

This book is intended as a modest but engaged contribution to this debate, based on the 'straight talks' I have had with a range of audiences inside and – mostly – outside the Commission, and on looking back at what a five-year term at the helm of the EU has taught me. In this book I want to propose the thread of a positive agenda to drive the EU forward, in order to restore jobs, growth, citizens' involvement and much-needed confidence and pride in our continent.