

LSE European Institute “Perspectives on Europe” public lecture

The English Patient? The UK's Desire to Redefine its Relationship with the EU and Germany's Role

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Thursday 25 June 2015

Check against delivery

http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2015/150625_StM_R_LSE.html

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the European Institute for inviting me to take part in its renowned series "Perspectives on Europe". As a student, I always wanted to study at LSE. This dream never materialised. Now I come back as a member of the German Government, allowed to give a speech which people are willing to listen to. That is even better! It is an honour and pleasure to be here.

Perspectives on Europe is a broad title. There are many things we could talk about: Greece and its prospects in the eurozone spring to mind immediately. Another issue which worries me a lot is the eroding consensus over the basis of our common values in Europe, like democracy and rule of law.

All of these issues would be worth a speech on their own. Today, however, I want to focus on a topic which also has a lot to do with European unity: the UK's desire to redefine its relationship with the EU. Allow me to give you a rough idea of the German and my own perspective.

Sometimes it helps to change perspective to get a clearer view of a subject. That is also true for our views on Europe.

You might have wondered why the title of my speech refers to The English Patient. Some of you might have seen the film. It is a quite popular romantic drama. I am not quite sure if this really foreshadows the negotiations on redefining the UK's relationship with the EU. Even if there might be some drama in it...

But that's not why I chose the title. In the movie the main character, the English patient, is in search of his identity after a serious accident. As his memories of the past come back, he understands that identity is more than a question of nationality. Who we are and what we feel like is rather a question of common interests and values.

So there are parallels. By choosing this title I wanted to point to the fact that, finally, it is the British people who will have to make up their minds on the extent to which they feel a sense of European identity. The British voters will have to decide whether their future lies within or outside the European Union. Whether they want to enjoy the benefits and also accept the costs of

European integration. Whether they want to continue to have a say on the responses to common European challenges.

That's neither a European nor a German decision. But if you ask me: the German answer to the question which the British Government wants to put to their people – "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union?" – would be a very clear one: YES!

We want an active and strong United Kingdom in the European Union! The UK has so much to contribute. Without the UK Europe would be poorer. We need you in the EU because we share a lot of common interests – look for instance at our common interest in completing the internal market.

We need the UK in the EU because we share common values. Europe is not only about common economic interests. We share another common basis: our European values. Democracy, the rule of law, cultural and religious diversity, the protection of minorities – all these values bind us together. Without the UK, our union of values would be weakened.

We need the UK in the EU because we face very serious common challenges: at present, a whole range of crises are placing the EU under stress. Look at, for instance, the challenging security policy environment in Eastern Europe or terrorist activities which threaten our open societies.

Europe has a vital interest in speaking with one voice in times of crisis. We have to send a clear signal of strength and determination, because all those challenges can only be addressed effectively if we stand united.

We simply have to acknowledge that very often it is better to do things together than to stay apart. You know that much better than I do, when you imagine Scotland inside or outside the UK.

The same is true for the EU: each EU member state is simply more influential when acting through the EU than merely by itself. In the global pond, we are all pretty small fish on our own! But a common EU position can hardly be ignored – or at least is more difficult to ignore than the solitary opinion of just one country. Only if we act together can the EU be a true global player – on a par with the US and China.

And by the way, the impressive review of the balance of competences undertaken by the British Government has clearly shown how reasonable a European approach is in most of the areas covered by the European treaties.

Now – many will argue: yes, we want to stay in the European Union, but it must be a different, a better European Union.

Whether or not there is room for improvement with regard to the European Union – I will come to that in a minute – it is worth looking at all the benefits and advantages we already enjoy from European integration. And it is not merely about 70 years of peace in Western Europe and 25 years of a reunified Europe.

There are much more concrete benefits like being able to travel freely around Europe, studying wherever you want to and even obtaining recognition for your foreign degrees at home.

I am also thinking of the huge advantages which the internal market brings to our companies, leading to an intensification of trade relations among member states and an enormous increase in wealth. I am referring to the gains for internal security provided through a common policy on justice and home affairs. I could mention many more benefits.

We tend to concentrate on the flaws rather than the advantages. This is in our human nature. I am no exception. Personally, I very much enjoy getting angry about things I disagree with! But it is our task as politicians to explain the benefits of the EU to the public.

For me, Europe is much more than a place for detail-worshipping technocrats who might look up to someone like Sir Humphrey from the great BBC show Yes Minister. It is not true that Europe is designed to spread uniformity and harmonise all differences between the member states.

On the contrary, Europe is the dream of diversity, the guarantor of our individual ways of life, our life insurance in this turbulent age of globalisation! We ought to remind ourselves of that each time we doubt the value of Europe.

That was the rosy part of the picture! I cannot deny that the European Union as a provider of growth, wealth and jobs has lost a lot of its appeal during the economic and financial crisis of recent years. And the process of restoring this appeal clearly has not yet been successful.

The European Union will be measured against its ability to effectively tackle the problems of our times and to satisfy the expectations of its citizens. Especially the younger generation rightly expect more from the European Union. That is why the problem of youth unemployment will be the litmus test for the European Union as a project of the future.

Of course there are many other issues where the EU needs to become more focused, more streamlined and less detached from the needs of its citizens:

We need to deepen the internal market, in particular regarding its digital economy. Cross-border online sales must be made easier. European industry must become fully digitalised, the fragmented telecommunications market needs reform. We need to reduce the administrative burden and improve our regulatory frameworks, in particular concerning small and medium sized enterprises.

I am convinced we will be able to make these improvements. The new Commission has understood the message and many initiatives are already underway. The last few months have brought a remarkable policy shift in the European Union that has been overdue for a long time. With its new Strategic Agenda, the European Union is putting the emphasis on promoting growth and employment and strengthening social cohesion.

Structural reform, strong investment and consolidation of national budgets are the cornerstones of this new agenda.

That shows that the crisis has already been a catalyst for reform – even without a treaty revision. And by the way: this has a lot to do with a number of initiatives and ideas proposed by the British Government. You have already achieved a lot.

Many more steps to make Europe work better are to come, and may already be in place at the time of the referendum in the UK. If this progress can convince any voter in the UK to put their cross in the yes-box, then all the better!

But let us be clear: all of this has nothing to do with a complete reset of the European Union. This has nothing to do with the foundation of European integration. All these improvements must not endanger our community of law based on our shared fundamental values with the fundamental freedoms as the basis for the common market.

We have a very strong view on protecting the EU's integrity. A "European Union à la carte" is not in line with our idea of a community of law. We regard the EU as a team. Team efforts require –

as you all know – compromises from each member. Teams usually outperform individual efforts in the end.

Yes, I have to admit: sometimes it is difficult and takes a lot of time to reach a compromise among the 28 member states of the European Union. Let me tell you: Council meetings in Brussels can be very boring events. Europe might even look like it has stalled sometimes. But it's worth the effort. In the end it is always best to resolve conflicts peacefully in conference rooms.

Let me be clear: we want the UK to stay in the EU. If the UK wants to redefine its relationship with the EU, it has to put forward concrete proposals. Germany – together with the 26 other member states – is willing to discuss these proposals constructively.

Let us not deceive ourselves, this process won't be easy. Negotiations on a treaty reform are complicated and usually take a long time. The last round of reforms that led to the Lisbon Treaty lasted ten years.

The negotiation process has to be inclusive. As the UK wants to redefine its relationship with the EU, the matter affects every member of the club, not just some. And the process will also have to include the European Commission and the European Parliament. We understand that there are high expectations in the UK regarding our role in the negotiation process. Germany will play its role in that process – and it will play it constructively. But the EU institutions are in the driver's seat when it comes to finding a sustainable solution which is acceptable for all partners.

There is, however, one thing that we have to keep in mind over the course of the negotiations: the world around us will not stop due to this process. The challenges for all European countries remain and new challenges may arise.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, sometimes it helps to change your perspective to better understand a subject. It is essential that we exchange our views and try to understand the positions of our partners. That is why I came to London this week. I am not here just to give a speech and leave afterwards. I am here to learn from you about your concerns, about your ideas, about your views on Europe.

And I am quite sure that this is also the reason why the Queen is on an official visit to Germany this week. It is a pity that I am missing the Queen's official visit to Berlin. It is her fifth state visit to Germany in the last 50 years, so the Queen is probably quite familiar with the German perspective. Recently a big German newspaper even asked "How German is the Queen?" – referring to her German ancestry. Even if I cannot be with the Queen today: it is a pleasure to be here with you to learn more about your perspective, the British perspective, on Europe. And now, after my speech, you might ask yourself "How British is Michael Roth?" I am really curious to hear what you think.

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