

Wojciech Przybylski: The discussion today is about: do you believe that it is more the European Commission, or, for that matter, the European Parliament, more in charge, more powerful in Europe? Or are those the governments that set the stage and decide the fate, the future and the direction of Europe?

[Audience vote. Majority for the governments.]

Przybylski: So we have a majority. We could say an easy majority of people believe in their governments. So the first question, the opening question, has to go to you, Gabrielius. How are the governments coping with this much responsibility on their shoulders, and how much are they in charge in today's Europe? What is your experience?

Gabrielius Landsbergis: It's an impossible job for the countries to be in charge. You have to imagine 27 countries that have different cultural backgrounds, different politics, different interests, different sizes, different perspectives for the future. They gather in one room and they need to figure out something that unites them. If we have the expectation that the countries would decide, it's almost impossible to do. The expectation is that there is someone in the room who would set an agenda and pull everyone around that opinion. But that requires a couple of things. First of all, it requires leadership from the European Commission, the European Council, whoever is in charge.

Someone has to understand that they will probably have to pay the price for being a leader, because nothing is for free. When you're a leader, there will be unpopular decisions and you have to sometimes just push them through. The countries, the capitals, those 27, also should understand that it's not for free. You have to give something up. Now we have a problem where my opinion is that we lack leadership. We lack somebody willing to pay the price at the European level. And then we have capitals who have very strong feelings about their own interest. You take the biggest capitals anywhere in Europe. You would immediately know their position. But then, if you ask yourself a question, how far would they be willing to go in order to find a compromise? Unfortunately, not very far. And that's why quite a lot of decisions in Europe are stuck.

Przybylski: In your line of work, what were the moments when this political leadership from capitals failed?

Landsbergis: It's easier to say where we succeeded. Honestly, we succeeded at the darkest hour. In February 2022, and if you take the period from February when the full-scale invasion began, up until June, so the first four months, we managed to impose the strictest and harshest sanctions on Russia. We figured out mechanisms to support Ukraine financially. Even countries back then were run by different governments, such as Hungary. They agreed on both sanctions and support. European Union started a mechanism that was a European Peace Facility, where European Union money was used to pay for the weapons we bring. That never happened in the past. So you say, is it the foundational moment for Europe? I would say yes. Unfortunately, that was a very brief moment, and that is the biggest problem. So we did not create a system. But it was a fleeting moment. So that means, if I'm a glass-half-full person, I would say we managed. There are things that we can do. It gives us hope. But the problem is that it was a very short time.

Przybylski: In the game of power, where is the European Parliament? It is not as vividly present, but it seems it is definitely a political usurper. It wants more power.

Kamila Gasiuk-Pihowicz: We are gaining our power year after year. We are really fighting in every battle to see and show that the European Parliament matters. Why? Because we have this power given by the citizens. We are elected by the citizens in direct elections. So we really fight for showing up in every piece of legislation and try to include, sometimes, such legislative construction that allows asking Parliament for an opinion, to scrutinise something.

Sometimes when I hear the question, who is in power in the European Union, for example the European Commission, or for example the countries, France and Germany, my answer, from my perspective, being a member of the European Parliament, is [that it is] not the plenary chamber, not an office in Brussels, but a phone and the list of names in it. And I could now tell you why.

The European Commission has legislative initiative. Parliament does not have such power in most cases. The European Commission writes a draft, and it can say, for example, we need a new law on defence, on artificial intelligence, on customs, etc. Whatever you want, and this is where the European Commission's power ends. At this stage, it is the most influential one, because this draft goes to the two co-legislators. One is the European Parliament, which represents citizens, and the other is the Council, which represents the states, 27 countries, indeed. Both of them must adopt the file, which is the same word by word, exactly the same, and in the Council, 80 per cent of the law is adopted by qualified majority. So you need 15 countries out of 27, which represent at least 65 per cent of the citizens of the European Union. What is important to remember is that a majority doesn't exist. We have to build it every time in every file. And every subject could have different powers behind building such a majority. Sometimes it is built only on political power. Sometimes we build this majority based on the countries and the needs of the countries, their goals. And to do it, you just use a phone and the contacts that you have in it.

Przybylski: Lithuania seemed to be alone in a very particular moment that your government initiated. There was a lot of backlash from China, and some companies in Europe were also pushing on Lithuania because they were pushed by China. Where did the help come from, governments or institutions?

Landsbergis: Indeed, we were put under enormous pressure. Overnight, all our trade with China was stopped. [Lithuania] was deleted from Chinese customs systems. We were no longer there. Nothing could be brought in, nothing could be brought out. And you asked about European reactions. European reaction was very interesting, though not very surprising. I received a call a couple of days later from a high European official. They called me and asked, because they knew that I was involved in the decision-making process of that decision. They said, well, you need to back down. You cannot take on China. Europe is not ready to support you. You need to back down.

And I said, is this the first phone call that you're making on this subject? And they said, yeah, this is the first phone call. I said, how surprising! You choose the smallest country in Europe, and you try to call them and break their arm. With the power that you have, representing 450 million Europeans, you could be calling China and forcing them to back down. But you do

not want to do that because that requires a lot of diplomacy. We're all doing the hard job. You don't want to do the hard job. So you do the easiest job possible. You break the little guys' arm. Unfortunately, I'm not going to do that, and you have to find another way.

And then they found another way, with the help of our American friends who were very much involved in the process. They gathered groups and persuaded the big European countries to support us. Then we entered that stronger with European instruments, anti-[coercion] instruments that allow Europe to handle these sorts of crises better now. And we came out stronger and better off.

Gasiuk-Pihowicz: One thing, from my perspective, is very important. The subject was brought into the European public discussion. The status of Taiwan and assessing the discussion with Beijing is extremely important nowadays for our safety. I wanted to underline Taiwan's role at the moment in AI, in the production of chips and supply chains. So such moves, which you have done as a foreign affairs minister, I think have value, very important value, because it brings a very important subject for our safety. In my opinion, it was a very important move. It shows exactly why we need solidarity in the European Union in such a situation. No country could be punished for a sovereign decision by China.

Question from the audience: You mentioned some leverage that the EU has over some countries. Do you think that happens often, the EU having some influence over some maybe less powerful countries within the organisation?

Landsbergis: The realism is very much real. That means there are rules that big countries expect others to follow. The coercion is real. The pressures are real. The use of levers is very real. Just look at what Donald Trump is doing with the allies. So it's real. But that doesn't mean that you have to agree with it, right? It's like Ukraine. Everybody expects it. They're weaker, smaller. Maybe less prepared than Russia. Three days to Kyiv, right? That was the idea. Look what's happened. Fifth year of the full-scale invasion, and they're still standing. This is where realism meets reality. So what Putin expected- exactly the same thing, like the person who called me and expected the same thing. I'm smaller, probably weaker. I should fold, but that's up to me, whether I am willing to do that or not.

Question from the audience: Would you agree that there is a problem with a slight contradiction between the EU being democratic and it being governed by people whose election process is so far from people's direct votes? And with that, what power would you say should belong to the European Parliament in order to make the EU more democratic, but at the same time keeping the members sovereign?

Gasiuk-Pihowicz: We really fight for being represented in every file and gain as much power as it is possible. Of course, on the table there are some ideas, for example, the right of initiative for the European Parliament. But all those changes require a change to the treaty. Actually, the answer I will give you at the moment will be an answer to both questions.

We are living in such unstable times at the moment. You see so many elections which are coming. The situation on the political level is also very unstable. You see Hormuz, Iran, Ukraine, and Taiwan, even the place which is pointed out by the smartest guys in the world as a place where the third world war could be started. So in such times you really have to focus on just running the European Union and focusing on the most important subjects. Not

changing the treaties, because it is like opening the Pandora box. And we have seen this several times. So we focus really on the changes which we have at the moment at the table. Defence, security, low prices of energy, competitiveness. Diminishing legislative burdens, cutting red tape. That is our goal day after day. We do not want to start such a big discussion, which requires changes in the treaties.

Przybylski: Where are we at it? Do we have any creative solutions? Do we have to live with that?

Landsbergis: Kamila made a very good point. What does it entail to fix this problem? It entails fixing a constitution, a European treaty. The last time we did that it was a very hectic process, because you have to imagine that it requires, if I'm not mistaken, basically every single country to have a referendum, if substantial parts of the constitution are being changed. So while we're talking about this, it's five to ten years, and what will come out of it, nobody knows, because you open Pandora's box and then anybody can put in their opinion. So if we're fixing veto, we can come out with a very different Europe than you embarked on. I'm not saying that we shouldn't do that. I've always advocated that. It's difficult, but we're not here to just fix easy [problems]. So that means that we have to embark on the journey one day if we want to save Europe. That's my belief.

But the problem is that now we're talking about the timeframes that are much shorter. People are talking about whether Putin would attack. Some say maybe 2027; somebody says maybe 2029. So nobody's talking about the ability for us to prepare in five or ten years. It's basically now. So the problem is that if we only want to fix the veto in normal ways, the process would take ten years. But the problems are now. United States is doing the things that they're doing with Greenland and with others. China, the things that they're doing, they're doing now. They're not going to wait for us to fix our problem in ten years. So that is the biggest challenge Europe has, and Europe might not survive that.

So the only way, as I imagine it, is coalition building within. My idea is that you gather coalitions. And I think that this is where, in my belief, and I come from the region, Poland really can do a lot. And there are many countries, and I know my country, where we would really expect and follow Polish leadership in this, basically doing or offering certain things that we can do without waiting for others to agree. Imagine the Nordic-Baltic grouping, already quite close, eight countries, rather like-minded. Add Poland to this, and you have a Nordic-Baltic grouping that can, for example, offer certain things for Europe, or even agree on certain things. Just to give you an example, yesterday there was information that the Nordic countries agreed on a single stock market. So they kind of expect that something would happen in Brussels, with all the decision making. They are not waiting for this. They said, well, we're small countries. We can agree on this. We all limit our sovereignty quite a tiny bit, but we gain something more. Imagine going on defence, going on so many other things, where we can actually make things happen. And in some cases the gravity centre is needed, and maybe Poland can be that gravity centre.

Question from the audience: Do you think that the European Union is reaching a crisis point?

Question from the audience: Is the European Union in crisis? In permanent crisis. In my opinion, that is also what makes the European Union change a lot. The best ideas came in

crises again and again. The biggest challenges have forced us to act together, to show solidarity, to find new ideas and new solutions. Europe is not built in the moments of comfort. It is built in moments of crisis, and we see this. We see results nowadays. A cruel war in Ukraine is a crisis. It is the first big war on the land of Europe since the Second World War. And at the moment we see direct results. We see in the European Union budget money, for the first time in history, not a small amount, for defence, for the defence industry, and, as a consequence, for our security.