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# Rodrigues: Brexit blame game will throw Europe into chaos

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Maria João Rodrigues  
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If some big member states now try to take advantage of the UK referendum and put all the blame on 'Brussels', Europe will descend into chaos and none of our big problems will be solved, said Maria João Rodrigues in an interview with EurActiv.com.

Maria João Rodrigues (Partido Socialista) is Vice Chair of the Socialists & Democrats group in the European Parliament and a member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs. She was Minister for Qualifications and Employment of Portugal in the first government of Prime Minister António Guterres.

Rodrigues spoke to EurActiv's Editor-in-Chief, Daniela Vincenti.

IT HAS BEEN TWO YEARS SINCE THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION PRESENTED ITS POLITICAL GUIDELINES. SINCE THEN, THE UNION HAS BEEN FIGHTING MANY CRISES, INCLUDING BREXIT. ON WEDNESDAY (6 JULY), PARLIAMENT ADOPTED A RESOLUTION ON THE COMMISSION WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2017. IS THE JUNCKER COMMISSION DELIVERING SO FAR?

We are of course extremely worried – and here I speak for the Socialist and Democrats, which is the second biggest group in the parliament – about the slow and uneven economic recovery in Europe, about still rising poverty and social inequalities.

Millions of Europeans live in precarious conditions and they are unsure about their future. Some of them also feel that the EU is making things worse for them.

The S&D has been the main force pushing this Commission to face up to these social challenges and to come forward with clear solutions.

We have given conditional support to this Commission, but we are very critical of it and we are asking it all the time to do more. It is not “our” Commission. But we do acknowledge that the Commission is doing important work to keep Europe together, strengthen the economy and deal with all the pressing crises, including refugee arrivals, social hardship and tax avoidance.

Right now, after the British referendum, Europe needs the Commission’s leadership to continue the good things started and to tackle our common problems together.

## WHAT ARE THE BIG MISTAKES OF THE JUNCKER COMMISSION? WHAT WOULD THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DO TO RECTIFY THEM?

What should be improved is the central question in the resolution on the Commission Work Programme for 2017. With this resolution, we have set out a concrete programme of action, based on practical compromises.

Let’s recall some of the good things done so far: a bigger investment plan has been launched and the Commission has proposed necessary changes to make the internal market fairer, namely to ensure that collective wage agreements apply also to posted workers and we avoid endless wage competition.

The Commission has also fought to keep Greece in the eurozone and has led the initiative to repair and strengthen the eurozone as a whole. Faced with the refugee challenge, the Commission has tried to set out a common European response and to avoid that the whole problem stays with a few front line countries that cannot cope with it on their own.

Clearly a lot should have been done much earlier. It’s a shame that Europe needed LuxLeaks and Panama Papers to get serious about tax avoidance. It’s very bad that we only build a European Border and Coast Guard now, thirty years after the Schengen Agreement.

And the eurozone crisis certainly didn’t have to be so painful if countries agreed to greater solidarity and risk-sharing. But this is the point: for all these problems, we can only cope through European solutions.

Member states need to engage and work together, not try to hide in their national shells and hope that problems will pass by. That’s why we also need the Commission to lead the way and put forward practical solutions to the very real problems we face.

## ARE WE DRIFTING AWAY FROM THE UNION AS WE KNOW IT, WITH MEMBER STATES TAKING MORE AND MORE CONTROL OF THE EU MODUS OPERANDI AS A WAY TO MANAGE CRISES?

Yes, this is a big risk which should really worry the average European, the ordinary man or woman on the street.

It’s not about a tussle between European institutions, or between Brussels and national capitals. The question is if we are still able to build European solutions.

If each country does only what’s easy in the short term, all the big problems will defeat us: global competition, violent extremism, environmental disasters, and corporate tax avoidance, which is like cancer for our societies and for provision of public services.

So if some big member states now try to take advantage of the UK referendum and put all the blame on ‘Brussels’, then citizens will really be powerless, because Europe will descend into chaos and none of our big problems will be solved.

## IS THE SO-CALLED COMMUNITY METHOD AT RISK AND HOW TO REBALANCE THE INSTITUTIONAL MACHINE?

Some recent statements by German conservative leaders are certainly worrying. Weakening the EU institutions at this difficult moment and trying to run the show from Berlin is a very bad idea.

But we have shown in the European Parliament that the ‘supranational’ institutions bring added value. At a time when national leaders quarrel about what to do after Brexit, it is in the EP where we have been able to work out a practical compromise on what the EU should do in the next 12-18 months.

The truth is that central EU institutions and national governments need to work better together. We should get over the nonsense debate on ‘EU versus the Member States’. We are all responsible; everyone needs to do his or her part.

Luckily there are enough people who understand this, including Commission President Juncker, European Council President Tusk as well as the incoming Slovak Presidency of the Council. The EU will succeed if it works in a balanced way, if we all do our job and talk to each other.

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS – THE UK EXAMPLE IS TELLING – IS THE MEMBER STATES' CONTRIBUTION TO THE EU BUDGET. IT IS INEVITABLE (WE WILL) REFORM THE SYSTEM OF FINANCING THE UNION BY STRENGTHENING GENUINE OWN RESOURCES. DO YOU THINK THIS IS WISHFUL THINKING, OR CAN WE REALISTICALLY ACHIEVE IT IN THE CURRENT POLITICAL CONTEXT?

We can do this. This is not about 'more money for Brussels' but about ensuring that the commonly agreed budget has enough resources to pay the bills in time. If more revenue goes directly into the EU budget (as with import duties and part of VAT), then national contributions to the EU budget can be reduced, that's very clear.

But the budget will be able to function better and projects like the European Border and Coast Guard or investments in European infrastructure will not be held back. Today, member states are unfortunately unwilling to provide enough cash to pay for the things they have previously agreed to do together, and the common European project is basically held hostage.

WHEN WE HAD THE REFERENDA IN FRANCE AND THE NETHERLANDS OVER THE CONSTITUTION IN 2005, THE COMMISSION CAME UP WITH THE SO-CALLED PLAN D FOR DEMOCRACY, DIALOGUE AND DEBATE. AFTER THE BRITISH REFERENDUM, DO WE NEED INITIATIVES TO STRENGTHENING THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS AND ENCOURAGING EU CITIZENS TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN EUROPEAN POLITICAL LIFE?

Absolutely. The EU institutions need to talk to people and listen to them. The Plan D was a very good idea, unfortunately not put into practice seriously enough.

I think a good start would be if all staff of the EU institutions were encouraged to spend some working days back where they come from, and talk to people in local schools, libraries, town halls and pubs.

Small sessions with 15-20 people, talking about what Europe is doing and how people see this. MEPs do this on a regular basis because they are directly elected, but we could achieve a massive effect if thousands of EU officials held such talks in their home towns.

Right now we have 'Citizen Dialogues' where Commissioners address hundreds of people; we have the European Citizens Initiative where a million signatures can force the Commission to consider an idea; we have the EU Ombudsman who can help people to exercise their rights.

All these tools should also be kept and strengthened, but most importantly there needs to be much more talk about Europe at the local level, so that people see that the EU is not some impersonal beast, but it's made by people, for people, and everybody needs to contribute.

ONE OF THE MAJOR SHORTCOMINGS IN THE DEBATE IS THE ROLE OF NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS. EUROSCEPTIC COUNTRIES HAVE ASKED FOR A GROWING ROLE OF NATIONAL PARLIAMENT. THAT WAS ALSO THE CASE OF THE UK. WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO HAVE A GENUINE INVOLVEMENT OF NATIONAL MPS IN HELPING FORGE EU POLICIES AND BE THOROUGHLY PART OF THE DISCUSSION, WHICH COULD HELP BRIDGE THE GAP WITH CITIZENS?

We need to talk. I have attended several 'inter-parliamentary conferences' over the past two years to discuss European economic and social policies, and these occasions are extremely useful. A lot can be clarified and useful practical steps can be defined when European and national parliamentarians come together.

Like in the relationship between the EP and the Council of Ministers, we need to overcome divides between 'Brussels' and the 'nation-state'.

We need to work together for the people's benefit. The EP plays a very useful role here because so many different political perspectives meet in the same house and work on finding useful compromises together.

IS THERE A RISK WITH THE CALLING OF REFERENDA THAT WE MOVE FROM PARLIAMENTARY TO DIRECT DEMOCRACY?

We need better representative democracy as well as better participatory democracy. The point is to choose well how to use both these models.

The problem with referenda is not that a government asks people what they think and prefer – that's democracy indeed. But big problems arise when a very complex issue that requires a complex response and complex negotiation with other countries, when all this is reduced to one simple question, and when one government uses a domestic referendum as a tool to put pressure on others.

In a continent as complex as Europe, overuse of direct national democracy can easily lead to conflict or to complete stalemates, with no problems actually getting solved.

That is why we have representative democracy, both at the national level, where governments answer to their parliaments, and at the European level where the European Parliament as well as the Council hold power over the Commission.

We are building European democracy and we need to continue making it stronger. National and European democratic processes need to connect. In a 21<sup>st</sup> century civilisation that knows its history, this must be possible.

#### WE SEE THAT IN THE CONTEXT OF BREXIT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL IS VERY MUCH DIVIDED AND NOT ABLE TO DELIVER A ROADMAP. ARE WE HEADING FOR PARALYSIS?

It is understandable that the heads of state and government want to take some to reflect and discuss the next steps. But the roadmap for Europe's future does not depend only on them: the European Parliament has democratically decided on a clear roadmap and the Commission will surely build on this. 2016 happens to be the first year when a real interaction will take place between the EP, the Commission and the Council of Ministers on the EU's work programme, based on the "inter-institutional agreement on better law-making" which was signed in May.

This is European democracy in practice, and if we all do our job and explain our work to citizens, Europe will bring real solutions and citizens will feel this.

As regards Britain, it is understandable that it will take a few weeks before the country emerges from its political turmoil and activates the divorce procedure. What is important is that the EU27 leaders agree to remain united, to build a common future together, and to engage constructively with the UK once the UK notifies its decision.

#### WHAT ROLE FOR THE PARLIAMENT IN HELPING UNTANGLE THE MESSY DIVORCE?

Europe cannot stand still while the divorce is on-going. The Parliament needs to look ahead and define good solutions to ensure a good future for Europe.

That's what we have done with the resolution on the strategic priorities on the 2017 Commission Work Programme, and what we will do with several forthcoming reports, notably on a budgetary capacity for the eurozone, on how the Lisbon Treaty can be better used, and on potentially useful Treaty changes. All these contributions will be based on European compromises, with the European interest in mind.

As regards the withdrawal negotiations with the UK, the Parliament has clearly affirmed that the Commission should be in charge of the negotiations.

#### YOU ARE A SEASONED EXPERT ON THE EUROPEAN UNION HAVING CARVED THE SO-CALLED LISBON STRATEGY. ARE WE FIT TO COMPETE IN THE WORLD AND BECOME A MAJOR POWER IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY?

We can be the most competitive economy, the best civilisation to live in, and the biggest force for good in the world. But we have to be united, we have to strengthen our democracy, and we have to invest in our future.

What's holding back Europe today, and what's frustrating people is major shortage of investment – a gap that has been opening for many years. States and the EU as a whole have been on the defensive since 2010. They have allowed the invisible hand of the market to deepen social inequalities and undermine the potential for sustainable growth.

But I believe democracy can regain control over global challenges, and people can shape the economy so that it works for all, in a sustainable way, providing fair opportunities to everyone.

Democratically agreed European solutions are possible – and they are our best option. If I didn't believe in this, I wouldn't be fighting for months to create a pro-European majority in the Parliament.