"The question about Europe is: will this ship be repaired in the middle of the storm?"

*Interview with **Geert Mak**, by Olaf Bruns*

Geert Mak
is a self-taught historian and writer. He is one of the most successful non-fiction writers in The Netherlands. His books have been translated into more than twenty languages and include *In Europe*, his masterpiece on Europe in the twentieth century. He has won numerous awards in The Netherlands and abroad.

A way to make sense of the recent European elections is to put them into historical perspective. Geert Mak has investigated social change during the 20th century and various levels: a village in Friesland, in the northern Netherlands, a big city: Amsterdam, but most notably in his Opus Magnus In Europe for which he has travelled the continent criss-cross, during the whole last year of the last century, 1999 investigating the places where the history of the 20th century was made: 'a final inspection of the 20th century'. Now, 20 years later, we are well into the 21st century - reason enough for a historian to start inspecting it.

***Progressive Post:** What was the one thing that has really surprised you on these elections?*

Geert Mak: I was very happy that so many people went out and voted again! There was a beginning of real European politics on the level of European citizens. And that is really a turnaround because these figures have been going down for so long. But this spring, people were suddenly very interested and very involved - there was a kind of "European coffeehouse".

PP: *What has brought about this sudden interest, or this "European coffeehouse", as you say?*

GM: We went as Europeans through the last decade from one long crisis to another. Perhaps a lot of people realised that these are not national problems anymore, but European problems.

PP: *One of the first stations on your 1999 journey was Paris, where you have been walking on the traces of the Paris of the early 20th century: a place of openness but also a place of anti-Semitism. When you come to France after these recent European elections, you come to a country where a far-right party has become the first party. Do you see a historical continuity?*

GM: Not only in France, but also in Poland and Hungary, there is a very strong anti-Semitic tradition. Europe is full of old ghosts, sometimes they are hidden for a decade, or for a few decades, but then they emerge again.

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PP: *What would you say makes these ghosts hide away - and what brings them back to life?*

GM: The important point was the heritage of World War II. For our generation, World War II was always there, often silent, but all our families have suffered. For the younger generations, the distance is growing bigger. And that is also good: that is peace! The Second World War gave politicians the courage to jump over their shadow and that made the European Union possible. It was difficult and complicated, but people wanted to do this, because they didn't want a war, ever again. I've known a few of these elderly statesmen personally, people who never cried, but they did cry when they talked about the beginning of the European Union.

PP: *The main lessons to be drawn from the history of the 20th century were of course the two wars, and both wars were fuelled by nationalism. And now it's precisely nationalism that is back again. Therefore: is it only about crisis and economics? Or is there something else going on? 'Culturally', some would say.*

GM: There is much more going on than just economics. For a new book, I visited two British cities in the North, a city called Wigan, in England, and a Scottish city, Paisley. Both are very similar: old mining cities, that have a lot of economic problems now. But in Paisley, in Scotland, a big majority voted 'remain' in the EU referendum, and exactly the same kind of city, just a hundred miles south, voted with a big majority for 'leave'. This has everything to do with uncertainty, with the feeling that these people don't belong to the centre of power anymore. The people in Paisley were strongly connected to Edinburgh: they have their own parliament. And the people in Wigan have a parliament that is far, far away: in London. They really

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feel alone, alienated, and that is a huge problem in a lot places of Europe. We are living in a time with very fast developments, and people cannot handle that. This causes something I call a 'cultural trauma', and that doesn't only happen in mining towns or cities, where the mine suddenly closed. It's not only about economics, it impacts the whole of society: people's traditions, their friends, family relations - everything is upside down, just because this mine, which brought everybody together, is gone. You see this cultural trauma everywhere in Europe, also in the countryside. In France for instance, there are regions where most of the shops are closed down now.

PP: Your first station in Italy during your 1999 trip was Predappio, Mussolini's birthplace, where you discovered a souvenir shop with all kinds of fascist and Nazi paraphernalia: uniforms, swastikas and far right literature. Now, in the European elections, precisely in Predappio, Matteo Salvini's far right Ligue made a stunning result of almost 44 percent! What does a place like Predappio tell us about Italy's recent history?.

GM: In Italy, fascism has never been far underground. These kind of souvenir shops in Predappio would have been impossible elsewhere in Europe. But for me, it's not about fascism: Italy was, still in 2014, under Matteo Renzi, a very pro-European country, and within five years this has totally changed. And that has a lot to do with the fact that Italy didn't get assistance during the euro crisis and it was also left alone during the immigrant crisis. So partly of course this extreme right is a typical Italian problem, just like Brexit is a typically British problem. But it's also a European problem and a symptom of a European problem.

PP: ***How can centre-left politics offer an alternative for all these people?***

GM: I think the recent elections in Denmark are very interesting. I didn't like that Social Democrats started to embrace right wing anti-immigrant policies. But they did something else too, and I think that explains a large part of their success: they acknowledged that they had made big mistakes in the past, that they went too far with neo-liberalism and they showed themselves again as a party that really wants to protect the working people and the poor. I think a lot of people with lower income have not felt that protection for years and they felt betrayed by their old workers parties.

PP: ***What's your view on leadership and its impact on European Union politics?***

GM: Leadership is very important, because the European Union needs faces, real faces. Like in national politics, to develop normal and healthy European politics, you need leaders, people you can trust - or even distrust – and talk about. In politics, institutions are very important, and rules are important. But without leaders you only get big buildings and anonymous institutions and that doesn't stir democratic emotions. Democracy is also an emotional thing.

PP: ***It feels almost like a cynical moment: Europe has been trying to build this European public space for a long time – and then it comes into being during the crisis.***

GM: These things always happen in crisis moments. The European Union, as a construction, is very out of balance, especially the euro, but also other parts of the European Union are very vulnerable constructions. And they have to be improved. Otherwise we will not survive as the European Union. But I expect that the moment that this will be improved will once more be when there is a new crisis: around Italy, with the euro for example, or again around the question of immigrants. And then the European Union is forced to make decisions that they didn't want to make in the beginning, but in the crisis, under pressure, they do. And again, the EU moves on a little bit. The question is: will this ship be repaired in the middle of the storm?

"Democracy is also an emotional thing. Without leaders, you only get big buildings and anonymous institutions and that doesn't stir democratic emotions."

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