



“The technocratic approach is not credible anymore”

Interview with **Luuk van Middelaar**, by **Olaf Bruns**

Luuk van Middelaar

is a political theorist and historian. From 2010 until 2014, he worked as chief speechwriter and advisor to the European Council President Herman Van Rompuy. The author of the prizewinning *The Passage to Europe*, he recently published *Alarums and Excursions*, a ground-breaking account of the Union's crisis politics.

*How do the recent elections to the European Parliament affect the balance of power between the EU institutions? In his recent book *Alarums and Excursions - improvising politics on the European stage*, the Dutch historian Luuk van Middelaar analyses how a decade of crises – from the financial chaos of the euro and the Greek sovereign debt; the conflicts with Russia over Ukraine; unprecedented levels of refugees from across the Mediterranean and the turmoil created by Brexit – have shaped a new way of doing politics on the European stage.*

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Progressive Post: *Your recent book, first published in Dutch under the straightforward title *De nieuwe politiek van Europa* (The new politics of Europe), has in the English translation become *Alarums and Excursions - improvising politics on the European stage*. Admittedly, I had to look up ‘Alarums’ in the dictionary!*

Luuk van Middelaar: I wanted to underline the importance of the theatre and theatricality in politics. One of the key things we've seen in the past years is that more and more, politics in the EU is being played out on stage, in public view, in the limelight. Whereas historically, a lot of EU politics took place more backstage. Then my English publisher came up with this expression ‘Alarums and Excursions’, which is in fact a stage direction from the Shakespearean theatre, meaning that the

actors have to prepare for imminent action and hectic scenes and perhaps a battle. It evokes that moment right before action which I found appropriate for the 10 years of EU crisis politics, which I try to describe in the book.

PP: *And then you open with a quote from somebody who has been on stage a lot: Miles Davis. ‘I will play it first and tell you what it is later’.*

LvM: With this quote I wanted to underline the other important aspect, that of improvisation: for 10 years, EU leaders and institutions had to rush, improvise and invent things on the spot. Nobody quite knew what they were doing. It was as if we were running breathlessly from one crisis to the next. And I thought, perhaps now, after 10 years, if you start with the financial crisis in 2008, it's time to take a step back and to see what we collectively,



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as the EU, have been doing in this time. Hence this Miles Davis quote: let's now take a look at the improvisation and see if we can make some sense of all of this.

PP: *The one actor that was centre stage during these improvisations is the European Council. When analysing how the European Union function, it's often described as being in conflict with a rival actor: the Parliament, which has just been newly elected. Analytically, it's a 'supranational' versus a 'federal' approach. But you distinguish three approaches for the EU construction.*

LvM: Indeed. Historically, the first approach which I call the 'backstage approach' was the idea to depoliticise conflicts. It's basically a technocratic-functional approach, where the commission as a technocratic, impartial expert body is centre stage, together with the Court of Justice. The strategy of de-politicisation is pretty much the DNA of the EU. Back in the 1950s, it was obviously a brilliant idea: the founding EU members realised that we, as countries, do not necessarily have conflicts, we rather have problems together. This was the idea of Jean Monnet and Schumann and the founding fathers. And problems, you can solve. Either legally,

or procedurally, to make them disappear or to... - sweep them under the carpet.

What you see then is that there are two rather political approaches of how to do your politics and these could be described as the federalists and the con-federalist approach: the federalist approach embodied institutionally by the European Parliament, representing EU citizens, and the con-federalist approach embodied by the European Council, as the body of national leaders.

And it shows you that these two institutions – Council and Parliament – even if they may be at odds sometimes, also share something: they both thrive under the public eye, they both look for visibility, they look for contact with citizens, unlike the Commission, the Court and the Council of Ministers.

PP: *Does the increased participation in the European elections indicate a power shift between these institutions?*

LvM: I think the European Parliament is a clear winner of the election and in particular because of the high turnout. In terms of competence, the European Parliament is of course a very powerful parliament. Even if you compare it to many national parliaments, it has nothing to be jealous of. But

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its weak spot has always been to be seen and to be found credible as a public arena, speaking on behalf of all European citizens. And I think that is changing now. The turnout, above the symbolic threshold of 50 percent, is very important and also the fact that there are more diverse voices within that parliament than the old monopoly – or 'duopoly' as some say – of the Christian Democrats, EPP, and the Social Democrats, S&D, which





has been broken down by stronger voices of new players which are also needed for majorities: the Greens the Liberals.

PP: *How about the nationalists?*

LvM: Even their presence, I would argue – although many in Brussels are worried about them – paradoxically could strengthen the parliament. Why? Because it makes the European Parliament a more credible body where all voices, the plurality of public opinion in the EU, is represented, and where ideas are fought out, rhetorically and politically. And that makes the European Parliament less of a 'Brussels Parliament' and more of a real 'European Parliament'. And it will also make it stronger vis-à-vis the other two institutions.

So, the key question is whether these kind of opposition movements will only make fools of themselves, or play a purely anti-European destruction or 'leave' card – like UKIP, or the previous Front National – or whether more so they want to be a legitimate opposition within the system, saying 'we don't want to destroy it, we want to be part of it and we want to change some of the policies'. And that's an important distinction between these two kinds of opposition.

PP: *...because it shifts from an opposition of principle against the whole 'theatre', to becoming an actor on that very stage.*

LvM: An actor on the stage and perhaps with a dissonant voice. But not one willing to bring down the whole theatre, and that is the key difference. And it means that again, paradoxically, they may strengthen the legitimacy of the project as a whole, because they're buying into it with their dissonance.



PP: *A way to handle dissonant voices on that European stage has always been the technocratic approach: 'You are against this or that part of the European Union: you probably don't understand it'. How do we confront these groups without falling into the trap of the technocratic answer?*

LvM: I think this technocratic approach is indeed no longer credible, for all the issues the EU is dealing with today. The same is true for the approach of the moral high ground, which often came second. First people said: 'you don't like it, well, probably you don't understand it and I'll explain it again'. And then they said: 'if you still don't like it, probably you're not a good European!' This was part of a longstanding tendency to put outside the order any critical voice. Voters are becoming a little bit allergic to these approaches now. There must be a possibility to disagree with policies within the system!

What is needed is political narrative of why certain decisions are taken, in the name of a certain view of the future, or appealing to certain values, which can unite a majority of parties and public opinion to follow a certain approach.

And I think that is more important now than in the past. Because even if I'm critical in the book of the technocratic approach, it was

The high turnout, as well as the new diversity of voices, gives the @Europarl_EN more credibility - @LuukvMiddelaar



fair enough for large parts of building an EU market for example. It is rather technical stuff to harmonise, for example VAT rates or to invent rules for food hygiene!

For a lot of the key issues that are dealt with today by European states and institutions together this no longer works: the refugee crisis, the euro, what to do with Russia, with China... – these are fundamental issues, involving not only matters of expertise, but really values. Take the refugee crisis, it's values of solidarity versus perhaps security and identity. For these kind of issues, the technocratic approach is not credible anymore: it is not by bringing together 28 national experts and people from the commission that you can then decide what to do with 1.2 million refugees. There, you need a political story and also political compromise or a way to work with different values to appeal to public opinion to say, OK this is perhaps what we want to do, but this is what we can do and what we will do and where we show that we also have some capacity to act.