Die Zeit - Interview HR/VP Borrell "Wir müssen die Herzen erreichen" („We have to reach the hearts“) - English translation

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DIE ZEIT: Mr Borrell, foreign ministers are usually constantly travelling. When were you last on the road?

JOSEP BORRELL: I was in Croatia seven weeks ago, since then I have been in Brussels.

DIE ZEIT: Is that even possible, foreign policy without travelling?

JOSEP BORRELL: Fortunately, there are video conferences. Of course it is better to have a personal contact. But whether you sit at a conference table or in front of a screen, the core of communication is similar. And we save so much time and money.

DIE ZEIT: When you took office a few months ago, you spoke of the need for the European Union to rediscover its place in the world and face up to geopolitical competition. Now Europe is being hit very hard by the Corona pandemic. What are the consequences for the EU's weight in the world?

JOSEP BORRELL: It is clear that at the moment we are mainly concerned with the pandemic. But this does not mean that we have forgotten our responsibility in the world. For example, we will completely change our development policy. We want to help weaker countries, especially those in Africa, to fight the pandemic. Even if we in Europe contain the virus, we will be in permanent danger if we do not also contain it in our immediate neighbourhood and in Africa. The EU is already the world's largest donor of development aid, and we will be the largest donor in the global fight against the pandemic.

DIE ZEIT: You said that Europe must learn the language of power ...

JOSEP BORRELL: Which turns out to be extremely difficult!

DIE ZEIT: Why?

JOSEP BORRELL: The EU is not a state. Our foreign policy decisions are subject to the principle of unanimity. We are not a defence union either. That makes it, to put it bluntly, very difficult.

DIE ZEIT: What exactly did you mean when you said that Europe must speak the language of power?

JOSEP BORRELL: The ability to influence others and to participate actively in the resolution of conflicts. That was not possible in the Syrian conflict, for example. Yet it has enormous geopolitical consequences for Europe. Just think of the flight of hundreds of thousands of people to Europe. Nevertheless, Turkey, Russia and the USA have much greater influence there because they have the will to shape and use all the means at their disposal, including military means. We do not have that possibility. But we can do much more with the means we have.

DIE ZEIT: What are they?

JOSEP BORRELL: We have the means of a civil power: trade, development aid, migration policy.

DIE ZEIT: Is it at all possible to solve conflicts like those in Syria or Libya without the military?

JOSEP BORRELL: Sure, we don't have the possibility to send soldiers to Syria or Libya. We don't want that either. Nevertheless, we can do more. One example: Until recently, it seemed impossible that the EU could set up a new military mission to monitor the arms embargo off the Libyan coast. Now we have this mission. But do not ask an apple to be a peach - the EU is not a state.

DIE ZEIT: The EU is a multilateral project. Could it be that the short period of multilateralism is already over? Right now, nation states are chasing each other's breathing masks on the international market.

JOSEP BORRELL: Multilateralism was already in crisis before the pandemic broke out. Some people rejected it ... like the American president. Everyone knows what Donald Trump thinks about multilateralism and the EU. The EU is the highest form of multilateralism. But this pandemic will put enormous pressure on people who think they can save themselves by being the first to close their door. Such a reaction puts the whole of humanity at considerable risk. We must therefore mobilise all the multilateral resources that we have, and we must create new and better ones. Perhaps the great lesson of this crisis will be that we need more multilateralism. Perhaps we will learn that no state - not even the USA, China or Russia, no one! - is big enough to meet this challenge.

DIE ZEIT: Nevertheless, there is less cooperation today than during the financial crisis.

JOSEP BORRELL: It is true that in 2008, first the G8 countries and then the G20 reacted very quickly. The financial crisis spread across the world at the speed of light, everyone was hit immediately. The virus took quite a long time to get from China to Europe in comparison. And from Europe to the US. That's one reason why the threat was not immediately perceived as a global threat.

DIE ZEIT: Do you even see the will to cooperate more?

JOSEP BORRELL: It depends on who you're talking about. In the case of the Europeans, I believe, expect and hope that this crisis will lead to a new push for integration. Take health, which until now has almost exclusively been the responsibility of the nation states. But health issues are also security issues, as we now know - not something that we can only deal with within national borders.

DIE ZEIT: What role does China play?

JOSEP BORRELL: China has behaved differently from the US in recent years, for example in the discussions on the climate agreement. The Chinese have supported multilateralism, while the US has abandoned it.

DIE ZEIT: And now China is delivering tons of medical supplies to Europe.

JOSEP BORRELL: The EU Member States sent 60 tonnes of aid material to China when we thought it was a problem that would not affect us. Now China is helping us. That is very welcome.

DIE ZEIT: You wrote in a blog that there is a "battle of narratives" going on around the pandemic and that there are attempts to discredit the EU. Who is trying to do that, China?

JOSEP BORRELL: In the social media you find a lot of news that tries to discredit the EU. China, on the other hand, presents to the world what it is doing to help Europe. That is their narrative, a proof of power, a proof of soft power.

DIE ZEIT: And in Italy you see Russian military trucks on the streets, which also bring aid. Where is the EU?

JOSEP BORRELL: If you plant your flag on aid supplies, you are advertising for yourself. You are not discrediting anyone else. My question is: Why don't we do the same? Germany, France and Austria together have sent many more breathing masks to Italy than China and Russia. My staff have worked day and night to coordinate and organise, together with the Member States, the return journeys of what are now 420,000 European tourists who have been stranded somewhere in the world. The EU has also partly co-financed these flights. But how many people know this?

DIE ZEIT: You would have to tell them.

JOSEP BORRELL: (laughs) That is why I am talking to you. But we have the same communication problems today as during the euro crisis. To organise solidarity, we need a common narrative, a narrative. Instead, a sentence from the Dutch Finance Minister is enough ...

DIE ZEIT: You mean his critical comments on the Spanish health care system during one of the recent Eurogroup meetings?

JOSEP BORRELL: When more than 30,000 people die in a month in Italy and Spain, they react sensitively to the words coming from outside. Everyone must bear that in mind.

DIE ZEIT: Why is the EU reacting so slowly even in this crisis?

JOSEP BORRELL: When you talk about the EU, you must say who you mean. The Commission has done everything possible with the instruments at its disposal. The European Central Bank has also reacted very quickly, much more quickly than during the euro crisis. Mrs Lagarde (the President of the ECB, editor's note) has put almost EUR 1 trillion on the table in a few days. Now we are faced with the question of whether we need additional instruments. And here we are having the same discussions with the same member countries as during the euro crisis: should each country procure money on the financial markets on its own? Or do we do it together?

DIE ZEIT: Unlike the euro crisis, this crisis affects all member countries.

JOSEP BORRELL: But it is still not a symmetrical crisis! The economic consequences are completely different. In Italy and Spain, and I am afraid to some extent also in France, the economy has come to a complete standstill. This is different in Germany or the Netherlands.

DIE ZEIT: So there is a lack of solidarity after all?

JOSEP BORRELL: There is solidarity within the framework of the existing possibilities. But we need new possibilities, new instruments. Before the outbreak of the epidemic we argued endlessly about the future EU budget. Do we want to continue this discussion as before? Or do we need a bigger budget now? We need to do more than we have done so far, but that does not mean that the EU has done nothing so far.

DIE ZEIT: Do you think we can use this crisis to create more European unity?

JOSEP BORRELL: I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic. I am an activist! I work ten, twelve hours a day to make the EU stronger.

DIE ZEIT: Let's get back to the bigger, geopolitical picture. Did we understand you correctly that at the moment it is easier to work with China than with the US?

JOSEP BORRELL: No, don't put anything in my mouth that I haven't said.

DIE ZEIT: You said that the American President refuses to cooperate in multilateral organisations.

JOSEP BORRELL: Before the crisis it was clear that the US government rejects any form of multilateralism. But I said nothing about what the situation will be like after this crisis. It also

depends on who will win the next election in the US.

DIE ZEIT: China has apparently successfully contained the spread of the virus. Is it more difficult for democratic countries to react to the corona pandemic with the necessary severity than for authoritarian regimes?

JOSEP BORRELL: This is part of the battle of narratives I was talking about: who has the better equipment? Who can more easily impose discipline on their citizens? Of course, the ways of influencing the behaviour of citizens in a liberal democracy are much more nuanced than in an authoritarian regime. But when I look out of my window in Brussels, I see no one on the street. People follow the instructions of their governments, not because there is a policeman behind them. But because they understand that these restrictions are necessary to protect themselves and others.

DIE ZEIT: Even within the EU there are governments that are increasingly acting in an authoritarian manner, for example in Hungary.

JOSEP BORRELL: We must be careful that democracy does not become a victim of the pandemic. I am deeply convinced that liberal societies are now at an advantage over regimes that simply issue instructions. Provided we draw the right conclusions from the crisis.

DIE ZEIT: What would they be?

JOSEP BORRELL: Let me give you an example. In my country, Spain, nurses and doctors have repeatedly demonstrated in recent years against the savings in the health system. Nobody has listened to them. Now we applaud them every night. This shows me that we cannot reduce the social security systems to a minimum. The costs we are now paying for them are much higher than the supposed savings. So we have to review a lot of things after the crisis. We have to rethink and try to find solutions that seemed impossible a month ago. Whether our democracies are capable of doing so is crucial for the geopolitical world of tomorrow.

DIE ZEIT: Mr Borrell, in conclusion: How bad is the EU?

JOSEP BORRELL: This is an existential crisis for the EU. I know that is a big word, but that is how it is. This crisis will decide how useful people think the EU is. So we must not just argue with numbers, we must reach the hearts of the people. It hurts me and I could cry when I see an EU flag being burned in Italy. If people feel that the EU is not helping them, we are doing something wrong.

The questions were asked by Matthias Krupa and Ulrich Ladurner.

(Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator)

See also

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