

Evelyne Gebhardt: Still seeing a bright future for the EU

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Interviews

An MEP for 25 years, Evelyne Gebhardt has seen it all. As vice president of the European Parliament and member of the High-level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity and IMCO committee, she tells Colin Mackay her thoughts on gender equality and quotas, the digital single market and globalisation.



Photo Credit: Giancarlo Rocconi

Do you think the EU has done enough to stop gender discrimination, particularly since the start of the #MeToo movement?

The Bureau has already adopted measures to counteract several forms of harassment and discrimination on 2nd July 2018, but much remains to be done. First, we must ensure that the EP resolution on combatting sexual harassment and abuse in the EU, adopted on 26 October 2017 with 580 votes in favour, is fully implemented before the end of this mandate. This means adopting the following three measures; mandatory training on sexual harassment for MEPs, commissioning an

external audit on the functioning of the two existing Committees dealing with harassment and merging the two anti-harassment committees. I have voiced my personal support for those additional measures and pledged to the #MeTooEU movement to also support them as a member of the Bureau.

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On the issue of gender equality, which policy areas do you believe the EU has made progress on, and which should a new Commission and parliament tackle?

We cannot gloss over the fact that Member States have hindered meaningful progress at EU level for many years now. It pains me to acknowledge that women, despite being increasingly well-qualified, are still paid less than men for comparable work. This undervaluing of women's work is one of the causes of the gender pay gap, which, in turn, contributes to the gender pensions gap. These problems are rooted in gender stereotypes, which perpetuate the inequality in sharing care responsibilities and household tasks. They also lead to gender segregation in education, in training and in the labour market. Overall, women face a more precarious working life throughout their lives - for example, low-paid and involuntary part-time work, or poor job security. Productive employment and decent work for all are key factors for achieving gender equality, reducing poverty and attaining equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. As a first measure, I call on Member States to adopt - at minimum - the Directive on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of listed companies, with the objective of increasing the numbers of women on corporate boards throughout the EU. This legislative project has been on hold for far too long now; more-encompassing and broader legislative measures must follow to eliminate the gender pay gap and to ensure a greater level of gender equality on an EU level.

Given the fact that there have only been two female parliament presidents, and no female Commission presidents, is the EU institutionally sexist? Do we need to introduce quotas for senior EU positions, and if so, how will this work?

Quotas can - under specific circumstances - be a good, or even the best practice for gender mainstreaming. However, they cannot sufficiently remedy the gender imbalance within EU institutions. We must encourage and adopt gender mainstreaming mechanisms anywhere and everywhere if we are to achieve gender equality within our own institutions. This means reorganising, improving, developing and evaluating policy processes so that the gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, and at all levels and stages by the actors involved in policy making. For these reasons, I would like to suggest several measures: First, political parties should ensure gender-balanced representation of candidates for the European Parliament elections, for example by means of parity lists. Second, Member States should designate at least two candidates of each gender that could be considered by the elected President of

the Commission to ensure gender balance in the College. Third, all EU institutions and bodies should ensure gender balance when appointing and renewing institutional posts, with a view to increasing nominations of women to top positions in the EU institutions.

"We must encourage and adopt gender mainstreaming mechanisms anywhere and everywhere if we are to achieve gender equality within our own institutions"

As rapporteur of the Digital Single Market Act, how successful do you believe the Juncker Commission has been in establishing a digital single market?

Highly successful. Many of the legislative initiatives have been finalised or at least expedited to a stage where they can still be adopted within this parliamentary term. From the new European Telecommunications Code to the Geoblocking regulation, my own dossier the Digital Content Directive as well as the new sales law Directive, we can point to numerous achievements. I sincerely hope, however, that we still have time to finalise the Directive on Better Enforcement and Modernisation of EU Consumer Protection Rules; the legislative update will contain several rules on platform transparency that are of the greatest importance to EU consumers.

What key areas a new Commission should address, to ensure a successful digital single market?

Artificial intelligence, artificial intelligence, artificial intelligence.

As a member of the IMCO committee, how confident are you that a new Commission can defend the principles of the single market from being undermined by more protectionist Member States?

Since the last economic crisis, the majority of EU citizens view globalisation as a direct threat to their livelihoods. This is why protectionist policies are being supported so enthusiastically. Citizens view the EU as part of the globalisation process, rather than as a chance to make globalisation efficient, enduring and equitable. We need to educate citizens and policymakers alike that attempts to turn back globalisation are pointless, even potentially harmful to our economies, and will only fuel more inequality. This means that we also have to address the distributional and social effects of greater economic integration through targeted national and EU policies, like for instance measures we are proposing in the Social Pillar. To be successful, we need a strong European Union, which includes Member States that do not only pledge to be pro-EU, but which also stand ready to address economic hardship not only within their own national border, but also in solidarity with these threats EU-wide.

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According to predictions, the EPP and S&D groups together are expected to win less than 50 percent of seats. How should the S&D group counter the messages of the populist parties?

With our core messages; progressive economic policies that aim at full employment with decent working conditions and a strong social, healthy and environmentally-committed Europe. One that is ready to put an end to social and fiscal dumping, pursue gender equality as well as determinedly anti-

racist policies and a compassionate and progressive policy on migration. After all, these objectives are what most people seek.

You have been an MEP since 1994, do you feel confident that the EU can continue to exist in its current form, with some Member States seemingly moving away from commonly-held beliefs in liberal values and respect for law?

It is precisely because I have been an MEP since 1994 that I remain confident that the EU is going to continue to exist; there is no viable alternative. During the next legislature, the pro-EU and progressive forces will need to overcome their differences more effectively. It reminds me of my early days in the European Parliament, when MEPs were much less likely to follow any whip and regularly acted quite independently from their political groups and even national delegations. We always had to make great efforts to secure majorities, but this also meant - and can mean again - that MEPs will have to delve deeper into the issues and be able to win through arguments, rather than simple numerical power.

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