

Plenkovic: Restoring belief in European project key task for European leaders

ZAGREB, Oct 22 (Hina) - Restoring belief in the European project and fighting populism is the most important task for European leaders, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said at an international conference of the Croatian Paneuropean Union in Zagreb on Saturday.

"You have heard European Parliament President Martin Schulz's statement that we must be very careful not to make the foundations of the European project all of a sudden seem fragile and prone to crumbling," Plenkovic warned at the conference entitled "Integration or Disintegration of the European Union".

One of the ways to fight such trends is to make the political mainstream stronger, namely restore trust in main ruling political parties throughout the EU, he said. "It will be difficult to withstand the strong attack of populism on the European project that comes both from the right and the left," he said, adding that that culture of discontent had spread throughout the EU and could now also be seen in the Croatian parliament every day.

"Owing to technology and the Internet, such policies have access to and influence a larger number of voters much faster than they used to several decades ago, and this phenomenon of easily giving trust to someone who is against the European project a priori and believes that all who have built it are clientelistic, privileged groups out of touch with ordinary citizens, is a kind of rhetoric that along with the economic, financial and social crisis has, unfortunately, been growing stronger," said Plenkovic.

To restore trust and protect themselves against such populist attacks, mainstream politicians re-nationalise policies, thus weakening the European response and increasingly attempting to find solutions that are only seemingly strong, national and statesmanly and that are contrary to what Europe is saying, he said. "I believe the task of all leaders - and this was evident yesterday when a common position was sought regarding Syria, Russia, the migration issue and the international trade policy - to preserve unity," Plenkovic said in reference to a meeting of the European Council in Brussels on Thursday and Friday.

He pointed to three political problems at the EU level that provide evidence of the current fragility of the unity of European policies and challenge the credibility of the European project.

"Due to the negative Dutch referendum on the EU-Ukraine association agreement, caused by populists, that agreement may never come into force," he said about the April referendum in which two-thirds of Dutch voters opposed Ukraine's integration with the EU.

The second problem to which Plenkovic pointed were talks on international free trade policies, referring to the decision by the Parliament of Wallonia, one of Belgium's three self-governing regions, to block the signing of CETA, a trade agreement between the EU and Canada.

"We have a document that has been agreed on, with what so far are the best solutions in international law... and now it is being questioned," he said. "What message are we sending then as the EU? Are we an organisation to be counted on in talks?" he wondered.

The third issue on which there is no consensus is the relationship with Russia, where the element of crucial importance is being the least discussed, namely that Russia has chosen to be a strategic rival instead of a strategic partner to the EU, said Plenkovic.

Stier speaks at Croatian Paneuropean Union conference

ZAGREB, Oct 22 (Hina) - Croatia without the slightest doubt supports EU enlargement because the process has a beneficial effect for Europe which has become a continent of peace and democracy, Croatian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Davor Ivo Stier said at a conference of Croatia's Paneuropean Union in Zagreb on Friday.

Croatia's new foreign minister spoke at the international conference entitled "Integration or Disintegration of the European Union - Paneuropean Response and Prospects of Integration in Southeast Europe Quarter of a Century Later" which started in Zagreb on Friday.

Stier believes Croatia is a bridge between the European Union and Southeast European countries which are on the path to Euro-Atlantic associations, underscoring that it is in the interest of Zagreb that this area undergoes the Europeanisation process with full compliance with EU membership criteria.

"The European path of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a strategic priority for us," Stier said, recalling the importance of the country's three constituent peoples enjoying equal rights. He also commented on recent events in Bosnia, notably "the unconstitutional referendum in the Republika Srpska and incidents in Stolac during the election." "Bosnia needs a comprehensive approach and stronger involvement by the international community," Stier said.

The conference was also addressed by Croatia's new Education Minister Pavo Barisic.

The two-day event was organised by the Croatian Paneuropean Union (HPEU), the Foreign and European Affairs Ministry, the City of Zagreb and Karlovac County. The conference is attended by representatives of 14 countries. The International Paneuropean Union is the oldest European unification movement.