



DUBRAVKA ŠUICA TRANSCRIPT

Interview conducted 20 February 2020

Clare Gray: It is a real honour and privilege to have Commissioner Dubravka Šuica with us. She is Vice-President in the European Commission, responsible for the dual themes of Democracy and Demography. She has dedicated much of her life to politics at the local, national and European levels. We are really thrilled to have you with us today, thank you very much for joining us.

Dubravka Šuica: Thank you for inviting me.

Clare Gray: If we start with the theme of citizen engagement, which is really crucial to your portfolio; the Commission engages with citizens on an ongoing basis, but it has now proposed holding this special two-year conference on the future of Europe. What is the added value of holding this conference?

Dubravka Šuica: First of all, let us remember that in last year's European elections, there was a very high turnout – the highest in the last twenty years, which was above 50 percent. We realised that citizens want to have their say, they want to tell us something, and they don't want to be engaged once every four years or once every five years. They want to have a dialogue with us. This is the reason why we, in a way, [initiated] a conference on the future of Europe. This is from the [European] Commission but also from [the European] Parliament [who], as you know, adopted a resolution on the conference and at the moment, we are waiting for the Council to [decide upon] their position. The conference is very important in my opinion because we would like to bridge this gap which evidently exists between us and citizens, us meaning politicians.

Clare Gray: You started your career, as we've mentioned, in local politics. How important do you think it's going to be to have input from local and regional actors in this conversation?

Dubravka Šuica: Sometimes I think if I hadn't been Mayor and if I hadn't been there working at local level, I wouldn't understand what's going on and how it works. So, I started at local level as Mayor of Dubrovnik, then I was in the National Parliament in Croatia, and then [for] almost seven years [was] a member of the European Parliament, and now in the Commission. So, I think all these levels of government are very important. Since we are on a local level, we are closest to the citizens, and without engaging with them at the local level at this

conference, I don't think this conference could be successful. So, it is very important to understand what people's needs are, what citizens' concerns are, what their fears are. The reason for organising the conference or series of different events is to listen to them, to see what the problem is and how we can abolish the problems that exist.

Clare Gray: Another really important group is young people. President von der Leyen has described the future of Europe as depending on our youth. How is the Commission going to try and get young people really enthusiastic about the conference?

Dubravka Šuica: First of all, we have two questions for ourselves, I mean me, not you. [The first of these is] 'who is going to live in this future?' The youth. I think a big part of this conference should be dedicated to young people, and to different agora for a different assembly, where young people will be participating, and the topics of their interest will be debated. So, young people are very important for us, and this is what President Ursula von der Leyen asked me [to do] in her mission letter to me; to include young people to improve the Youth Guarantee, and of course, children. The Child Guarantee is part of my portfolio, and as I said, being a politician at local level and later on at different levels, I was always engaging with young people, with children and with students. I think we have to understand their needs and try to help them live in this very challenging world, nowadays.

Clare Gray: Moving on then to the second half of your mandate, which is Demography, and demographic change; this is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges for Europe, especially countries such as your native Croatia. What kind of challenges will demographic change pose for European democracies and societies?

Dubravka Šuica: Demography is very important. Regardless of this, it is going to be the second part of my mandate and I think I have to start immediately because demography is really a problem all over the world, of course in Europe, and in some Member States even more than in others. I think that we have to start as soon as possible, and we will have a report on demography impact on 6 April [2020] on the agenda of the College of the Commission. We will see what the state of play is all over Europe and this will be the basic document for us to start offering measures, our so-called toolbox, to our citizens all over Europe. Although we know this is a Member States competence, we don't want to interfere, but at the same time we think that only working together at local, national and European levels we can solve the problem, which is huge if I may say so. Figures show us that the problem is really huge and we have to address the problem and try to solve it.

Clare Gray: Finally, in the case of Ireland, one of the biggest concerns is the impact of demographic decline on rural populations. Does the Commission have any proposals to improve connectivity and productivity in [rural] areas?

Dubravka Šuica: A long-term strategy for rural areas is part of my portfolio, which I hope will also be done soon as the second part of my mandate. Rural areas are facing big challenges, people are leaving due to different reasons. People are moving to urban areas or to other countries. From the country I know best [Croatia], people are coming to Ireland because they think that life is better here and the living standard is better, some because of education, some [to gain] skills, some because they want to get married. But they are leaving at this moment and every day. This is a problem and I know that this problem also exists here in Ireland. So, connectivity is very important, and when we say connectivity, it doesn't only mean highways and trains and roads. Connectivity [also] means digital connectivity because broadband internet is very important nowadays if you want to create new jobs. We rely heavily on the new Digital Agenda and as you know the new Green Deal is one of our priorities. So, we think we can reverse the trend [and if we do, people will be able to] live in a better environment with a better quality [of life]. So why not live in rural areas in the country, if you have good infrastructure like kindergarten, schools, connectivity, which you mentioned, and all other services which are important for decent lives.

Clare Gray: You have a lot of challenges to tackle, and we wish you all the best for the next five years. Thank you very much.

Dubravka Šuica: Thank you, I'm looking forward [to it].