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Stenbäck has been a member of the Finnish parliament (1970-1985) during which time he was the Minister of Education (1979-1982), Minister of Foreign Relations (1982-1983) and Party Leader of the Swedish People's Party (1977-1985).

He has also been the General Secretary for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Geneva.

In these difficult times, Europeans need to reflect on how far we have progressed as a union. Now is not the time to fan the flames of dissent and social agitation that last swept through Europe in the 1930s, writes Minister Pär Stenbäck.

When you try to dive into a subject you find important, the first thing you often do is to open the web. I did it. I searched for the subject, "The Relevance of Europe", and I expected to find vast quantities of articles, dissertations, opinion polls and so on.

Not so: the headlines revealed that the question of relevance for Europe seems to be limited to special professional fields, technical, health-related and economic. I looked in vain for the heavy-weight opinion pieces, op-eds, about the future of Europe in a globalised world, lamentations about the old world sinking into oblivion, an ageing continent that has lost out in the fierce competition with both the US and China, not to speak of the new kids on the block like India and Brazil.

Nevertheless, this issue of the relevance of our old continent is far from irrelevant and it has certainly been an underlying theme in many debates all over Europe and in many sectors of life and society. Now, we will try to apply the question (of relevance) to culture: has European culture a meaningful role inside Europe and, in a larger

context, is European culture relevant to the rest of the world?

A short overview: we are now at a dramatic point in time when Europe is fighting for its economic future, let it be that only the eurozone is closely involved in this battle for survival – we know that the outcome will also have repercussions for the rest of Europe, and for the whole world. In that sense Europe is no doubt relevant through the law of interdependence, which has become the dominant feature of the global financial market.

By now we should have concluded that, after the immediate crisis has been overcome – if this is to happen – there are only two alternatives for Europe: either to give up on the dream of a prosperous continent with gradually disappearing inequality in living standards between the regions and states, through sharing the burdens and levelling the barriers. This would mean going back to the nation-state, a divided Europe, with increasing competition between states, social unrest (like Greece today) and deepening divisions between regions and between ethnic groups. As a peace project, Europe would fade and perhaps the old animosities would return in the next generation with the same disastrous consequences we know so well from the European history of the last century. We must realise that economic turbulence and social upheaval are strong indicators for political change in a fundamental and populist direction, which ultimately can turn nations away from the democratic path.

The alternative, as I see it, is to learn from this crisis and accept that integration has its own dynamics. It cannot succeed by going slow; it must go forward. I have always been somehow hesitant when asked to choose between a federal Europe and a Europe of nation states, but I must admit that this crisis has tipped the scale towards stricter rules, self-discipline and sanctions if agreed rules are not followed. The longer this economic chaos prevails, the thinner the credibility of a common European future grows. Europe must come out of this maelstrom stronger, not weaker – by accepting its destiny, which is growing together.

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European relevance in the world is its greatest experiment in history, creating a union based on soft power, economic integration and peaceful solutions to issues creating tensions. This union must grow, being non-discriminatory in its policies to those European countries not yet members or associates. And it must allow cultural and linguistic diversities to prevail and flourish. Europe is strong if the ideas of liberalism, tolerance and openness become the mainstream ideology all over the continent. The European Cultural Parliament (ECP) has stressed so many times that cultural diversity is the goal of this integration process, not cultural standardization and uniformity.

Europe has been declared irrelevant in many other aspects: defence, demographic future, capacity to uphold the welfare state, economic competitiveness, competence to solve ethnic questions, etc. Many of these sectors can be addressed only on a European level, not through national efforts alone.

I do not intend to dwell on all of these areas; instead let us look at the mental situation in today's Europe. If I use this term strictly, I can refer to a recent research report from the European College of Neuro-psychopharmacology, covering all 27 EU countries plus Norway, Iceland and Switzerland. Some 14 % of the citizens suffered from anxiety disorders (71 % of these were women), 7% from insomnia, 6.9% from depression and 3.4% from alcohol dependence (77% of these were men). Altogether, 38% of us Europeans suffer from some sort of mental disorder.

No, let's not continue on this path – and end by calling Europe a sick continent. I was reminded of a book by sir Philip Gibbs, a war correspondent in the First World War, who in 1934 made a trip by car through five Central European countries, among them Hungary. Everywhere, he noted in his book "European Journey", he found signs of the coming new crisis and everywhere he met decent and reasonable people who wanted to see the threats diffused to avoid a new disaster throwing the continent in flames once more. And he described the symptoms: economic misery, unemployment, growing fundamentalism, populist politicians, strong nationalist feelings, agitation against social and ethnic minorities, contempt of contemporary art and culture, nations growing apart instead of uniting against the destructive forces abandoning democracy and human rights.

I will not claim that 2011 can be compared to 1934. It is accepted wisdom that Europe has changed for the better during these 77 years. But, also, today impossible and astonishing things happen. The political shifts are fast and elections are fought only to get the ruling party out, regardless of the alternative. Our political leaders do not seem to be in control, no-one knows where Europe is heading and faith in the political establishment is diminishing because it cannot produce a credible vision even for the near future.

This is to a surprising degree a reminder of the same disease that Gibbs recorded in 1934. He dreamt of more European unity, fewer borders and custom duties, a stronger European identity and responsibility for the rest of the world outside Europe. So, how lucky we are, because all of this has happened, more or less? We seem to have moved in the right direction, we have the instruments and institutions to fight the deadly diseases of the 1930s. We need to defend the results achieved and survive over the current crisis and come back more united, as a model for the rest of the world. We have to accept that there is no New and well established World Order after the end of the Cold War, but at the same time we must impress on our minds that there is a New European Order and that we must build on that historic achievement.

This Viewpoint is based on Minister Stenbäck's opening speech at the European Cultural Parliament's 10th meeting in Pécs, Hungary on 14 October.