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## José Manuel Barroso: 'Not everything I did was right'

On his final day, the former European Commission president explains his actions during two terms

Peter Spiegel NOVEMBER 4 2014

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Friday broke sunny and warm in Brussels, a rarity for late October in the Belgian capital. But as José Manuel Barroso exited the imposing wrought-iron front gate of his home, a three-storey townhouse in the central Etterbeek neighbourhood, his face was sour.

The night before had been the second late one in a row for the outgoing European Commission president, brokering an ultimately successful deal between Kiev and Moscow to ensure gas deliveries would continue to Ukraine this winter, and he appeared tired. Plus, he had awoken with an upset stomach.

"Yesterday I did not eat," he lamented. "I just had those canapés for the Russians, and I don't know what our people prepare for the Russians."

But it was not just his digestion fouling his mood. As he sat in the back of a black BMW taking him to the commission's headquarters in the Berlaymont building for the final time, Mr Barroso admitted to experiencing *saudade*, or melancholic nostalgia.

"It's a mix. On the one side, I'm looking forward to my new life. I think it's great at 58 to have the ability to restart," he said, as his driver steered the car into the tunnel that leads to the Berlaymont's underground parking lot. "At the same time, there is a sadness . . . If I was 10 years younger, I would do it again. This is the kind of job I would pay to do."

The Financial Times was given exclusive access to Mr Barroso during the last day of his 10 years in office, accompanying him as he wound up what is almost certainly the stormiest tenure of any man who has held the job since the "high authority" of the European Coal and Steel Community, as the post was first known, was created more than 60 years ago.

Not only did Mr Barroso head the EU executive through the bloc's first truly existential crisis – the near break-up of the eurozone – but he also spearheaded the so-called "Eastern Partnership" the commission's outreach programme to ex-

may yet find its future threatened by anti-EU parties of the far left and right that have found continent-wide support in the wake of the crisis.

Similarly, the Ukrainian conflict unleashed by then-president Viktor Yanukovich's eleventh-hour decision to renounce a Barroso-backed EU integration treaty last November has receded into a smouldering ceasefire. But while the uneasy stand-off could see Ukraine land safely into a western embrace, the conflict could just as easily reignite at the instigation of Russian President Vladimir Putin – and even spread, [agitating Russian minorities](#) in ex-Soviet republics that are already EU members.

“Frankly, for me my conscience is enough. I did my best during these years and this I think even my critics recognise,” Mr Barroso, now seated in an office of empty bookshelves and voids on the wall where Portuguese modern art once hung, says when asked about his legacy.

### **Facing his critics**

After a decade in office, Mr Barroso's critics are legion. Many accuse him of acting too cautiously in the face of the eurozone brushfire, of failing to stand up to the big EU member states on critical issues, of naïveté in his outreach to Ukraine. Mr Barroso is fully aware of the criticisms – many of the loudest of which have come from Berlin, where German officials often lost faith in the commission's ability to manage the eurozone at the height of the crisis – and acknowledged his tenure has not been without its failings.

“I'm not going to pretend everything I did was right,” Mr Barroso says.

### **Putin has told me that he would not have an objection in principle regarding membership of Ukraine to the EU**

**Barroso on Putin's view of Ukraine-EU ties**

But in a series of interviews throughout the day, he vigorously defended his actions during the crisis – he proudly recalled a Berlaymont dinner with chief economists from several banks where all but one predicted a Greek exit from the euro – and ticked off a litany of issues where he locked horns with EU powerhouses: fighting Paris on international trade, Berlin on auto fuel efficiency standards, London on the EU budget.

they sounded scripted. But it was when Mr Barroso was asked about the EU's talks with Ukraine, which have been portrayed by some in Washington as having recklessly provoked Mr Putin, that he became emotional.

"We were perfectly aware of all of the risks," he said, his voice rising with pique. "I spoke with Putin several times, and he told us how important for him was the customs union, the [Eurasian Union](#), and the specific role he saw for Ukraine. But should we have given up? Should we say, 'OK, Vladimir, Ukraine is yours, do whatever you want?' That is the logical consequence of what they are saying. That's perfectly unacceptable."

His devotion to the emerging democracies of central and eastern Europe – a stance heavily coloured by his own political awakening as a young activist against Portugal's dictatorship – put Mr Barroso on the wrong side of Mr Putin.

A 2009 diplomatic cable from the US embassy in Moscow, made public by WikiLeaks, asserted Mr Barroso even then was viewed by Mr Putin "as the 'Trojan horse' of the new EU states, whose message that 'family is closer than friends' had worn thin in Moscow".

But unlike [Angela Merkel](#), the German chancellor who reportedly said Mr Putin has become "irrational", and his own trade commissioner Karel De Gucht, who recently told reporters Mr Putin "is somebody who doesn't like Europe", Mr Barroso said Mr Putin understands his country's future lies to the west and should not be shunned.

**The show must go on.  
Why? [Pessimists]  
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interdependence**

Barroso on European integration

He has met the Russian president more than two dozen times, and recalls their first meeting: a dinner lasting nearly four hours at Mr Putin's dacha outside Moscow, in which Mr Putin depicted the EU and Russia as two members of a team of Christian nations facing terrorism from abroad.

"One of the first things he said to me was, 'How many are we,' and by 'we' he meant

not have an objection in principle regarding membership of Ukraine to the EU. Membership!”

Mr Barroso is equally confident that what George Osborne, the UK finance minister, once called “the remorseless logic” of the eurozone – that a single currency requires even more centralisation of economic policy making in Brussels – was still achievable despite rising anti-euro sentiment in core EU countries.

### **Stalled integration**

Voter backlash and market calm have stalled efforts towards further economic and political integration, a fact even the powerful Ms Merkel learnt the hard way when her push to require binding economic reform contracts for all 18 eurozone governments fell short at an EU summit this spring.

But Mr Barroso said he believed that failure was merely another temporary setback that occasionally befalls EU integration, much like the French and Dutch rejections of an EU constitution in 2005 – which was followed by a treaty to overhaul the EU that was almost as ambitious just four years later.

**The [EU] institutions are much stronger than before. But the peoples, the old prejudices, are still there**

**Barroso on North-south divisions**

“One of the lessons of the crisis is that the forces of integration are stronger than the forces of disintegration,” he insists, arguing that even as voters revolt against Brussels, leaders know they cannot now reverse course – lest they risk a return to the days where markets openly questioned the euro’s existence. “The show must go on. Why? [Pessimists] underestimate the level of economic interdependence and the centripetal forces in political integration.”

Mr Barroso said he saw leaders exhibiting “petty consideration of only the national interest without considering the common good”. And within countries, he worries about [Catalans and Flemings advocating independence](#) rather than supporting poorer Spanish and Belgian countrymen.

“The [EU] institutions are much stronger than before,” he said. “But the peoples, the old prejudices of the north to the south, and the prejudices of the south to the north, are still there. Of course, I’m not naive; I knew perfectly well the basic political community reference is the nation state. But I would have liked to see more instinctive solidarity, and it was very hard work.”

### **‘Same enthusiasm for Europe’**

Mr Barroso is not one to dwell on failures or doubts, however. He declares himself as having “the same enthusiasm for Europe” as he did as a young idealist, and by late afternoon – following phone calls from current and former world leaders to wish him well, and a handful of final media appearances – his mood had improved markedly.

He regaled a klatch of aides that had gathered in his office with tales of his attempts to learn to drive again, which included a recent weekend session in the parking lot of a Brussels Ikea. He admitted that the thing he worries most about in civilian life is the intrusive airport screenings he will have to undergo when he visits the US.

Indeed, he was enjoying his long farewell so much that his office assistants worried they still did not know when he planned on departing. “He has to leave here by 8 o’clock,” fretted one nervously, noting that electricians were due to begin rewiring

## **Timeline: highlights and low points of a decade in power**

**July 2004:** Surprise choice as European Commission president, a compromise after countries could not agree on Guy Verhofstadt, prime minister of Belgium, or British commissioner Chris Patten

**May/June 2005:** The Netherlands and France reject new EU constitution, at the time the most serious setback to integration in the bloc's history

**January 2007:** Accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU, the last of the "big bang" enlargement from the former communist bloc

**December 2007:** EU members sign the Lisbon treaty, creating a new European Council president to rival commission president's supremacy

**June 2009:** Chosen overwhelmingly to serve another five years as president after opposition social democrats fail to back a challenger

**December 2009:** EU fails to win global limits to greenhouse gas emissions at UN climate conference in Copenhagen

**May 2010:** First Greek bailout agreed; start of eurozone crisis

**November 2013:** Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich rejects integration treaty with EU at summit in Vilnius, setting off months of protests

