

Mário Soares, The Community option, eight years on (June 1993)

Caption: In June 1993, the Lisbon-based magazine *Expansão* publishes an article by Mário Soares, President of the Portuguese Republic, in which he gives an assessment of the economic and political situation eight years after Portugal's accession to the European Communities.

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The Community option, eight years on*

1. Reason for being

I have always thought that the necessary counterpoint to the decolonisation that inevitably followed the 25 April Revolution was Portugal's integration into the European Community. It was not easy to negotiate with our future European partners. The bill for them was not very attractive. We, however, held the moral high ground, since we had rid ourselves of the dictatorship and were in the process of putting an end to 13 long years of a deadlocked and hopeless colonial war that ran counter to United Nations recommendations.

In 1975, while campaigning in the first free elections held in Portugal since the First Republic, the motto that I used was 'Europe With Us'. And so it was: Community Europe eventually accepted a new enlargement, and Portuguese integration was formalised on 12 June 1985 with the official signing of the Treaty of Accession in the Jerónimos Monastery. Portugal, however, had no other strategic alternative, as the next few years were to demonstrate.

Yet there were other reasons that militated in favour of integration: our concern to become part of a political framework that was formally in favour of consolidating democracy after almost half a century of dictatorship; the need to give added momentum to the international integration of the Portuguese economy which had already begun and the terms of which were radically altered in the 1970s because of the concentration of foreign trade in the Community market; the oil crisis; the results of the United Kingdom's accession to the EEC; and the enlargement of the Community to include the countries of southern Europe — which was to oblige us in any event to change our relations with Spain.

Portugal's accession to the Community should thus be seen as an appropriate global strategic response to the changes observed. It was, therefore, a fundamental political option that was firmly grounded on defending Portugal's permanent long-term interests. It was, in addition, given democratic legitimacy by a very broad party-political consensus that was clearly expressed in the Portuguese Parliament.

The real balance of accession in these first seven years confirms the option taken at the time. Integration into the Community has made an irreplaceable contribution to improving Portugal's capacity to assert itself in the world, to controlling international means of action proportionately superior to our size as a nation, and, above all, to restoring and developing relations with other areas and cultures that form part of our historical heritage.

This is an important point: not only did Portugal's accession to the Community not prove to be incompatible with its African responsibilities (as some would have it); on the contrary, it gave it influence and significance in the current international context. Like Brazil and other countries to which we are linked by the bonds of the diaspora or of memory, such as the United States, Canada, South Africa, India, Australia, China and even Japan, the interest of Portuguese-speaking African countries in and their respect for Portugal has grown significantly since we have been full members of the European Community.

Accession also allowed Portugal to secure development resources which it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to raise and use in other circumstances. This gave us the possibility, so often denied by history because we are a country on the periphery of Europe, of establishing a direct link to the central decision-making core of Europe, in the economic arena as well as in terms of culture and science.

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Portugal's integration into Community Europe represented, within the timeframe of present generations, the most consistent and perhaps even the only opportunity for Portugal to gain access to European standards of development.

This objective in itself would be worth a special collective effort, although it is important to stress that development does not only concern the welfare of its citizens and the country's material progress. It is also an important factor in raising our external profile and ensuring a more balanced management of the various

levels of dependence that no State can now avoid.

In this sense, I repeat, European integration represents, overall, a gain rather than a loss of sovereign power (as some still claim), if we take this expression to mean a nation's capacity to assert itself among others. As we are aware, in the terms in which it is now proposed, the European Union partially calls into question certain powers of the State but not of the nation. I would say that it involves the sharing and joint management of important administrative powers, but this does not encroach upon national identity or the permanent values and interests associated with it. Quite the contrary, in fact.

2. A changing project

It is important to stress that what is known as the 'European project' is not a static framework whose definition is set in stone. Integration into the Community, therefore, cannot be considered to be a process confined within the strict terms of the Treaty of Accession. It must, on the contrary, be understood as a continually changing objective or, more accurately, as a process of permanent negotiation.

The truth is that the reality of today's Community now has very little to do with the essential reference points and problems that faced Portugal when it became a Member State in 1985. The Single Act, the process of developing the internal market, the signing and ratification of the Treaty on European Union and the reform of the common agricultural policy are telling illustrations of what has changed since we acceded. This is why I, a self-confessed militant pro-European, would have preferred the Treaty of Maastricht to have been ratified after direct consultation of the people in the form of a referendum. Since there is no doubt as to the outcome — a majority in favour — such consultation would be a very useful guarantee for the insecure and complex future that I foresee on the horizon.

Since the implosion of Communism in 1989, the changes in the world have been so numerous and of such a nature that they have completely changed the assumptions and reference points that underpinned the system of security and the geostrategic framework that existed in the decades following the end of the Second World War. The globalisation of markets, remarkable technological progress and the persistent economic recession simultaneously affecting the three major world development poles — the United States, Europe and Japan — have given rise to entirely new situations and problems. A consistent and cooperative response to all this, in order to create a new world balance, is late in coming, hence the enormous uncertainty of the era in which we live.

Europe's political borders were called into question once again. War returned to our continent after 47 years with the tragic outbreak of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. The unknown factors that threaten the immediate future of the countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union are a major concern, since they could generate new, deep-seated changes. There is, as yet, no definition of a new Europe-wide hierarchy of powers and values, to which Community Europe, conceived in the old days of the bipolar world, has so far been unable to provide a coherent response. This response must be found — consistently and in good time — otherwise the Community may not live up to its historic responsibilities and may, at the same time, lose a unique opportunity to assert itself globally.

Community Europe — despite its internal problems and uncertainties — is the most favourable and perhaps even the sole framework around which it will be possible to develop the new European architecture as a whole. From this point of view — and in the current stage of European development — this is also why failure to ratify the Treaty on European Union would be a political set-back with serious consequences and an enormous frustration that we must avoid at all costs.

Yet the Treaty of Maastricht — which provides for its own revision in 1996 — must, once again, be seen as a starting point and a framework instrument rather than a finished process or full stop. It is common knowledge that I am not a keen supporter of Maastricht because I believe that the Treaty contains countless ambiguities — which have now been clarified to a greater or lesser degree — and is open to what may even be diverging interpretations. In the words of Professor Ralf Dahrendorf, however, who qualifies as it as 'an unfortunate Treaty', it must be ratified as quickly as possible so that Europe can move forward.

What is more, the problem of European Union enlargement cannot be disregarded any longer: it will occupy the Community political agenda over the next few years. And, when I speak of enlargement, I am referring not only to the area covered by EFTA, a more or less peaceful issue, but also to other European countries which, having abandoned Communism, are building democratic institutions, redefining their national areas and seeking to develop along market economy lines. This project is likely to take over a decade and will have to be carried out gradually, presupposing various levels of integration, without doubt, but also a clear political will, i.e. one whose intentions cannot legitimately be called into question.

Obviously, the European Union also involves considerable institutional progress at supranational level that will have to be made legitimate by greater democratic control. Coordinating Member State foreign and defence policies, building a social Europe based on the European Social Charter and developing European citizenship are issues that will have to progress in line with the construction of economic and monetary union. They cannot be dissociated. The European Union will have to be an area of solidarity — or it will not be — which means that relations between Member States will have to develop cohesively and on an equal footing. Accordingly, the concept of a variable-speed Europe is unacceptable.

It cannot, in the interim, keep itself to itself and languish in its internal problems — no matter how much pressure is exerted from outside, to the east and south, by hugely significant migratory tensions — on pain of losing its essential stabilising function and the role that it should have in creating a new world order.

Accordingly, the ratification of Maastricht — a process which has still not been concluded at the time of writing — does not close the debate on the future of Europe and its component States and peoples. On the contrary, it is no more than an initial manifestation that now provides us with precious lessons for the entirely new stage on which we must embark rapidly and with courage.

3. A demanding project for Portugal

Thanks to European integration, Portugal is, for the first time in its long history, at the decision-making core where the destiny of Europe is being forged. This is a situation of inestimable value that we must exploit to the full.

Integration and its associated modernisation obviously require far-reaching reforms, involving complex and not always pleasant consequences for Portuguese citizens. Basically, I believe that we must fulfil four requirements before we can aspire to be a developed country: we must transform and radically enhance (by consensus as far as possible) the system for educating and training our human resources, pave the way for a true ‘productivity shake-up’ by restructuring the entire production sector (which is so seriously affected at the moment), modernise the State and the administration, streamlining and decentralising its structures, and pursue a much-needed and ambitious infrastructure programme.

Despite the difficulties and costs which are beginning to influence Portuguese opinion and despite occasional incompatibilities, of the possible options available, the European Community is the most advantageous framework for conferring viability on what could be seen as a genuine revolution in our collective life and for achieving it reasonably safely and predictably. It is up to the political leaders, both in government and opposition, to make the negotiating margins flexible and to adjust the rate of changes to the real conditions of Portuguese society.

The fact that some changes may be unpopular in the immediate term should, naturally, not preclude them. They will, however, oblige us to demand that they should be made with equity, social justice and in the national interest. It is rare for any problem to have only one solution. Proposals should therefore be democratically analysed and debated, with due regard for the responsibilities and powers of each decision-making body. Furthermore, it is necessary, above all, for the sacrifices to be shared out equally so that the perception of social cohesion which is so necessary and which is rightly claimed as a primary objective at European level is not lost.

The significant resources that Portugal will continue to have available in its own right — as a result of the development of European integration and the approval of the ‘Delors II Package’ — require the political and social agents to take greater responsibility in terms of meeting the expectations of structural modernisation which the Portuguese people have justifiably nurtured.

I am certain the expected reforms will constitute an ideal opportunity to improve social welfare systems and dilute the phenomena of exclusion created by the disappearance of certain industries and the exodus from some regions. It seems to me essential to pay greater attention to the qualitative aspects of economic growth so that the country’s modernisation can become a genuine process of development. In this connection, a more effective education system, better health and welfare and social security provisions, better living conditions, the preservation of the environmental balance and the battle against a deteriorating quality of life on the peripheries of the major urban centres are key issues of modernisation that economic growth will not resolve on its own unless consistent voluntary policies, based as far as possible on consensus, are applied.

Modernisation also involves a democratically mature and responsible political society which is capable of naturally respecting the separation of powers (an essential factor in a democracy), which quietly accepts the differences of opinion and open criticism inherent in pluralism, and which calmly assumes the transient nature particular to any democratic power which, as we are aware, is based on the rule that the wheel turns full circle.

These are essential conditions for changes to occur without excessive conflict — which would be extremely detrimental to the country — in an atmosphere of confidence, with a sense of State and with the greatest respect for Portugal’s permanent interests.

In summary, Portugal’s European integration is a historic opportunity for modernisation that must not be squandered. Portugal will have to be an active presence in the Community, with an original voice, and it will have to make a useful contribution commensurate with its glorious history and with what those who know the value of our culture and identity expect from us.

* Article written in June 1993 and published in the magazine *Expansão* .