

'Three historic minutes' from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (17 April 2003)

Caption: The German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung describes the atmosphere surrounding the official ceremony held on 16 April 2003, in Athens, to mark the signing of the Treaty of Accession to the European Union by Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. ; Herausgeber KILZ, H. W.; SITTNER, G. 17.04.2003. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "Drei historische Minuten", auteur:Schlötzer, Christiane , p. 2.

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Last updated: 06/01/2017

EU Summit in Athens

Almost everyone talked about a ‘historic moment’, yet, on the fringes of the meeting of the 25 Heads of State or Government convened to seal the accession of the new EU Member States, there were notes of discord to be heard, with quite a few countries opposing the German-backed idea of a full-time EU President. Germany’s Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, is reported to have ruled out Turkey’s accession to the EU long ago.

Three historic minutes

Leaders given only a few words to mark the historic scene

by Christiane Schlötzer

Blue police buses parked across the wide street blocked the road to the National Gardens in Athens, along which Europe’s leaders walked on carefully weeded paths to the EU enlargement summit. Behind the buses with their grilled windows, policemen had put their white helmets on the ground, forming a geometric pattern which made the police guard look as if they were performing a classical ballet. Little Greece wanted to provide a big stage to mark the occasion when the Community grew from 15 to 25 nations. At least they got the scenery right.

Hardly any of the speakers could refrain from referring to the inspired location chosen, the 116-metre-long marble colonnade of the Stoa of Attalos under the Acropolis, the birthplace of modern democracy. Greek protocol allowed the 25 Heads of State or Government only three minutes each. Hardly a single speaker, including the German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, and the Greek Prime Minister, Kostas Simitis, managed to avoid the word ‘historic’. But there were still subtle differences in what was said.

New additions to the family

The new arrivals tended to look inwards. For example, Estonia’s President, Arnold Rüütel, declared that ‘this is a great day for the people of Estonia’, then added: ‘and for Europe too’. Old EU hands, like the UK’s Tony Blair, on the other hand, looked outwards, as if the EU was still too small. Even countries that are not here today might look forward to being admitted to the EU family, Blair announced. This was a reference to the Balkan countries, and principally Croatia, on which Brussels has already set its sights. But Blair also mentioned Romania, Bulgaria and even Turkey, still plagued by doubts about its suitability. So too did Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi, who called the EU a ‘Union of peace’.

But there has not been much peace in the Community recently. The war in Iraq, waged by the USA and the UK with the support of new EU Member States like Poland, has torn the Union apart politically as no other global event has done for a long time now. In Athens, however, just as the Greeks would have wished, no one wanted to rub salt into the wounds. The Athens declaration on enlargement, which all the Government Heads were able to approve with nods and smiles because it simply states the obvious in the nicest possible way, does not even mention Iraq.

Protocol ensured that the two advocates of the war, Tony Blair and José María Aznar, appeared on the podium immediately after each other. Even Mr Blair allowed himself only one passing reference to the war. In times of disagreement, he said, the Accession Treaty was even more important. The Accession Treaty runs to 5 000 pages, and two representatives from each country were allowed to sign it. Before the Summit there had been a certain amount of wrangling, because many of the negotiators who had spent countless hours in subcommittees fine-tuning the many articles would have liked to wield the pen themselves. However, the Greeks had put out just two thick books for the signatures on a heavy, dark wooden table, right in front of the podium. So the same scene was played out 25 times: appearance on the podium and signature at the table — also a kind of ballet.

On the morning before the act under the Acropolis, all the various figures involved in the enlarged European

chorus sat down to a meal together. The huge table struck Germany's Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer as a metaphor for the problems that 'this enlarged Union could face in operative terms'. 'Operative' is EU-speak. What it means is that the enlarged Union urgently needs an internal constitution to help it to remain workable. No agreement has yet been reached in Athens on the shape of this constitution, but those attending the Summit did not want to allow this to spoil the celebrations. Joschka Fischer preached 'Periclean optimism' and promised that the differences could be bridged. Even he couldn't avoid an historical allusion, in his case to the great state reformer of Greek antiquity.

Only a few obstinate opponents of the war refused to join in the celebrations under the deep blue, almost cloudless Greek sky. They fought a short battle with the police. Helmets were put back on for that.