

'Aimless odyssey' from Die Zeit (12 December 1997)

Caption: On 12 December 1997, commenting on the achievements of the Luxembourg European Council held on 12 and 13 December, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit outlines the European Union's uncertainty regarding future enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the implementation of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and criticises the German Government's lack of initiatives in terms of European policy.

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Aimless odyssey

The resounding phrases are not misplaced. The ‘reunification of the continent’ has now begun. Europe is on the way to ‘overcoming Yalta’. At least the arsenal of terms with which the 15 Heads of State or Government of the European Union will be operating at their Luxembourg Summit this weekend befits this ‘historic challenge’ — to quote yet another of these bombastic mantras. Since the fateful year of 1989, the Eastern Europeans have been making strenuous efforts. Gentle and bloody revolutions have been consigned to the history books by Czechs, Poles and Romanians, and the nations of Eastern Europe are now embroiled in the struggle to restructure their political and economic systems. Their aim is to join the ‘West’, in other words to enjoy freedom, democracy and prosperity. They simply call it Europe.

The prosperous West, however, is not ready for the East. Months ago, Helmut Kohl made the gloomy prediction that, if the 15 leaders were to vote at the Luxembourg Summit on whether to open the doors of the European Union, it was doubtful whether a majority would support the proposal. The Chancellor’s prognosis reflects a realistic assessment of the current mood. Western Europeans have, hitherto, greeted the transformation in the East with domestic stagnation and a level of serenity suggesting the absence of almost any sense of history. They look on in silence, because they do not know what to do.

The reasons for this helplessness are deep-rooted. This, at least, is the view of Peter Ludlow of the Centre for European Policy Studies. The head of the Brussels think-tank talks of a real crisis. We do not have a compass, he says, to tell us where we are, let alone a map to show us where we are going. The foundations of the European edifice, in other words the basic consensus among the 15 Governments about the position and orientation of the EU, have long been crumbling away.

The paradox is that, while the nations work their way through the strict timetable for monetary union and their leaders call for eastward enlargement, the EU has lost its bearings. Europe 97 is an aimless odyssey in uncharted territory.

Against this backdrop, the ‘reunification of Europe’ is degenerating into a series of piecemeal ventures. Five chosen countries have been invited to engage in serious accession negotiations, but the Latvians, Lithuanians, Romanians, Bulgarians and Slovaks are not among them — at least for the time being. This exposes the state of mind on each side of the continent: the East is champing at the bit, while the West is pulling on the reins. Although it is true that Slovakia, under Vladimír Mečiar, has yet to become conversant with democracy and that all five stragglers still have numerous economic reforms ahead of them before they can begin to compete in the single European market, their situation is by no means a million miles away from that of the preferred applicants, namely the Poles, Hungarians, Slovenes, Czechs and Estonians. Beginning next spring, these nations will be able to send delegations to Brussels for an admission examination; thanks to Greek protection, Cyprus will be joining them.

There is no room for more. Even this ‘Five plus One’ formula elicits an audible groan from the existing Union. The ‘Eurocracy’ will creak under the additional strain. The Foreign Ministers, especially the permanently harassed Klaus Kinkel, are aghast at the prospect of overcrowded appointments diaries. The Brussels machinery has its limits, too; as one ambassador said, ‘No one can expect us to absorb eleven all at once.’

It is certainly clear that this Summit in Luxembourg will not initiate a new beginning for Europe. The best that can be hoped for is an ‘enlargement summit’. In the worst-case scenario, the argument about the ‘European credentials’ of Turkey will be exacerbated. For months, the diplomatic corps in Brussels has been vainly seeking a formula that will put Ankara’s aspirations on hold without alienating it. There is quite simply a lack of resolve among the leaders to do their own homework. Accordingly, the original plan to outline, at least in broad brush strokes, the long-overdue reform of the EU itself has slipped off the agenda.

The reconciliation of East and West is already opening up new divisions in Europe, this time between North and South. The rivers Oder and Neisse are faraway places in the eyes of Spaniards and Portuguese; conversely, Germans and Scandinavians are much more familiar with the Baltic States than with the province of Alentejo. Enlargement is forcing Brussels to rediscover geography and geopolitics.

The rest is a distribution battle, in other words more or less business as usual. The Government in Madrid, for example, has particular reason to fear that the enlargement of the Union will shortly deprive it of many thousands of millions in subsidies from the EU treasury. Meanwhile, the governments of the wealthier countries, led by Bonn, are refusing to increase their future contributions to the Community. The Agriculture Ministers are the only ones who are refusing to be hemmed in. Like stateless partisans, they are fighting on all fronts so that they may continue plundering half of the annual EU budget of 165 billion marks for their farmers. Since everyone will ultimately have to share in funding the development of Eastern Europe, the general attitude is that the longer it takes Europe's Easterners to arrive, the less their accession will cost. Time is money, and hard cash is in short supply in the East.

If the Luxembourg Summit were to herald the first accession talks after all, this would also mean that enlargement would precede consolidation of the European integration process. Convinced integrationists can only hope that the euro will be cured of its internal ailments and that, by the time that the first applicants appear on the doorstep, we shall be so painfully aware of the effects of unfinished reforms that we shall finally get round to putting our house in order. As one of the Brussels diplomats cautioned, however, we shall not manage it alone. Political scientists Josef Janning and Claus Giering of the University of Munich predict that Brussels will scarcely recognise itself any more by the middle of the next decade. Like monetary union, they say, enlargement will change both how Europe is seen and how it sees itself. The return of the East to the European fold, they believe, will dissolve the political and cultural niche established by the Western Member States.

There is still time. Monetary union will begin in 1999, and it will be four years before the first euro coins are issued. Negotiations with the Eastern European applicants will also take time — at least five years and perhaps even ten.

One Brussels veteran, of all people, is now loudly appealing for this time to be used to the full. Belgian diplomat Philippe de Schoutheete says that the EU has no spirit, no soul and warns that the project is in danger of becoming a technocrats' concoction. Ambassador de Schoutheete himself participated in the Maastricht and Amsterdam negotiations; for ten years, as his country's envoy to the EU, he was a member of the Permanent Representatives Committee. No one is more familiar than he with the constraints and haggling that are part and parcel of that power centre of the Brussels machinery. Scarcely had he retired before he wrote a book (*Une Europe pour tous*, Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 1997; English translation: *The case for Europe: unity, diversity, and democracy in the European Union*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Colorado, 2000), in which he said that the process of building Europe had stalled *precisely because of the euro and eastward enlargement*.

The EU is in crisis because of its failure to explain itself. The implications of that failure were illustrated by Europe's leaders themselves in June. At the summit negotiations on a new Treaty for the European Union, numerous Heads of Government refused, for fear of their sceptical populations back home, to condone the very reforms that would have equipped Brussels for eastward expansion: root-and-branch reform of the Union's outdated institutions and, most importantly, wider scope for decisions to be taken by majority vote instead of being subject to a unanimity requirement. With even Helmut Kohl digging his heels in to preserve his Government's power of veto, there is a danger that more Member States will mean still more unilateral blockades — and still more frustration.

Philippe de Schoutheete's main recommendation for an escape route from this impasse is that Europe should finally get round to defining its mission. There is, however, no appetite at all for that particular task at the present time, as he well knows. There was a time, during the dispute over the Fouchet plans in the early 1960s, when the European Communities were bold enough to engage in such a debate. The alternatives at that time — a federal state or a confederation of states — are no longer on the agenda. The last attempt to imbue the EU with some sort of 'federal vocation' collapsed in 1991 during those long nights in Maastricht. Since then, all has been at rest in this respect over the landscape of the EU.

The last thing that we want when Europe is under stress is a debate on first principles — that is the message

proclaimed by almost everyone in Brussels. The seeds of doubt, however, are germinating in some minds, such as that of Silvio Fagiolo, the leading Italian diplomat who negotiated the Treaty of Amsterdam on behalf of his country. Since the time of the founding father Jean Monnet, he says, 'Europe has been advancing in small, pragmatic steps. We have no other method.' There have been no great architectural blueprints — it is simply a matter of cementing one stone after another.

Since the lopsided Amsterdam compromise, however, Dr Fagiolo has been rethinking matters. 'Perhaps,' he says, 'we are no longer progressing with this approach.' Sometimes, as he quietly acknowledges, united Europe seems like 'an old temple somewhere in the jungle that is gradually being overgrown'. The rate of advance is too slow, and the Union is in 'danger of being overtaken by events, for history now appears to be moving faster than politics'.

Jacques Delors is a far more vociferous subscriber to this view. The former President of the European Commission makes no secret of his disappointment at the Amsterdam 'fiasco'. For fear of a row, he asserts, Europe's governmental thinkers shied away from discussing principles. There would have been a crisis, he says, but that would have been more fruitful than this threadbare partial compromise. Instead, Europe had continued to confuse means with ends. The single market, the euro and eastward enlargement, he said, were only means to an end.

And the end? 'That we Europeans want to live together.' Expressed in this vague and seemingly naive way, Delors' vision could be universally endorsed. The question, however, is how we are to live together. To this question, too, an answer can be found, albeit the hackneyed and somewhat pathetic answer 'in peace and social justice'. Amen! Then, however, in the maelstrom of everyday life in Brussels, the discussion is quickly drowned out. Yet this is the very place where the argument about Europe's aims and mission begins. Karl Lamers (CDU), a specialist in foreign policy, cautiously suggests where many German debates on Europe go wrong: 'We focus too much on where we have come from and too little on where we are going,' he says. He is well aware of the higher power to which this criticism could be applied. It no longer cuts any ice to declare, like Helmut Kohl, that monetary union is an issue of war or peace: the battles of Sedan and Verdun may not have been forgotten, but they finished a long time ago. It is precisely this apparently self-evident success of post-war Europe that makes it essential for the rationale of the European Union to be redefined following the end of the Cold War. The Chancellor, one-time scourge of the frontier barriers and the last European of his generation, is none too active on that front.

Europe's 'peace project' is not the euro but the opening of its doors to Eastern Europe. Eight years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, eastward expansion is being used as a means of safeguarding the future stability of the continent. By exporting its regulatory system as far as the River Bug, it seeks to support the establishment of a civil order and the market economy. Not even the largest Member State, Germany, could ever achieve that on its own. The project will be costly, swallowing far more resources than most EU Member States have, hitherto, been willing to release, and it will require them to be far more careful in their dealings with the supranational governing structure in Brussels that they themselves devised. As the new partners in Central and Eastern Europe remind us daily, no one likes to move into a half-finished house.

The euro serves the other purpose: in an age when economic globalisation is challenging national political sovereignty, Europeans can preserve their much-vaunted 'social model' only through concerted action. This does not require a 'superstate' to burgeon in Brussels. That particular concern is totally unfounded at all events, since the Brussels budget amounts to only 1.27 % of the Union's GNP. Rules must be made. The euro will compel politicians to make compromises which, particularly in Bonn, have hitherto been slated as 'interference in internal affairs'. Only if the European relevance of domestic policy is understood will the conditions be created for joint external action to harness globalisation.

This would not be an all-powerful interventionist Europe with a finger in every pie. The Union would, like a sort of multinational team of nightwatchmen, merely ensure that its peoples lived in secure surroundings by safeguarding peace, nurturing monetary stability and providing a framework of internal and external economic policy. And the old continent has already shown on occasion that it can perform on the larger stage — in the World Trade Organisation, for example, or at the climate negotiations in Kyoto, Japan, where, in the last few

days, the EU has established a degree of credibility as a counterweight to the ignorant American superpower. This, too, is politics for the future.

Europe will shortly have to learn its role for its debut in the world of international high finance. The euro requires it to make fresh efforts to this end — and it demands leadership. Of the Big Three Member States of the EU, the French Government alone seems to recognise how much of a boost the European integration process will derive from the single currency. Britain, of course, has not signed up for the euro, and the Germans are wavering.

The world has been turned upside down: while the political classes in Paris are launching a debate on European federalism, entirely new sceptical tones are being heard on the other side of the Rhine. Gone are the days when Bonn wanted to create political union alongside monetary union. Now a Junior Minister is promising that a 'British element' will characterise future German policy on Europe. Furthermore, one of the Chancellor's advisers has announced that the days of religiously held convictions are over, coming out of the closet to admit that 'I am not an integrationist.'

Brussels has registered this with alarm. Hitherto, observers have preferred to regard the 'Amsterdam shock' — the Chancellor's braking manoeuvre in the negotiations on the new EU Treaty — as a mere tactical ploy rather than part of a strategy designed to prevent further integration. There has been a tendency to seek solace in the thought that Helmut Kohl has simply been focusing all his efforts on his campaign for the euro.

Gradually, however, concerns have been emerging at EU headquarters about a 'Bavarianisation' of Bonn's policy on the future of Europe. Is it only electioneering? It is also possible that a new style is creeping in very gradually, that Germany is adopting, as it were, a 'normal' attitude to national sovereignty.

Observers are already putting two and two together. They recall that, only recently, the Chancellor warned against allowing a 'new Leviathan' to emerge in Brussels. At the same time, he abandoned his old ideal of a United States of Europe; that, he said, had been 'the wrong approach'. At the EU employment summit in November, German Ministers did their utmost to keep the agreements as vague as possible. And the negotiating position from which the Federal Government intends to approach eastward enlargement and closer convergence within the EU seems positively grotesque to its partners: Bonn wants the EU to open its doors quickly but rejects reform of the expensive agricultural policy. At the same time, it is even demanding a reduction in its future contributions to the Brussels budget.

At a time when Brussels is more anxious than ever for impetus from its largest Member State, nothing is forthcoming. Bonn, in the words of an experienced European civil servant, is showing little more than 'cybernetic leadership'. Like a robot, he says, the Germans do no more than respond to other parties' proposals. It is, at best, control by force of gravity, he asserts, not enterprising leadership.

In this way, the new Europe is lining up in a chaotic manner in the first instance. The differences are beginning to crystallise.

The hard core, the participants in monetary union, will meet quite informally in future in a 'Euro Council'. Although they at least managed, in the face of German opposition, to secure a place in this club for the European Commission, as the 'guardian of the Treaties', those who do not sign up for monetary union — presumably the British, Greeks, Danes and Swedes — will have to stay outside. Meanwhile, the 'reunification of the continent' is caught up in a tangle of 'European Conferences', ad hoc committees and 'accession partnerships'. Even Klaus Kinkel, who helped to dream up this construct, can no longer make sense of all these wheels within wheels in the absence of an explanatory diagram.

And what about the whole *Fifteen*? To date they have had no more than an inkling of the demands that closer integration and enlargement would make of them, of the speed with which the euro would be rolled out or of the fact that 'overcoming Yalta' would be more than a mere accession process. Scarcely has the Treaty of Amsterdam been signed, and voices are already calling for a 'Maastricht Mark III'. The unavoidable fact is that Europe must discuss its wretched constitution. Some aims are worth such effort.