

Guy Verhofstadt, A vision of Europe (21 September 2000)

Caption: On 21 September 2000, in Brussels, Guy Verhofstadt, Prime Minister of Belgium, presents his vision of Europe and suggests, amongst other things, that a declaration signed by the Fifteen be drawn up to indicate where the ultimate goal of the European Union lies.

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Guy Verhofstadt, *A vision of Europe*

Speech to the European Policy Center (21 September 2000)

Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last summer it was exactly fifty years ago that the then French minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Robert Schuman, made a proposal to bring the joint coal and steel production of France and Germany under one Common Authority. It was the first step towards the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community two years later. With the ECSC the seeds were sown of the European Union of today. It was the initial impetus to the development of a community approach, step by step forging the European integration by joining and sometimes also by abolishing national sovereignty into a joint approach.

This approach has proved to be quite successful since then. It led us almost straight from the Paris Convention and the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 to the Amsterdam Convention and the formation of the Economic and Monetary Union in 1997. The Six of 1952 became the Fifteen of 1995. In these 43 years it had become clear that the expansion of the Union was not an impediment to its reinforcement.

In the beginning of this new century the European Union is preparing for a new leap forward, both with regard to its size and its internal functioning. Negotiations are carried on with no less than twelve new candidate member states. Once these negotiations prove to be successful, almost all the states of Europe will for the first time in history be united into one Union.

With this new step it is of the utmost importance to keep in mind a global vision of the ultimate goal of the European unification. After 50 years, I believe that the time is ripe for it. Let me make it clear right from the start that the discussion about the ultimate goal must not be a pretext to ignore or to shelve any concrete problems with which we are confronted at this moment or to lower the level of ambition of the Intergovernmental Conference or to push it to the background.

I know that the main goal of the present Intergovernmental Conference is to make the European institutions operate in an efficient manner after enlargement. It is a conference that must ensure at all costs the operation of the Union, even when there will be 28 member states.

But this point of departure - which is correct - may not conceal a lack of ambition. We must use the present Intergovernmental Conference as much as possible to lay the foundations, which will lead to the achievement of the ultimate goal we have in mind for the European Union.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The debate about the ultimate goal of the European unification has faded into the background in the past few years. And that was probably not a mere coincidence. After the Maastricht and the Amsterdam Treaties, the realisation of the internal market, the creation of the economic and monetary union, it was time for a break. Still it would be wrong to make this break last too long. We have reached the point in the European integration where it would be a mistake to keep avoiding the debate on the ultimate goal of the Union.

In the past months, several European leaders, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, the French President, got this debate going again. And that is a good thing because the European Union as it is now could never be the ultimate goal, which we have in mind. It does not operate well enough for that. And what is even more important, the work is far from finished. The internal market is not completed. Important economic sectors have not been completely liberalised yet. The economic and monetary union does not have a socio-economic basis. The common security and defence policy is scarcely out of the egg. And the European space of justice

and security, which we baptised in Tampere, only exist on paper. We need to make progress in each of these domains. But that will be possible only if the ultimate goal which we wish to achieve is formulated first. For any process comes to a standstill when we lose sight of the objective. That is how it works. It is the dynamics caused by the debate about the ultimate goal that is the strength of the European integration. If these dynamics are no longer there, the European unification is threatened by stagnation. Actually, the European Union may be compared to a bicycle. It must move forward, otherwise it falls.

But there is also a second reason why the debate about the future of Europe must be continued with great intensity. And that reason is that in the absence of a coherent vision of Europe's future, the terrain threatens to be occupied by different ideas. Lack of vision creates a vacuum in which member states fall back on themselves and in which they content themselves with the existent community achievements. At best they will reject any further integration. In the worst case they will start to plead for the restoration of their former sovereignty. I may be exaggerating things. I may be too pessimistic. But it is my deep-rooted conviction that any further delay in the debate about the future of Europe will make us fall behind, particularly in a world that is characterised by a trend to globalise.

If we fail to pick up the debate about the ultimate goal of Europe, I am afraid that we will be confronted with an increasing resistance to the further enlargement of the Union. For we must remain realistic. Leaders of states and governments advocate an expansion of the Union. But in many circles there is an undeniable reserve with regard to enlargement. It goes without saying that I do not share that reserve. All countries, which are now applicants, belong to Europe. We have lived in a divided continent long enough. Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Sofia and Bucharest are European cities just like Berlin, Rome, Paris, Madrid or London. They are the capitals of countries and people with a European identity. Enlargement is all about the restoration of European unity, the harmonisation of the geographical and the political identity, just as was the case with German unity and German identity in 1989. The expansion has exactly the same scope and exactly the same significance as the German reunification after the fall of the Berlin wall. Europe has been divided in two parts by the knife of communism for forty years. Now communism has disappeared. And the unity of Europe must be restored as soon as possible.

Besides, there are quite a number of rational motives to bring about this greater Europe. If the European unity is rejected, there is a serious risk of a further fragmentation of Central and Eastern Europe, of instability at our external borders, of increasing migration pressure, conflicts and war.

Therefore it must be clear that, next to picking up the debate about the ultimate goals of Europe, we need to bring negotiations on the entry of the applicant countries into the Union to a favourable conclusion as soon as possible. Two things are essential in that respect. First of all, the application of each member state must be assessed separately. It would be wrong to allow applicant countries to enter into the Union merely on the basis of political considerations if these countries do not meet the technical requirements. And it would be just as wrong to keep applicant countries waiting - merely on the basis of political considerations - if they do meet these requirements. The full, strict and correct application of the *acquis communautaire* must be the point of departure for the negotiations about the applicant countries' entry into the Union. Of course, transitional measures may have to be taken to ensure that the new member states can survive the shock of their entry. But in any case, the *acquis communautaire* must remain the standard, the basis.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What is the ultimate goal of the European Union we have in mind? Before answering that question, let me state in no uncertain terms that the ultimate goal is not just an institutional matter. Mind you, the discussion about the institutions is extremely important. I will come back to this later. But it is wrong to reduce the debate about the ultimate goal to a discussion merely about institutions.

The debate about the ultimate goal must first of all be a debate on the development of a joint vision of the Europe in which we want to live, about the role we would like to see Europe play in the world, about the domains in which we want to pursue a common European policy together.

The first question - although it may seem a bit banal - is the following: in what kind of Europe do we want to live? I think that we all would like to live in a Europe that is built on European values of democracy, respect for human rights, rule of law and the cultural and political diversity which is our richness. In short, a Europe that attaches great importance to the values, which result from the French revolution. A Europe that knows how to ensure these values without giving up its diversity and its future. A future which lies in the conversion of our economies, in the creation of a new economy that is based on knowledge, information and communication and that respects the strong feeling of solidarity - a feeling that is cherished in our society.

It must not only be a democratic, pluralistic and solidary Europe; it must be a politically strong Europe that plays a prominent role world-wide, that has a say and is given a say, and that universally propagates its ideas and values. That is not an imperialistic attitude but - I have just used the word - a universalistic attitude. We must believe that the values which we cherish, more in particular democracy, human rights, rule of law, interhuman solidarity, are values that may be applied all over the world. In other words, we want a Europe that is able to assume control and to lead the way, both morally and economically, together with the other democratic superpowers in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This may sound a bit bombastic, a bit exaggerated, but let me concretise things for you. What we want is a Europe that takes action on its own initiative in the Balkans, that ends the ethnic fire in former Yugoslavia, and not a Europe that sits by until its American ally takes an initiative, just because we do not have the necessary political power nor the military capacity to do it ourselves.

We want a Europe that assumes its responsibility outside its own borders, for example in Africa, the continent that suffers terribly under poverty, illness and war. Only a strong, united Europe can develop a long-lasting partnership with Africa, a stability pact that can help the African people out of the economic morass and that can put them once and for all on the way towards development. For that is our responsibility and not the responsibility of the rest of the world.

Not only is it the continent that is nearest to Europe, just across the Mediterranean Sea. It is also the continent for which we have a historical responsibility. Because it is the 15 member states who colonised and subjugated this continent for more than fifty years.

Finally, we want a Europe which - together with other superpowers - resolutely chooses for a balanced system of world trade without protectionism, without protection of its own market, so that economic growth and prosperity will be possible in the underdeveloped regions too and so that the stream of migrants from the past decade can be ended.

If we want to live in a diverse, democratic, multiform and solidary Europe, a Europe with new economic power, a Europe that may play a prominent role in the world, we need to develop fundamental lines of policy in at least four domains. Today these lines of policy hardly exist or do not exist at all. I think that these lines of policy are the following:

- A truly common foreign policy, in other words a policy speaking with one voice at all international fora, in the United Nations, in the Security Council.
- An autonomous European defence policy. Helsinki was a first step in that direction, but we need to go much further than the rapid reaction force which was established there.
- An integrated justice and migration policy. This surely is one of the domains where European citizens expect the Union to take action fast.
- A joint socio-economic policy platform to complement the economic and monetary union we created a couple of years ago.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The question then is: which is the best method to facilitate this European idea of the future and these new

lines of policy? The answer to this question is essential because - although it does not seem to be so - this is the underlying debate that is going on. Do we prefer the intergovernmental method or the community approach? And which is best to achieve our aim?

Let me state right from the start that I share with much of the criticism on the present community approach: non-transparency, too much bureaucracy, and lack of democratic legitimacy. But it is not because we have ascertained that these weak points exist that the community approach itself is to be rejected and that we must strike out on the intergovernmental course.

We all know that international institutions (whether they function properly or not) are based on an intergovernmental method. Big successful countries and states, especially the ones in which various cultures are united, are based on a community approach. Some might call it a federal approach, but the word is not relevant. The debate that is going on now can be formulated as follows : is the European Union going in the direction of an ordinary international institution that is based on intergovernmentalism and the rule of unanimity? Or do we keep developing a joint community approach in a radically new version that meets three imperative conditions: transparency, efficiency and democratic legitimacy.

So you see, by making these conditions imperative I do not intend to ignore the imperfections of the present community approach. But once again, it would be foolish to conclude from the existence of these imperfections that we must drop the entire community approach. I fear that an explicit choice for the intergovernmental approach in a European Union with 28 member states will inevitably take the form of a "Directoire"; a virtual government by a restricted number of larger member states. Even if this fear proves to be exaggerated, I am still convinced that an intergovernmental approach - whatever its nature may be - can never compensate for the lack of community institutions. This may be illustrated by means of a number of obvious examples.

Once again I refer to the wars in the Balkans. We did not have the necessary institutions and means to react quickly and effectively. And the intergovernmental game between the European member states, which existed at the time, has done little to remedy this situation. In the end, the United States had to take the initiative and the lack of a community approach turned out to be a recipe for what is called a "Europe impuissante" (powerless Europe).

A second example is the current weak position of the Euro. It is clear that the exchange markets underestimate the value of the Euro. For the underlying socio-economic reality is positive: the economic growth perspectives are high, unemployment is decreasing, and inflation remains low. Then what is wrong? I think it is the lack of a community foundation in spite of the existence of the European Central Bank. This lack manifests itself in two domains.

First there is the lack of integrated, joint socio-economic policy options for the entire Eurozone. Secondly there is the fact that everybody has his own governmental say about the Euro. We need one community institution - by nature the European Central Bank - which must control the Euro and set out the monetary policy; not five or six eminent personalities : the chairman of the European Central Bank, of course, the chairman of Euro XII, the Commissioner in charge of the monetary policy and the Ministers of Finance of a couple of member states. Only a consensus can inspire confidence, especially in the people of those countries that are not part of the Euro yet.

My third example to illustrate the indispensability of a community approach - albeit a radically new one - is the migration issue. In spite of all the impetuses that were given at the extraordinary European Summit of Tampere, which dealt with issues such as asylum, migration, police and justice, it is clear that we will not achieve results with intergovernmental agreements alone. We will actually have to create a European scope for justice, we will have to take joint measures to combat crime, we will have to work out a joint approach with regard to asylum and migration, and this will have to be done through community institutions. Otherwise I am afraid that we will not achieve any results at all.

There is one more example I can give you: food security in Europe. How are we going to ensure this without

a community approach? Belgium has developed its own control and detection system in the past year, but the demand for a European food security agency remains.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I believe that it may be proved that in all these fields only a community approach yields results. There are lots of examples to prove that a community approach pays off. In the WTO negotiations, for example, the impact of Brussels is evident. Competition, which is the competence of the Commission, and which is therefore a community matter, produces actual results. Surely, everyone remembers the merger between Boeing and McDonald Douglas, on the occasion of which Commissioner Van Miert prevented this merger company from entering into exclusivity contracts with the major American airline companies. Only recently, Vodaphone and KPN-Orange were compelled to split up in order not to distort the competition on the Dutch mobile telephony market.

The internal market, as we know it today, is the example par excellence of the potential strength of a good community approach. This internal market was the result of a community approach on the basis of directives, transposition terms and jurisdiction, with an increasing impact of soft law with peer review, convergence pressure and benchmarking. All these measures did not lead to the predicted uniformity and to a levelling harmonisation imposed from above. On the contrary, they led to the creation of an integrated market that allowed considerable space and freedom.

Does this imply that the intergovernmental approach should be avoided at all costs? Of course not. Intergovernmental co-operation can be an initial impetus, and sometimes an intermediate stage towards integration, but it can never be the actual objective. Whereas a community approach may be based on qualified majorities, an intergovernmental approach can only be based on a consensus and the strict unanimity rule. In many cases this boils down to a situation of impotence and indecisiveness.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to seize this opportunity to raise a point which relates to this issue and which we will have in Nice, particularly the discussion about enhanced co-operation, which, I am afraid, is slipping further and further towards an intergovernmental approach. Indeed, enhanced cooperation should never become an intergovernmental instrument that allows a number of member states to tear themselves loose in a number of fields, with a secretariat that functions outside the community institutions. It should not be an instrument to create a two-speed Europe. I am in favour of enhanced co-operation. I believe that it can be a means to speed up integration and to involve member states, which did not join in during the first phase.

In other words, enhanced co-operation can never be a mechanism to withdraw oneself from the Union. It is an instrument to strengthen the Union from within, an instrument of integration, not exclusion. An instrument that is aimed at attracting member states, not rejecting them.

This also implies that enhanced co-operation can never become the standard. At first sight, this may seem an attractive thought, but in fact it would be a way to conceal that we do not want to increase the number of areas where majority decisions are the rule. For that reason alone, I argue in favour of transforming enhanced co-operation into a mechanism that is managed and controlled in and by the Commission. That is why I am also in favour of linking a number of catch-up mechanisms to enhanced co-operation, which will facilitate the integration of those countries which could or would not participate in a first phase.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to return to the weaknesses of the current operation of the European Union: inefficiency, lack of transparency, lack of democratic legitimacy. What would a new community approach, cured from these three illnesses, look like? And which profound modifications are required in order to achieve this?

Efficiency is closely linked to cohesion. Without cohesion there is no efficiency. Four radical measures are

needed: in the first place, a socio-economic basis for the monetary union, a socio-economic policy platform which is completed each year by means of directives or recommendations and which outlines the policy to be pursued in these domains within the Union. This goes much further than GOPE (the "grandes orientations de politiques économiques") and the annual adjustments of the Luxembourg and Lissabon guide-lines. Not only must this socio-economic basis combine these instruments. The aim is also that it follows the example of the public finance policy we pursued in the past and which led to the creation of an economic and monetary union. Obviously, it should be less stringent yet comparable in a sense that it is based on annually adjusted programmes which are comparable to the stability programmes that have led to the creation of the economic and monetary union. Such a socioeconomic policy platform would be a basis for our joint currency and would make it possible for Europe to respond as a Union to exogenous factors such as the recent oil crisis. And this in contrast with the disparate position of the member states which we are currently experiencing, to say nothing of the complete absence of the Commission and Council in this respect.

Instead of sending letters to request an explanation about the hasty measures which the member states have taken these past few weeks or which they were forced to take, Commission and Council had better taken a joint European initiative.

It seems to me that the second measure is the inevitable separation of the Council's general secretariat and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security policy. To my view, it would be better if this High Representative had a seat both on the Council and the Commission in order to avoid ambiguity in this respect. It is untenable that both the High Representative and the Commissioner are involved in the Union's joint foreign policy.

A third measure which is necessary refers specifically to the Union's defence policy: in 2003 we will have a rapid reaction force, but we already have a Eurocorps, a reinforced co-operation agreement *avant-la-lettre* which unites five countries at present. Together, they may be the steppingstone to a truly European defence system. For the Eurocorps is an instrument for converting the rapid reaction force into the nucleus of what is to be the future European defence system. Because the rapid reaction force that was created in Helsinki is nothing more than a list of troops and means on which the High Representative can count. However, in the relatively short term we must go further than that and create an integrated European defence system with a collective military force, common equipment and materials and even a common defence industry which can provide all this.

A last measure to increase efficiency intends to create treaty mechanisms, which make it possible to switch from a system of unanimity to qualified majority - provided that there is a consensus -, all this without the need to follow the rigid procedure of an intergovernmental conference and a ratification round. It would certainly be a tremendous step forward in areas such as justice and domestic affairs. Article 29 of the Treaty provides for such a "passerelle". We will have to examine if it would be appropriate to create more of these treaty articles or rather to extend or at least effectively apply the possibilities provided for in article 29.

Two radical measures are necessary to achieve genuine transparency within the Union. Firstly, I refer to the Charter of the Fundamental Rights that in the long term should be included in the Treaties. I do not see the point of limiting ourselves to a mere declaration. We already have a European Declaration on Human Rights. The charter must go further and add something new. Furthermore it is also necessary to rewrite and simplify those Treaties. This should be the initial phase towards the creation of a Constitution of the European Union.

Secondly, we must regulate the *Kompetenzabgrenzung* (delimitation of competences). In other words, each level - the Union, the member states, the regions and the federal states – should know its competences. There should be transparent and clear agreements regarding competences in order to remove the impression that the Union is surreptitiously shifting competences and is assuming competences which had better be exercised at a different level. It is not my intention to make a plea for a European superstate, quite the reverse. The European integration process is unique precisely because the Union does not subject or phases out or substitutes the existing states nor the regions and the federal states, but peacefully integrates them in a greater unity. The growing weight of the regions is already clearly noticeable in the demographic and

economic field. In several members' states, cross-border co-operation between regions is already a fact. In a globalising world it is better to put competences where they can be exercised most efficiently. This is a common trend today in major member states of the Union which were centrally controlled until recently, such as France or the United Kingdom.

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen,

A new community approach will only constitute a breach with the past if there is real democratic legitimacy. Indeed, a true democracy is founded on a system of checks and balances. And we must dare to admit that this has actually never been the case in the European Union. There is insufficient democratic legitimacy within the Union.

That is partly due to the weakness of political party formation in Europe is concerned. And it is also related to the current structure and position of the European Parliament. The concept of a bicameral system proposed by minister Fischer is a step in the right direction. The first chamber would seat the directly elected members of parliament, on the basis of the respective populations, the second chamber would seat the representatives of the member states with a fixed and equal representation of those member states, exactly like the United States Senate.

Therefore I opt for the second alternative that was presented by the German Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Democratic legitimacy also implies the existence of an interinstitutional balance. Most European constitutions make it possible for government and Parliament to dissolve each other. Within the Union, however, a unilateral system is applied, according to which Parliament can dissolve the Commission, but cannot be dissolved itself. In a union of checks and balances this imbalance must be adjusted.

Finally, democratic legitimacy implies the creation of a different Commission, a Commission which does not draw its power from its past, from the personality of one or more of its members, but from a renewed relationship with other institutions and more particularly from a democratically and directly elected chairman. Besides, I do not see how Europe could benefit from a weaker Commission. We need a strong Commission that can exercise its right of initiative to the full. Subsequently, the Council must outline its principal priorities and act as legislator, together with the Parliament.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

What is the significance of all these proposals to the intergovernmental conference, which will hopefully come to a conclusion in Biarritz and Nice? How does all this relate to the Intergovernmental Conference? As I already stated, the debate on the ultimate goals must not be a pretext for postponing the important decisions, which we now have to take. The present Intergovernmental Conference must carry through the necessary reforms in the first place to ensure that a Union with 28 member states remains operational. The more we can do in that respect, the better. But the discussion should not be ended even if Nice turns out to be a success. That does not mean that I am hoping for new left overs. But I do think that after Nice and even before the start of enlargement we will have to outline the ultimate goal of our joint undertaking, namely the European Union. Making a first outline could be a task for the Belgian presidency, which could result in a declaration of the 15 member states, a declaration which does not give the exact content but which rather indicates the direction of the ultimate goal. A new modification of the treaty immediately after the Intergovernmental Conference is not realistic and I do not advocate it. But a declaration in which the start is given for a debate about the leap that the expanded Union will have to make ought to be possible. I do not know when this will lead to a new modification of the treaty, and for the time being I do not think that is relevant. But it will happen eventually.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to quote the famous Hölderlin: "Man is a God when he dreams, but a beggar when he thinks". What we need to guide the European Union to its final destination are both gods and beggars, both dreamers and thinkers. The European Union was the result of a vision and of the every-day political reality. Let's continue along these lines and dream and set to work at the same time.

Thank you.