

Interview with Jacques Santer: preparations for the fifth enlargement (Sanem, 6 April 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In March 1998, negotiations started in Brussels on the accession to the European Union of the new applicant countries. As President of the European Commission, what do you remember about these negotiations, and especially about their initial phase?

[Jacques Santer] Firstly, I must say that I am still very pleased that, in 1997, my Commission drew up what I should call the strategic concept for enlargement. It was not easy to do so at that moment, but we managed it. It was a lengthy period of preparation; we consulted a number of foreign institutes — American and others, scientific ones, and so forth — but we managed to develop a strategy for enlargement. I must say, however, that we were rather more pragmatic and prudent than the Commission that succeeded mine. At first we wanted to negotiate on the basis of the criteria with three countries: namely, the new applicants with the strongest economies, and Cyprus and Malta as well ... and, once those countries were integrated, with five other countries. In other words, we set in place a negotiation process. We had not given a status to Turkey. That was why we set up a European conference, where those with whom we had not begun negotiations were integrated into this European conference and where we could address issues of common concern together — not just economic and financial issues, but also those involved in political dialogue, in order to keep them within an inclusive process, as we used to say.

This concept — one shared not by the European Parliament but by the European Council here in Luxembourg at the 1997 summit — was changed fundamentally by the European Council held two years later in Helsinki in 1999. They decided on the ‘big bang’ approach, to negotiate with all the Member States, naturally respecting the same criteria, and to recognise Turkey as a full candidate for membership, with all that that entailed. When I look back at that now, after the event — not merely because it was my Commission that drew up the strategy in the first place, but following the discussions that took place in certain countries such as France, and even here, and in the Netherlands, after the referendum or the ratification of the proposed Constitutional Treaty — I ask myself whether perhaps my Commission was in fact right not to be quite so hasty, and to be more pragmatic than its successors. One has the feeling that our citizens did not really understand, did not quite digest this greater Europe that came about all at once. And we now have Bulgaria and Romania as well. Negotiations have also started with Turkey, and now with Croatia. The Europeans, the citizens, the man in the street, just do not understand, cannot identify with this inclusive process, if I may put it this way. I believe that it was a mistake to go too fast and perhaps too far. You must give it time, as President Mitterrand said, give it time to come about ...

When we adopted our enlargement strategy, we set up a task force for each country, headed by Mr van der Pas, and we talked and negotiated with each country. Obviously those who were not related were not very pleased, but they accepted the criteria, because I visited each one separately, each of the Heads of State or Government separately; they understood the process and accepted it, not as an exclusion, but on the contrary, as a possibility to gain membership of the European Union more quickly later on. With hindsight, I believe that they were very happy to be in the first wave of enlargement, because there was no other planned at the time. The negotiations got off to a good start, and those countries that we had selected on the basis of objective criteria were most assiduous. This was true for the small countries like Estonia, which were highly motivated and worked on the *acquis communautaire*, and so on. And that went ahead very well. Of course we were not able to complete the negotiations, because our Commission ended its term of office in 1999. But today, despite everything, I am pleased that, in my view, it went off without any difficulties. Perhaps to enable our citizens to understand, we could have gone more slowly and communicated better, because that element was also lacking. But I must say that I have a lot of confidence in these new Member States, these new members of the European Union. After 1 May 2004, when they acceded to the European Union, and for the following year or two, there was no upheaval. There have obviously been internal changes, governments that have changed, and so forth, but all that went ahead relatively well, much better than I had initially believed. There have been no extraordinary changes, although there are of course still some problems: now there is the problem of freedom of movement and the problems involved in social dumping and all that, but these are practical problems that must be settled as they crop up. Besides, their solution has been foreseen — differentiation clauses — which, to my mind, is a good thing, and for the rest, I am quite satisfied. What is

needed now is for the Heads of State or Government to come to an agreement at some point on the European identity, which also presupposes, if one talks of European identity, some kind of geographic configuration. One cannot talk of a European identity if there is no geographic configuration.

[Étienne Deschamps] Yes, identity ... the border issue?

[Jacques Santer] That is right, it all goes together.

[Étienne Deschamps] But at the time, what was your frame of mind? Did you consider that you had to carry out an almost moral, historic task of reconciliation, or was it, more pragmatically — one does not rule out the other — principally in the interest of the European Union and the applicant countries?

[Jacques Santer] No, it was both, in my view. It is a question — and I have often said this — of what we were unable to make our citizens understand, and perhaps ourselves as well: it was not just a geographical enlargement, but it was the first time that the unification of our continent was successfully being carried out peacefully and freely. It was this aspect on which a decision had to be taken, and not merely the economic interests. Of course, there are always economic interests involved. There have always been problems, even with Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and who else ... Greece, and so on. Each enlargement has brought problems with it. They also always presented an opportunity to develop new potential. On the other hand, what we were unable to make clear to our people was this aspect which you might describe as 'sentimental', and also I would say this historic message which was associated with it, because these countries had a right to join the European Union. If you read certain articles or certain speeches by Robert Schuman, at that time he already saw Europe extending beyond the Iron Curtain — the Iron Curtain from 1953 onwards — so there was already the idea of reuniting our continent. What he put in place was not an economic community in the true sense of the term. Even the ECSC was also an aspect that was genuinely political, as we can see from its title. Some of our Member States have forgotten this aspect, and I believe that it was because of this that the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty was torpedoed in certain Member States.

There is another aspect that I should like to raise concerning the negotiations, because we had to learn the lessons of the Yugoslav crisis in various countries. During this time we had a number of these countries, such as Croatia and Slovenia — Slovenia was a case apart — but other countries as well, which had at once started to have expectations of becoming Member States of the European Union. To which my Commission — and I think that this was admitted afterwards — always said: 'No, before this, there must be firstly stability within your countries, which is far from having been achieved, and secondly, interregional cooperation within the Balkan states.' You cannot allow a fully-fledged member of the European Union to have relations only with Brussels or with other countries whilst internally ... for example between the Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are none. They are beginning to establish relations now, which is why there is the stability pact, relations between the various regions. That is what is needed. There is still the problem of Kosovo and so forth, but that is a separate problem. We must continue to insist on these criteria: stability, interregional cooperation, and then expectations.

[Étienne Deschamps] A little like what the Visegrad countries did among themselves, before officially becoming applicants ...

[Jacques Santer] Yes, exactly.