

Interview with Jacques Santer: European uncertainty as regards German reunification (Sanem, 3 May 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] The fall of the wall, even if it was not expected to happen so quickly, led to German reunification. Do you consider that German reunification presented a chance or, conversely, perhaps a threat or an additional difficulty for European integration?

[Jacques Santer] German reunification presented a number of problems right from the start... Not for us, here; we immediately declared that we were in favour of German reunification: the Government here, also my Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Poos, and so on. There was no difficulty in this quarter. But there were difficulties inside our parties. By the way, I should say that I was at the time Chairman of the European People's Party, from 1987 to 1990, and then there were a number of influential members who had some reservations regarding this matter. In particular, Ruud Lubbers, among the Dutch, but also Mr Andreotti, who was then President of the Council in Italy and made Helmut Kohl furious with his remarks about it being better to have two Germanies than one.

So I took the initiative of telephoning Kohl; it was a Saturday afternoon, at his home address in Germany, and I told him: 'Listen, we must do something; we must meet with all our heads of government and party chairmen.' I had organised an informal meeting at Pisa, in Italy — it was alongside the congress held at the time by the young people — where a number of us had to be present to speak at the youth congress of the European People's Party. So we met in Pisa, quite privately and informally, with all the Christian Democrat heads of government and party chairmen, and all day long we discussed the significance of German unification, for Europe as well. In the end, Andreotti and I held a Press conference, for Andreotti was our host, and then Andreotti too supported German reunification in the presence of the astonished Italian press, who had never before witnessed such a thing. From that point on, I think that the Christian Democrats rallied to the idea of German reunification.

This is just to show you that this idea was not accepted so easily. It is also the reason, I think it was these initiatives that I took — and there were other ones as well — which led Kohl to support me for other reasons, because there was at the time a very tricky situation at the European level, particularly at the Strasbourg summit, I recall, during the French Presidency. He has always told me that it was one of the most difficult summits that he had experienced at that time. But it went relatively well. However, there was Margaret Thatcher... and also Mitterrand, who at one point was quite reluctant. He has always spoken of this — not Mitterrand, but Helmut Kohl. Also of when he met Gorbachev in Kiev, or when he made an official visit on the fortieth anniversary of the GDR, and so forth. So there was a lot of turmoil then because, I imagine, we were caught off-guard. Even a man who was as intelligent, as diplomatic and as European as Mitterrand, lacked confidence. It was not that he was opposed, but it was uncertainty, I should say, certainly due to the sudden emergence of this phenomenon in the heart of the European Union, where no one was prepared for it.