

Thinking Through the Moment of Reflection

Remarks of Eva Nowotny, Austria's Ambassador to the United States at CSIS, February 27th, 2006

Thank you very much, first of all, for having organized this most interesting conference and for having chosen a very opportune moment to convene it. Not only are European-American relations at the moment as dense as they have not been for quite some time, but the most recent events and developments have brought home the point, and with a vengeance, how important this partnership and cooperation is for both of us, in our mutual interest, and to what extent we are sitting in the same boat.

I feel honoured that you have asked me to make a contribution to this debate, although, quite frankly, the topic you have assigned to me is something I would call in German a „Himmelfahrtskommando“ - or roughly translated an invitation to step into a minefield. It is also an invitation to free speculation, because there are a number of very concrete questions on the table around which the reflection circles, but so far very few concrete answers.

The period of reflection was decided upon by the European Heads of Government at the European Council in June 2005, confronted as they were with the failed ratification of the Constitutional Treaty in France and in the Netherlands. To introduce a pause for analysis and thought seemed at that point a logical thing to do. A reflection period should also open the possibility for an enhanced European consultation, but also for a more direct and immediate dialogue between European governments and European citizens. It was at that meeting also decided that by the European Council of June 2006 Heads of Government would then look at and discuss the different options for further procedure which were supposed to come out of the period of reflection. Thus, the task to make some sense out of the European debate and to try and find some markers for a future procedure fell to the Austrian EU Presidency.

There are not many options for future procedure, and in the consultation which the Austrian government has started it became quickly apparent that each and every option has its adherents and supporters.

There is, first of all, the easiest way out: declare the treaty for dead, bury it among other forgotten drafts of legal documents, and forget about it once and for all.

There is another school equally ready to bury the treaty, but also ready to give it another try after some time elapsed in order to come up with a new and perhaps more convincing text. The tragic irony is that under these two options the EU for the foreseeable future will be obliged to work on the basis of the so called Nice Treaty – a treaty which is a very unsatisfactory compromise indeed, and which in reality nobody wanted.

There is another school arguing that the treaty is now in limbo, and that one should try to negotiate a few adjustments and changes to make it more palatable and then try for ratification in a second round. Here, however, the question presents itself, in which way this would affect the countries which have already ratified the treaty as it stands now?

This event was part of the first two-day meeting, held February 27-28, 2006, of the CSIS Task Force on *The Future of the EU and its Relations with the United States*.

And we should not forget that by now 15 countries – more than half of the EU membership and more than half of the EU population have already done so.

And then, there is the school of European pragmatism and rationalism, recommending to revert to the trusted, practical and successful traditions of European integration: you take out those elements of the Constitutional Treaty which are important and non controversial, and implement them by Council decision quietly and without big fanfares. This sounds like practical advice, but underestimates the precariousness of the consensus achieved in the treaty negotiations. As in most negotiations the consensus is based on compromise achieved by a balance between divergent interests, and if one alters the elements of the compromise one disturbs the balance and the consensus may turn out to be shaky indeed.

These are some of the arguments around which the reflection circulates, and you will understand that it is very difficult if not altogether impossible at the moment to come up with some sense in which direction the debate will finally veer. If I venture a personal guess I would suggest that the possible outcome will be a mixture between option three and option four, that is to say, that some elements of the treaty will be singled out for immediate implementation, and that then the EU will attempt to do a bit of redrafting, in order to give ratification another try – but as I said, this is only speculation and my personal guess at this point in time. The consultation in any case is going on, and it is going on on many different levels – in dialogue between our governments, but also in public discussions with the European citizens, as well as on many internet websites and in many academic circles and publications.

In Austria herself, an internet forum under the title „Europe is listening“ has proved to be quite successful, and has opened a broad debate where people articulate their concerns as well as present new ideas and suggestions.

There are also many side issues to this debate, such as the standing of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the comprehensibility and transparency of the Union's decision making procedures, the closeness of the EU to its citizens. A stronger role for national parliaments in European integration is under discussion, as well as the big question of better regulation, reduction of red tape, more effective and clearer rules, European legislation which is simple, understandable and has real European added value. I might add here that the discussion of the Charter of Fundamental Rights has already resulted in the decision to set up a new EU agency for Fundamental Rights. This new agency which follows on the former Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia will have its headquarters in Vienna and begin its work as a centre of expertise for all fundamental rights issues in the EU on January 1, 2007. Its director will pay a visit to Washington later in the spring, in order to present the agency's agenda and work plan to a larger American audience.

We have to acknowledge, however, that around and above this ordained reflection about the future of the Constitutional Treaty and all its ramifications, there is another reflection going on – a reflection about the future development of the European Union, about where we are and where we should go from here.

It is an interesting and at the same time disturbing phenomenon that after a period of great and important successes of the European Union the confidence of the European citizens into the valour of European integration and into the evolution of the Union is waning. Or was the peaceful unification of our continent as an area of security, peace and prosperity with the smooth integration of ten new members, the biggest enlargement of the European Union ever, not a success? Or the successful conclusion of enlargement negotiations with two more countries, ready to join the club next year? Or the fact that more and more countries are attracted to it and do their utmost in order to have the prospect of future membership? Or the successful transition to a single currency, which has in a very short time firmly established itself as one of the world's most stable monetary values, or the competitiveness of the Union on international markets? Or the fact that today the EU is successfully managing nine difficult foreign policy and security missions while only a few years ago there was not a single one?

These successes are certainly there and are certainly true, and nevertheless there is a lack of confidence and of optimism, which has to be taken seriously, which indeed demands reflection and analysis as well as the elaboration of countervailing strategies. As we see it, people are disenchanted because they do not receive clear and convincing answers to some issues that are important to them in their daily lives and their daily concerns: security in their existence and in their social and economic development, sustainability, economic growth and employment, the possibility to live their lives to their full potential. People do know that there is no emergency brake against the impact of modern life, against globalization and increased competition, and that there is no glass dome which shields and protects countries and peoples against some of the damaging and threatening phenomena of our times. But they expect, and rightly so, concrete action by their governments and their political leaders to form and to shape developments, to give them answers which live up to the reality check, and to take them seriously in their concerns.

It seems to us that the mandate for European politicians is already there, and that it demands urgently particular attention to three general objectives: the promotion and stimulation of economic growth in Europe, combined with a tangible creation of new jobs and opportunities, securing and developing the specific European social model, maintaining Europe as a strong and reliable global partner. If one succeeds in these preoccupations, confidence among the European citizens in the European project will also rebuild itself.

Another important issue which figures prominently in the ongoing public reflection concerns the future enlargement of the European Union. In this context there are clear tasks and projects already on the table. These concern for instance the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, where a final scrutiny of their fulfillment of all obligations will have to be made and a final decision about their date of entry will have to be taken. The first substantive negotiations with Turkey and also with Croatia on individual negotiating chapters will start, the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia will follow soon. The European future of the countries of South East Europe is on the agenda, involving at the same time Serbia-Montenegro, Bosnia- Herzegovina, and Albania. For my country, this is a foreign policy imperative of the first order – it is after all our geographical front yard, countries with which we have had very close and direct relations over the centuries. We are convinced that the gradual integration of these countries into the European Union is

the best and most promising instrument to ensure their political and economic stability, and indeed the peace and stability of the whole region.

These are concrete and managerial tasks. Beyond and overriding them there is, however, a different debate going on in Europe. More and more, the question is being asked by our people whether the enlargement of the European Union is a continuous process *ad infinitum*, or whether there is a natural end to enlargement and a sort of natural border to what Europe is and can be. So far, one has tried to avoid answering this question and has resorted to crutches and constructions, such as a political definition of Europe on the basis of certain political criteria, qualifying for membership in the Union. The questions are becoming more pressing and the demand of clear answers and perspectives becomes more insistent. I would assume that we will have to engage in this debate and also here find and give acceptable answers to legitimate concerns.

Much has been said and written about the so-called enlargement fatigue of the Europeans, as a new and disturbing European phenomenon. I would argue that Europeans in general are less fatigued with enlargement, but there is a certain fatigue with the acceptance of constant change. Just think for a minute of the changes Europe has gone through in the last fifteen years – from the collapse of the Soviet Union, to a horrible war on European soil, the unification of Germany, the introduction of the European currency, the enlargement of the European Union. It is in my opinion not surprising that people claim a little pause in order to catch breath and get a clearer idea where and how fast we are going.

The test for every big idea comes with its practical implementation. The European Union is no exception. Since its beginnings, in every phase of its development European integration was only the reflection of the consensus among Europeans in a given moment: from the joint administration of coal and steel to the customs union, the monetary union, to the European Union of continental reach and an area of peace, freedom, justice and prosperity. Each and every project was also a pilot project, an undertaking *sui generis* without the benefit of prior experience. The step by step realization of European integration was a permanent process of learning by doing, of learning from each other, sharing experiences and drawing the necessary conclusions, building always new partnerships, a lively management of diversity. The project has lost nothing of its power and its appeal. If the period of reflection on the various levels which I have tried to sketch reconfirms its validity, then it was time well spent.