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Article — Digitized Version

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Intereconomics

Suggested Citation: Scharrer, Hans-Eckart (1994) : A hard core for the European Union?, Intereconomics, ISSN 0020-5346, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden, Vol. 29, Iss. 5, pp. 209-210,
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02926378>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/140463>

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A Hard Core for the European Union?

The “Reflections on European Policy” published by Germany’s ruling Christian Democrat Party and its CSU coalition partner have caused quite a stir at home and abroad. To avert the danger, as they see it, of the European Union’s regressing into a loose alliance confined essentially to certain economic aspects, the authors of the paper advocate a five-point package: developing the EU’s institutions further (putting the principle of subsidiarity into practice); consolidating the EU’s core; intensifying Franco-German ties; strengthening EU powers in terms of foreign and security policy; and enlarging the EU eastwards around the year 2000. Among this package of measures, which the authors see as a reciprocally dependent whole, it has been the call for embodying the “variable geometry” or “multi-speed” approach in the Union Treaty and for a further consolidation of the “hard core of five” which has caused a major public commotion. Apart from that, the document contains a number of assertions, demands and recommendations, some of which are worth thinking about and others beset with problems.

This holds first of all for the basic tenor of the paper: due to its history and its geographical position, Germany has a vital political (and economic) interest in a strong European Union and its enlargement eastward; this national interest conforms with Europe’s interests as a whole. There is no objection to this. Less straightforward and in need of clarification is the postulate that a “deepening consolidation” of the Union is a precondition for its enlargement. To what does this “deepening consolidation” refer? To institutional development? To new policies? At first glance, not the consolidation of the Union, but, on the contrary, its reform – especially the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, of the rampant structural policies and of the budgetary system – appears to be the essential prerequisite for eastward enlargement. Otherwise, it would simply be beyond the means of the “old” members, not least of the few major net contributors among them.

The institutional development of the Union as envisaged by the CDU-CSU paper – based on the model of the federal state: the gradual establishment of a two-chamber system of Parliament and Council; the Commission with “elements of a European government” – seems basically desirable to reduce the Union’s deficit in democracy, but this goal is at best achievable only in the very long term. John Major adamantly dismissed it in Leiden recently. In his view, the EU is an association of states that derives its basic democratic authority from *national* parliaments, and this is the way it should stay. Of course, Britain’s negative attitude, the general tendency of which is also shared by a number of other countries, comes as no surprise to the authors of the paper. That is why they argue for a “variable geometry” or “multi-speed” Europe, to be approved and institutionalized by the Union Treaty or by a new “quasi-constitutional” document to be adopted at the intergovernmental conference in 1996.

This Europe with “variable geometry” would be grouped around a “hard core of countries intent on integration and cooperation” among which the authors number not only Germany and

France – as the “core of the hard core” (!) – but also the Benelux countries. These countries would “not just have to take part in all areas of policymaking as a matter of course, but beyond that they would have to take joint action which is recognisably more strongly oriented towards the Union than that of others and introduce joint initiatives to develop the Union further”. They thus form the clamp which holds the Union together in the face of discernible centrifugal trends, in particular between the more protectionist and interventionist South and the more open and liberal North.

This idea is not as new as the vehemence of the reactions to it might lead one to suppose. As long as 20 years ago Willy Brandt unleashed a hefty controversy with his statement, “The Community needs a policy of graduated integration.” This method has already found its way into the practice of European policy: since 1979 in the European Monetary System (EMS), which was agreed on from the outset as a flexible and open system with different levels of participation; later in the Schengen Agreement on dismantling border controls in the intra-Community movement of persons; and recently in the Maastricht Treaty, which, in the transition to the third stage of economic and monetary union, for participation in the common social policy and in common defence within the framework of the WEU not only allows for “different speeds” on the way to the final common goal but also for a “variable geometry” in the long term.

So there is nothing new about the method. What is new is that the CDU-CSU paper defines this core precisely and this is where the difficulty lies. It is one thing to foster close cooperation with France and the Benelux countries in order to advance integration and stress the particular responsibility of central Europe (not a core Europe) for the cohesion of the Union. It is another to assert that from today’s standpoint the goal of monetary union can be attained on schedule by only a few countries including, in addition to the five, Denmark and Ireland (mentioned in the paper) and Austria (not mentioned). It is quite another to exclude a priori countries like Italy and Spain, as well as Great Britain, with which Germany shares close common interests, from the circle of “countries intent on cooperation and integration”. This has not exactly been of service to the cause.

The cause is a good one. On the one hand the Union must be kept together and it must be developed further by those who wish to do so. This development is not an end in itself; it must be geared to the concrete interests of the member states involved and it cannot be allowed to founder on the veto or the inordinate compensation claims of individual member states. On the other, the point is to avoid setting up any additional obstacles to enlargement that the EU cannot surmount and to make the Union “fit” for enlargement by adapting its institutions and policies. This includes the issue of how to define the *essential* “acquis communautaire” which forms a mandatory entry requirement for new members. The graduated Union model brought into the debate by Edouard Balladur, but also by John Major and others, needs further discussion.

And finally it is also a question of securing the inner stability of a future Community of sixteen, twenty or more. This cannot be done by pressing all the member states and their citizens into the Procrustean bed of standard European regulations and policies in as many areas as possible. Rather, every member state with its own interests and individual traits must be able to find a place in the Community. The Community, then, must be seen to *proffer* common regulations (which are as useful as possible) rather than coerce members into compliance. This opportunity was missed when regulating monetary union in the Maastricht Treaty. “Variable geometry” (or a multi-speed Europe) and subsidiarity thus turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

As a whole, the CDU-CSU paper has not just kicked up a lot of dust. It has also ignited a debate on Europe in the run-up to the intergovernmental conference in 1996. It would be a good thing if it also prompted a debate in Germany on German interests and goals in the European Union. In view of the challenge posed by central eastern Europe, simply to declaim, “We are for both deepening and widening” is no longer enough to ensure the quality and future “management” of Europe.

Hans-Eckart Scharrer