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Straubhaar, Thomas

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Europe at the Crossroads

The bad news is: the "non" in France and the "nee" in the Netherlands to the European constitution is a clear "no" to all ambitions to implement a European State at this point in time. The European population does not want more Europe: it wants less Europe. People do not want to set out for new but unknown European shores. They want to stop, to wait and see how all the unfinished projects already embarked upon are brought to a good end. And there are (too) many unfinished projects. The single European market with no internal borders has not yet been completely achieved. Just remember the very recent debate on whether EU citizens may move from East to West to offer their services according to the conditions in their country of origin or whether this is wage dumping and they therefore have to accept the national rules of the game in the destination country. Despite the fact that the euro has been successfully established, there are still populist fears that it has hindered growth, increased employment problems and is a reason for many national economic problems. The sentiments against the euro cumulate in rumours which are more than absurd that Germany or Italy will exit the monetary union and return to the mark or the lira. Finally, too many politicians have pushed the enlargement process too fast. Before the EU had time to digest the admission of ten new member states, political leaders have accelerated the speed of enlargement with a view to integrating Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Turkey. Thus all the unfinished projects were, and are, an invitation to the proponents of all kinds of anti-European sentiments to join together and to establish a broad coalition of opponents. Some are against further enlargement, others against the euro and most take Europe as a scapegoat for national malaises or the uneasy feelings about globalisation and liberalisation. They turn the specific referendum for the European constitution into a general referendum against structural change, against more open national borders and against unwanted attacks on the status quo in the distribution of political rights, social entitlements and all kinds of vested interest rents. Opponents have hit the European constitution but have also meant domestic issues and other challenges that have made, and will make, life harder than in the easier years before.

The good news is: Europe will not come to an end. The European Union will not fall into its national parts. The European integration process will not be reversed. It will just stop for a while. Politicians will be given some necessary time to think about the future of Europe. They might start with thinking about why they have failed. Why have European people not followed their political leaders? Why have people rejected a constitution that would have brought more and not less democracy, more and not less transparency, and more and not fewer opportunities to participate? European leaders might then realise that in the eyes of many Europeans the proposed European constitution was much more a collection of detailed regulations than a short and concise summary of institutional and individual rights and duties. Indeed, the constitution would have brought more centralism and less subsidiarity. It was driven by the wish to harmonise national regulations and to avoid the competition of systems. Thus, people are asking whether it would not be good enough to write down in a constitution what Europe is, what it must and might do, and what the individual European citizen is allowed or not allowed to do.

The "no" to the European constitution means that Europe has been given the time to rethink the future of the European Union. And fortunately enough, Europe can afford to take this time. There is absolutely no pressure to hurry and to speed up the deepening or widening of the European integration process. The Nice Treaty is, and remains, valid. And it provides a legal basis that perfectly allows all the needs and requirements of current and future European legislation to be fulfilled. If necessary, it can easily be supplemented and improved by intergovernmental and interinstitutional agreements. Thus, the "non" and the "nee" are simply the signal "not yet" and "not in this way". Consequently, European policymakers should take the time to solve two different puzzles.

Firstly, European leaders have to communicate much more convincingly the philosophical, emotional and also spiritual foundation of the European integration process. They have to make clear to their populations what "Europe" means, is and should be. What is the common foundation for a Europe reaching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Black Sea? Is there something that makes Europe special and different from other forms of institutional agreements or multilateral arrangements? The answer is: yes of course! The Age of Enlightenment is the origin of modern Europe. That is the difference between "Western" and other societies. The Enlightenment was the origin of secularisation and mass democracy. It brought the separation of powers, inalienable human rights and guaranteed individual (property) rights. It turned the burden of proof around from top down to bottom up. Before the Enlightenment people perceived their individual rights as granted by the grace of God or they were granted by autocrats. Afterwards the people had the power and they delegated parts of it to states and governments. The European Economic Community was founded in 1957 as a community of common laws and norms. The Copenhagen criteria of 1993 renewed the very few indispensable core elements of the European Union. They include institutional stability, democracy, the rule of law, respect of human rights, protection of minorities, the free market economy and the ability to compete economically within the EU area. The Copenhagen criteria are valid not only for new members and make it relatively easy to check whether countries like Turkey are ready to became full members or not. At the same time, they define a system of coordinates with a political, juridical and economic axis. It could and should act as a compass for guiding all further European integration processes.

Secondly, politicians in Europe have to demonstrate that they are not simply using Europe as a cheap excuse to shift urgent problems from the national to the European level. Nowadays, it looks as if national decision-makers misuse hectic European activities as a substitute for political action that should be taken at a national level. There were so many reforms that governments should have initiated back home to stimulate employment and economic growth and to make their countries ready for further European integration. However, national politicians are afraid to do what has to be done due to the expected severe political protests of all the different opponents of structural change. Moreover, it seems that national governments play a tricky game. They speak European but act national. They take the national applause for European success but blame Europe for all the burdens they have to place on their national voters, which is cynical enough considering the fact that at least some of their national decisions make European life more difficult. The delay of the right to the free exchange of services, the frivolous neglect of the stability pact, and the populist debates over wage dumping or social dumping in the new member states are just the most obvious examples. Europe seems to be something for Sunday speeches but not for everyday hard work.

In the eyes of too many Europeans the rush of politicians towards a European constitution or towards a further enlargement looks as if policy-makers want to take the bull by the horns instead of doing their homework first. They rush into an unknown European adventure, without having done the necessary risk-minimising preparations. It is naïve to expect political leaders to think and act to maximise European interests. Neither are European interests well-defined, nor would such a strategy be honoured by the national electorates. Consequently, enough European leaders still think nationally and use Europe as an instrument to achieve their national goals. As long this is the case, they should not blame their voters for seeing through their games and answering the same way: by using Europe to punish their national politicians.

Thomas Straubhaar
President of the HWWA