



"A greater Europe by reform": article by Hubert Védrine in the European press

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Mr Hubert Védrine, Minister of Foreign Affairs in an article jointly published by the Financial Times (Great Britain), the Financial Times Deutschland (Germany), l'Expansión (Spain) and les Echos (France), voiced an opinion on the enlargement of the Union which "is an opportunity: it must be seized to carry out urgent reforms. The last thing we need is more ideological divisions"

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A greater Europe by reform

The European Union is a club that everyone wants to join. With enlargement looming, the European Union faces the prospect of doubling its membership from the current 15 member states to 28 or 30. This is much more than a mere change of scale.

It is a real challenge. The very future of the EU is at stake: it needs not only to prove that it can continue to work, but it has to work even better than it does now.

In recent months, many ideas have been floated around and many plans put forward. France has welcomed this revival of the public debate over the future of the EU. Now is a timely opportunity to take stock of past experiences and to reflect on future developments.

The debate over the future of Europe's institutions is proof of an emerging consensus: it is clear that the EU is increasingly unwieldy in its present form. Because the EU has become increasingly ambitious, it does not function to the best of its abilities. Hence the widely shared feeling that some of its goals have not yet been fully realised. The Euro is a case in point: while technically an unprecedented success, as the return of growth to the continent demonstrates, its political expression needs to be strengthened to uphold its credibility with the markets. Another example is the EU's external programs. Never has the EU contributed so much in international support, whether in the Balkans, the Mediterranean, Africa or Russia. But because of the failings of its internal procedures, Europe's political clout in these regions does not truly reflect the level of its foreign aid. To many, observers and decision-makers alike, the EU is too often still characterized by its questioned legitimacy, its frail dynamism and the cumbersome nature of its procedures.

If we enlarge the Union while ignoring these criticisms, we will be doomed to failure. We will run the risk of undoing everything that we have achieved over the last forty years. Far from achieving "an ever closer Union", we will water down the EU to a loosely co-ordinated trade area. In this respect, enlargement is an opportunity: it must be seized to carry out urgent reforms. We owe it to the candidate countries as well as to ourselves.

Yet we must not drag ourselves into a war of words. Nor do we need a theological dispute on the ultimate goals of the EU. Federalism, sovereignty, supranationality, intergovernmentality, variable geometry are all entrenched pre-conceptions that some may find attractive and others repulsive. The present 15 members should be wary of concepts such as "hard-core" or "avant-garde" which, as slogans do, can divide as much as unite. We must cast aside any proposal that would result in arbitrary or rigid divisions between any member states. The last thing we need is more ideological divisions.

What we need is clarity in our common objectives for Europe. The EU needs to be able to work. It needs to uphold its achievements - the *acquis communautaire*. It needs to be capable of making progress and launching new policies. It needs a clearer division of responsibilities between the Union and its members as well as between its institutions. It needs to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of its decisions. Where they contribute to Europe as a whole, dynamic national policies must be combined with common approaches. The more dynamic national foreign policies are, the more efficient the future EU common foreign policy will be.

The stakes are high. As Jacques Chirac, the French president, remarked in his speech before the Bundestag, they are, in the true sense of the term, existential - they go to the core of our nations and our peoples, their history and their identity.

They concern the very organisation of our societies. They need to be addressed, but in a thorough way. In this respect, the outcome of the Intergovernmental Conference in Nice this December is of paramount importance. It will serve as a test of the ability and resolve of our governments to reform the EU. Each of the items on the agenda of the IGC is directly linked to the immediate implementation of the objectives I have outlined above. We need to reform the Commission in order to restore its ability to provide new impetus and an efficient management of common policies. We need to extend qualified-majority voting to avoid institutional paralysis and unravelling. We need to reassess the weighting of votes to make majority-voting decisions more legitimate and, more fundamentally, possible at all. We need to ease the mechanisms and rules that allow for closer co-operation in order to be more proactive and to prevent the risk of paralysis that an EU of 30 members could cause. These are not simple issues. If they were, we would not have failed to solve them at Amsterdam three years ago. In short, the newness of the EU's present shortcomings is a welcome development. It can only be reinforced now that an unprecedented enlargement of the EU has become a likely prospect. Now is the time when it should translate into a genuine will to make the necessary changes and a real determination to negotiate and compromise. As holder of the current EU presidency, France will spare no effort to this end.

Time is short. The absence of significant reforms or an agreement just for the sake of appearances would both signify failure. A failure at the IGC would jeopardise our achievements thus far, unleash centrifugal forces and probably derail or delay enlargement. Faced with such bleak prospects and a great likelihood of dwindling support in public opinion, the EU would be left with little choice but to go for stop-gap measures to consolidate its crumbling system.

Just any agreement in Nice will not do. What the EU really needs is a substantial agreement on meaningful reforms. Achieving that would set the Union back on track. New endeavours could be built on solid ground. Only then will we be able to pursue the EU's new ambitions and develop fully the euro, the common foreign and security policy and a strengthened European role in the world. We can achieve this and conduct successful enlargement. What is at stake is the future of a strong and efficient Europe. This means that the common European interest must prevail with each of our governments.



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