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NEWS FROM AUSTRIA

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Austrian Thoughts on the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference of the European Union

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1. Europe at the Crossroads

Accession to the European Union has given Austria the opportunity to play an equal part in shaping decisions which will have a momentous effect on the future of the whole European continent. The 1996 Intergovernmental Conference represents the first turning point in the integration process in which our country will be a full and active participant. We are determined to make the best possible use of this opportunity, in the interests of Austria and of Europe alike. We intend to cooperate actively and constructively, and we will introduce our own ideas on the future of Europe into the negotiations.

The Union is now confronted by new challenges to which it must react:

The gulf which presently exists between the EU institutions and the citizen must be reduced through the further development of citizens' rights, more transparency, and the strengthening of democratic legitimacy.

Stability in Central and Eastern Europe must be assured on a lasting basis by drawing the reform countries into the process of integration.

The new responsibilities of the Union in foreign and security policy, and the increasing challenges presented by international crime, drug abuse and the danger of uncontrolled migration, demand effective instruments.

Mass unemployment and threats to the environment demand a qualitative leap in the intensity and effectiveness of European cooperation.

We believe that substantial advances towards European integration will be necessary if the Union is to be in a position to cope with these challenges. The Intergovernmental Conference is therefore a necessary and important step in the Union's adaptation to the far-reaching political, economic and social changes which have taken place in Europe. Austria will therefore work for a substantial and future-oriented result.

2. Deepening and Enlargement

Austria has no interest in remaining permanently as the European Union's most easterly border state. We regard it as essential that our neighbor countries in Central and Eastern Europe are firmly and permanently included in the community of peace and stability of an integrated Europe.

We therefore consider it as all the more important that the European Union should possess structures which are strong and effective enough to cope with the challenge of extension to the East. We regard both enlargement and deepening as essential issues which must be dealt with in parallel and in close relation to each other. We therefore expect from the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference that it will make the European Union "fit" for at least the first stage of extension to the East.

EU structures which are capable of coping with the challenges of enlargement, that means in particular:

A Union committed to the basic principles of federalism.

Leaner and more efficient decision-making and legislative procedures with majority voting as the rule.

A strong and independent European Commission which will effectively realize its role as the "motor" of the integration process.

A European Parliament with extended legislative and control functions which thereby confer additional democratic legitimation on the Union.

The reform of the institutions must not simply be change for the sake of change, nor must it be an outlet for institutional or national rivalries. It must be strictly related to the basic purposes of the Union. The issue here is the safeguarding and strengthening of the Union's capacity to act in the exercise of its specific political, economic, social and ecological functions.

3. Democracy, Closeness to Citizens, Transparency

Genuine steps towards a "deepened" integration will, however, succeed only if they are accepted and shared by the citizens of Europe. The Intergovernmental Conference can not, therefore, restrict itself to the issue of "more efficiency". What is also essential is to bring the Union closer to its citizens and increase its transparency; to create a Europe whose unity is founded on the rich variety of its national and regional cultures.

Specifically, that means, in Austria's view, that the Conference must ensure, amongst others:

That the national parliaments of the EU countries are in future bound up as closely as possible in the process of European integration.

That the strong position of the small and medium-sized member countries is retained as an essential feature of the integration process (they must continue to exercise over-proportional voting power in the Council of Ministers, each nominate a member of the Commission, and have equal rights to the Presidency in rotation).

That the role of the regions (and the "Committee of the Regions") within the integration process is enhanced.

That the principle of "subsidiarity", which since Maastricht has been recognized as a fundamental principle of the European Union, is infused with genuine life. At the conference, Austria will propose the creation of mechanisms which will genuinely ensure that Brussels deals only with those questions which cannot be better handled at national or regional level.

4. The Common Foreign and Security Policy

The corollary is that Europe should be genuinely active wherever common European action is called for.

The experience of the past few years has demonstrated, in particular, how urgently Europe needs functioning common security structures.

For this reason, Austria will be looking for substantial progress in the Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) at the Intergovernmental Conference.

In this context we particularly want to see:

An expansion of the planning and analytical capacity which is necessary to provide impulses and strategies for the CFSP.

A gradual transition to decision making by qualified majority within the framework of the CFSP.

A substantial expansion of the EU's capacity in the areas of conflict prevention, crisis management, peacekeeping, disaster protection and humanitarian operations.

A step-by-step intensification of the cooperation between the EU and the Western European Union, which according to the Maastricht Treaty, constitutes an integral part of the development of the European Union.

5. Internal Security and Justice

Within the context of a broad definition of security we expect from the Intergovernmental Conference that it will give a substantial boost to the fight against organized international crime. Austria will therefore advocate genuine progress in integration policy within the so-called "Third Pillar" of the EU treaty (cooperation in the fields of justice and home affairs).

Austria is particularly interested in the establishment of:

Binding EU legal instruments and simplified common European working structures in these fields.

Efficient mechanisms for cooperation with third countries.

Strengthening the role of the Commission as the "motor" of effective European cooperation.

6. Social Policy and Environmental Protection

Effective joint action at European level is also called for in many areas of social and environmental policies.

Accordingly, at the Intergovernmental Conference, Austria will call for:

Better anchoring of the concept of environmental protection within the EU treaty.

The submission of all proposals by the European commission to an examination of their environmental

compatibility.

The inclusion of the conditions of the so-called "Social Protocol" as integral parts of the European treaty.

An improvement of the dialogue between the social partners at European level.

7. Economic and Monetary Union

At the Intergovernmental Conference we must not call into question what has already been achieved within the framework of the European integration process.

Austria therefore believes that the Economic and Monetary Union - which in Maastricht was bound up with security criteria - should be implemented according to plan.

In particular the strict, stability-oriented convergence criteria laid down in Maastricht must not be relaxed in any way.

Austria will agree to a future common European currency only if it is at least as hard as the Austrian schilling.

8. Flexibility and Coherence

The double challenge of enlargement and deepening is likely to increase the need for arrangements for differentiated integration. Even countries at a stage of economic development which does not permit them to take part in the most highly-developed forms of integration (e.g. The Third Stage of the Economic and Monetary union) ought not to be excluded from the integration process as such. On the other hand, those countries which are able and ready to move to a higher stage of integration should be enabled to do so. In order to make differentiated integration possible without weakening the coherence of the Union, the following principles should apply:

Differentiated integration should remain the exception, and common development of integration policy the rule. Only in cases where, at a given time, it is not possible to achieve a common course of action by all members, should graduated forms of integration be adopted.

Even in these cases the objectives of the further development of integration should be jointly established and the common institutional framework preserved. Transferring cooperation between groups of member countries outside the EU institutions would weaken the cohesion of the Union as a whole.

A broad basis of common norms is necessary for the functioning of the Internal Market. Differentiated integration which, for example, leads to individual countries gaining competitive advantages (e.g. through environmental or social dumping) must be rejected.

The various levels of integration should remain permeable and have the character of transitional arrangements. Participation in the more highly-developed forms of integration should be determined on the basis of objective criteria applying to all member countries. Any development of permanent lines of division between different "classes" of member countries would run counter to the fundamental concept of integration, and is rejected by Austria.

For herself, Austria intends to belong to the countries which actively promote and cooperate in the advancement of integration policy.

Because, from Austria's point of view, the European Union is:

a guarantee of peace in our continent,

a vehicle for Europe's economic and social advancement,

and the logical foundation of an enduring European political order.



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