

## **The Journey is the Destination**

### **An old-fashioned plea by Bodo Hombach**

Anyone who hopes to evaluate the European Union is pursuing an exercise in utopian thinking. It's already been done by a few old men named Jean Monet, Alcide de Gaspari, Robert Schumann and Konrad Adenauer, when they had a sensational idea following the most successful attempt at European self-destruction to date: The notion that Europeans could choose to either kill each other or refrain from killing each other.

Coal and steel, for example, were too often used as justification for war and could also serve as grounds for peace, provided the players acted in ways that benefited everyone involved. The old men set a process in motion that is far from over, and hopefully will never end. Apparently they had been the modern thinkers of their age. After thousands of years of enmity, European unification became the biggest peace project in the continent's history.

### **Checking finances**

There was also economic success, which brought Europeans a previously inconceivable level of prosperity and social peace. It supported structurally weak regions and helped cash-strapped members out of acute difficulties. The strong countries, which like to lament their status as "net payers" to improve their standing among clueless voters, have also benefited. The Bertelsmann Foundation recently hired the prestigious Prognos Institute to review the EU's finances over the last 20 years. Populist complainers won't like the results:

Between 1992 and 2012, the European single market led to an average annual increase in EU citizens' income by €172 (\$230). All economies have benefited.

### **Interesting asymmetries**

It's hardly surprising that the nations that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet empire want to be members of the Western community. We should be surprised, however, that the existing EU members do not see this as a reason to rejoice. Instead, they nervously wonder: Which country will be at our door next? Do we want to let it in? Is it even ready for that? They are not pleased to see their horizon being expanded in a new direction. The "welcome visitors" mentioned in soap-box oratory quickly turn into "hucksters" who are left standing at the door.

We are experiencing astounding asymmetries. While the original EU member states are aging and exhibiting symptoms – perhaps not of dementia but certainly of exhaustion and melancholy –, young democracies on the fringes are vehemently asking to be admitted to the club. Is it possible that these countries will not only learn from the old members, but that they in turn can learn from the new members?

## **A colorful assortment**

The EU isn't some boring classroom of model students, nor is it a schoolyard where older students keep watch over youngsters while they roughhouse. In fact, it's a colorful assortment of overachievers and slackers, high flyers and troublemakers, players and nitpickers. Everyone is still a long way from graduation, but they're getting their act together. The individual members encounter one another at different levels., *They can focus on the things that bother them* and, when push comes to shove, they somehow remain united. That's the beauty of voluntary unions. Everything is more than the sum of its parts *and no one is obliged to be perfect.* Apparently the desire to become a member is more exciting than being one. When asked about the quintessence of his long life as a historian, Gordon A. Craig said: "The stars shine in the dark." New applicants introduce reforms much more quickly than the existing members, who often sit back and relax, blame their mistakes on "the people in Brussels" and play the strict teacher.

## **With Serbia, but without England?**

A satirist could hit upon the idea that each member should withdraw from the EU once every 10 years to re-experience the value of its membership card. But no satirist could dream up the absurd situation of England leaving the community while Serbia fervently pursues membership. Something is seriously wrong here. Brussels, too, must ask itself how this British alienation was possible. Part of the reason lies in bureaucratic delusions and overreach. And then there are the hordes of lobbyists who take advantage of policymakers' lack of expertise and poor decision-making skills. Finally, there are certain elements in the press that untiringly badmouth Europe until nothing is left of it but the curvature of cucumbers and olive oil containers.

I vehemently argue that the island nation should remain part of the community, but just as decidedly, I support the acceptance of Serbia when the time comes. Without England, the cradle of European democracy, the continent would suffer from constant amputation pain and England from an unprecedented isolation. And the Balkans cannot be stabilized without Serbia.

## **A new way of life**

Serbia wants to be part of the West while maintaining its traditional relations with Russia, and that's a good thing. The Ukrainian approach to flinging itself at Europe, in which "the enemy of my friend is my enemy," is no longer appropriate. Thinking in terms of polarization instead of cooperation is not the recent European tradition.

The EU is a project, not a property. It is not a conquest of territory in the context of stereotypical geostrategic thinking, but a new way of life. The journey is the destination.

The fact that the Kremlin no longer looks at things this way creates both problems and new dangers for Moscow. The Europeans have failed to present Russia with convincing and appealing arguments for the value of cooperation. There are overlapping misunderstandings between the two sides, but this doesn't justify reverting to the bloody posturing of major powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It does, however, explain the shortage of political tolerance in autocratic systems.

## **Major challenges**

Every European country wrestles with the shadows of its past, determined not to forget them but to process them in constructive ways – to safeguard experiences so as never to have them again. Each country aims to create laws and institutions that last longer than the memory of a generation.

No one is an island (not even England). In the global picture, no country can succeed on its own today. We all have to learn to compete with one another instead of against each other. Each country can only benefit from the game of international relations if there are no losers.

Structural issues with a global dimension are the truly great challenges of the century. War and peace, the debt crisis, economic migration, threats to the climate, international terrorism, the problems of refugees and displacement, and corruption do not respect borders, rivers or mountains.

Europe's history has been partly shaped by numerous migrations, and each of them has left behind its traces and descendants. Ethnic minorities want to assert their cultural identity, which requires tolerance and empathy from the majorities.

## **Non-terminable relationships**

Psychologists have learned that an adolescent human being will become strong and free if he or she is surrounded by a large and dense network of non-terminable relationships. The same applies to nations, and European unity makes this possible. The notion of community is the continent's way of anticipating peaceful global domestic policy, without which the human species has no future.

Translated by Christopher Sultan