

Wednesday, July 10, 2013

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Paths to the future

In difficult times the European Union is seeking paths out of the crisis.

June 18, 2013 by Werner Weidenfeld

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Europe has been struggling against the economic and financial crisis for several years. Since the advent of monetary union, Europe has become more closely integrated than ever before. The euro, the joint **currency** used in the 17 countries of the eurozone, requires joint competitiveness and joint stability. That's why domestic policy details also receive Europe-wide attention: the continent is seeking its future.

Behind this lies a key phenomenon that represents the true challenge going beyond the economic statistics: despite all the criticism of everyday political details, citizens recognize the fundamental importance of the unification of Europe – as an opportunity for free self-determination and global political responsibility. At the same time, however, more than 70% of Europeans say: “I don't understand any of that!” This expression of disorientation is the real warning sign. We need to create conceptual order on the building site of Europe. The 500 million people who organize their lives together in a constitutional, peaceful and democratic way should feel at home on their continent. That requires an understandable strategic perspective.

There is an example here that can provide useful ideas: at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s it was possible to detect a mood in Europe that was very similar to the atmosphere today. The negative economic data suggested Europe was in inexorable decline. At that time, politicians like François Mitterrand, Helmut Kohl and Jacques Delors succeeded in rescuing the continent by realizing the single market. The crisis was transformed into a success story.

How can this experience be related to the present? Initially, it is important to gain a clear view of the difficulties and challenges. Many member states of the EU have allowed their budgetary policy to go to rack and ruin – and the Union had no way of effectively preventing this. Under critical pressure, Europe then completed a learning process and gradually created instruments and took measures – from the rescue package to the so-called European semester all the way to the fiscal pact. And the fiscal pact is not the end of the story, but only an important step on a long historical path.

Against this background, Europe needs new justification paradigms. Many of the political rationales for integration still stem from the early days when there was a need to respond to war and peace – or when the unification of Europe was a core component of the global political conflict between East and West. There is now a need for agreement on a new justification model for understanding the conglomeration of power that is Europe. After all, in recent decades

there has been an immense transfer of power to the European level. There are now only two areas of policy in which Europe is not politically involved – the funding of **social security** systems and cultural policy. The 500 million people with enormous economic potential and extensive military equipment have raised the EU to the rank of world power. It is therefore all the more important to free this world power from its sense of disorientation.

That will require those new justification paradigms and those precise strategies. Only then will Europe be able to find a sustainable, future-oriented shape and form. The alternatives are already apparent: many member states have refugee movements moving away from the complexity of the situation and towards the simplistic slogans of populist extremism. Three strategic problems need to be solved if this challenge is to be successfully overcome:

-The question of political leadership remains unresolved. Observers cannot help but notice the tensions between the President of the European Council, the President of the Council of Ministers, the President of the European Commission, the Chairman of the Eurogroup, the Speaker of the European Parliament, the Heads of State and Government of the member states and, depending on the task at hand, also the President of the European Central Bank or the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. However, who really bears leadership responsibility for which task? Hardly anyone is able to answer this question at present. To that extent, the EU is undoubtedly one of the least transparent phenomena that **politics** has to handle. However, lack of transparency causes alienation and a retreat into populism. This therefore explains the priority and the need to create transparency.

- Europe has experienced a dramatic increase in power – but not in acceptance by its citizens. The **euro** framework makes decisions about many hundreds of billions of euros, but the background, interests and objectives remain unclear and are not understood. Who actually has the authority at all to make such far-reaching decisions? The question of authority therefore moves into the focus of attention.

- The current dilemma thus becomes obvious: citizens must be able to experience Europe as their Europe. They must be able to understand it and to participate in it. Several decisions would be helpful here. The **European Council** has set up a reform commission on institutional development. A similar commission should be established on the subject of decentralization and the return of powers. Equally important, however, is the idea of creating a Europe that is close to its citizens, making Europe a place of participation – that would be the solution. Participation cannot only involve casting a vote in the **elections** to the **European Parliament** and, in future, perhaps in the direct election of a president. No, the thematic details of strategic solutions must also be sketched out within a culture of participation. This responsibility justifies the greatest possible application of imagination and creativity.

Europe needs an ambitious conceptual discourse. It needs steps towards a real European public – in other words, the cultural foundation of its political order. If we approach this in a sensitive and strategic way, we will discover that Europe stands at the beginning of a new era. ▪

Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Werner Weidenfeld is Director of the Center for Applied Policy Research at the University of Munich.

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