

Chapter 1

Yes to more Europe – now!

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'Tis the time's plague when madmen lead the blind...'
(Shakespeare, *King Lear*)

Europe? Europe!

The European Union is in a political nosedive. Forces from the outside are undermining it, while forces from the inside are eroding it or actively destroying it; at the same time, a rising groundswell of anti-European populist nationalism has proven itself theoretically capable of gaining a majority. For a long time now, people have ceased to view the visions of European integration evoked by de Gaulle and Adenauer, De Gasperi and Churchill, Mitterrand and Kohl as the lesson which Europe learned from its two world wars and as the logical next step for politics, the economy and society.

Europe serves as a screen onto which growing numbers of people project their opposition to everything they think is wrong with the world. This opposition is evidenced clearly in their outright rejection of the EU (characterised as a 'political behemoth') and its institutions. In conceptual and emotional terms, Europe is looking ever more like an old boys' club for the few (cosmopolitan, left-wing and liberal city dwellers), while the many (residents of rural areas and peripheral regions far from the urban centres) are left feeling isolated, abandoned and forgotten.

The ever-wider gap between the city and the country, the 1% and the 99%, the rich and the poor, those in precarious work and those in long-term employment, and the sheer number of people living on the brink – all against a backdrop of political failure at national level – is making it harder and harder to believe in the 'European promise' of peace and security, prosperity and growth, justice and sustainability.

European visions – visions of Europe

If we follow Helmut Schmidt's maxim that 'People with visions should go to the doctor', the German political establishment is in rude health. Germany's debate on Europe is entirely devoid of any visionary view of the future or ideas for a concrete political utopia, and there is no foundational principle guiding the country's actions. Instead, the discussion is dominated at every turn by sober and pragmatic realism and a 'policy of the smallest possible steps', underpinned by the belief that Europe can be built quietly and cautiously in this way, through 'piecemeal engineering'. Progress (in some cases significant progress) has indeed been made in individual areas, but Europe is more fragile than ever and on the verge of crumbling. We are losing sight of the fundamental promise and the central political message of the European Union – guaranteed peace and prosperity for everyone.

This predilection for pragmatic realism has brought forth sobering fruit. Europe is perceived as a bureaucratic colossus in Brussels which churns out rules and regulations and watches over their implementation, and as an aloof entity which is remote from its citizens and which lacks transparency and democracy, even though the men and women working in its fortress-like office blocks are doing nothing other than what they are told to do (or not told not to do) by the national political bureaucracies. The policy of pragmatic realism followed by these latter has turned Europe into a symbol – particularly among those of a populist mindset – of creeping hyper-regulation and bloated administration.

Impassioned calls for an integrated future Europe, as the legacy of and the lesson learned from our shared history, are heard only on particularly momentous or solemn occasions. The fundamental questions – peace or war, prosperity and growth, solidarity and social justice, an open society and sustainability, and whether we want to be the captain of our own ship or a vassal state simply rubber-stamping decisions by other ‘world powers’ which push us around – have been put on the back burner, and are no longer given their due prominence. Yet this Europe of ours cannot survive without a tangible shape and an institutional framework. Joschka Fischer¹ put forward for discussion a vision for a concrete utopia, intended to guide our actions; the ‘transition from a union of states to full parliamentarisation as a European federation’. Instead of voices debating ideas such as this, however, we hear only deafening silence, or at most soapbox speeches in which the concepts are rendered remote and harmless and watered down to heartfelt wishes for more Europe and a better Europe. The political will to achieve full parliamentarisation of the European Union is needed more urgently than ever, and it must be the issue on which the forthcoming European Parliament elections are contested. The European Parliament is the voice of Europe’s peoples at EU level, with the European Council acting at best as a second house in the law-making process, and this landscape of political democracy must also be supplemented by individual examples of direct democracy such as referendums and the citizens’ initiative.

The European Union – the most auspicious political project of modern times in a continent convulsed for centuries on end by wars, various brands of nationalism and hegemonies – is lurching into the worst crisis in its history. The symptoms of this crisis? Brexit, the structural instability of the euro area, Eastern Europe’s *Sonderweg*, a resurgence of identity-based nationalism, a manifest inability to take a common line on the migration issue, a growing anti-European populism on the one hand and a cementing of anti-liberal political and constitutional convictions on the other, and the palpable hesitation and inability of the ‘Europhiles’ to share a convincing and believable pro-European story and strategy.

The European Union is a monumental peace project and a successful one, even if no one nowadays is able or willing to hear this truth. November 2018 marked the passing of 100 years since the end of the First World War – a war of senseless slaughter. The European Union was an idea born out of both of the world wars, but the veneer of civilisation continues to be worryingly thin. We can no longer pretend that the world

1. In his ‘Humboldt speech’ of 12 May 2000 (Fischer 2000).

order has become safer, since the fundamental principles which underpin the European Union (the rule of law, the basic tenets of parliamentary democracy, the inviolability of borders, the validity and binding nature of the canon of international human rights and, last but not least, the self-imposed moral obligation to engage in international cooperation and stick to the rules) are being questioned or even ignored in many other geopolitical arenas. It is becoming increasingly common for infringements of these fundamental rules of human coexistence to be trivialised as ‘taboo breaking’, and the global freedom of the Internet, social media and fake news have made it even easier to push the envelope of basic moral boundaries.

Action?

In subjective terms, what hurts most (and what feels closest to historical failure) is the ‘wait-and-see’ attitude, the tactical manoeuvring, the timidity and the faint-heartedness of the committed Europhiles in Germany and in other Member States of the European Union. The small-minded way in which they think and act is painful to see, and there is a glaring contradiction between the fine speeches they give, safe in the knowledge that talk is cheap, and what they actually do in practice. The reason why this is so painful is because it ties into the broader trend of plummeting political credibility on the part of the country’s Federal Government and the mainstream parties which form its governing coalition (the CDU/CSU and the SPD), as evidenced by the stony silence in response to Macron’s proposals, the absence of any strategic framework guiding the advancement and strengthening of the European Union, and moves to block the development of a shared roadmap. Everyone is happy to get up on his or her soapbox and join the choir of voices agreeing that Europe is vitally important, but the real focus of their politics is on minute details, and it is one of these minute details – a European unemployment insurance scheme – which could ultimately upset the whole apple cart. It is only a tiny piece of the larger puzzle of European integration, and yet even a measure on this small scale is doomed to failure for lack of cash. Against a backdrop of such ingrained procrastination, it is hard to see how the bigger challenges can be overcome, and hard to see the sense in calls for a European tax policy (digital tax, financial transaction tax, corporate tax), despite its importance in the interests of social justice.

There is no point hoping for the emergence of bold initiatives to shape Europe until the pro-Europeans (in Germany at least) have cast off the shackles they themselves created by arguing so vehemently against the ‘redistribution union’, the ‘debt-sharing union’ or the ‘liability union’. Europe costs money, and those who benefit most – particularly through public assets such as peace, freedom, democracy, fundamental social rights and (lest we forget) shared prosperity – can and must bear the larger part of what some refer to as a burden.

Prosperity for all

The European Union promised prosperity for its citizens, and it has delivered on this promise. The EU is a union of prosperity – unparalleled in the world and unprecedented

in history. Its economic clout and financial growth, in which the vast majority of its citizens can share thanks to mechanisms such as mandatory social participation, make it attractive to people all around the world. This is not the whole story, however; the European Union is also characterised by the creeping spread of insecurity with its myriad faces, the entrenchment of poverty in certain social groups (in particular the persistent youth unemployment in Europe's peripheral regions) and the unsustainability of its ecological and economic transformation. The promise of prosperity, of living a good life in peace and freedom with a decent job and the right to basic social insurance, is one that we must also make to future generations without any ifs or buts, and the European project will only gain acceptance in the Member States if we can deliver on this promise. At the same time, no discussion of prosperity can be complete without reference to the need to level the metaphorical playing field for entrepreneurial initiative, or the need to tackle the present and growing wealth gap. The ever-worsening disparity between Europe's prosperous regions and countries and its remote ones (in subjective and objective terms) is symptomatic of a major problem which calls for action in the here and now. Helping the less well-off should not be confused with propping up debt-driven economies – it is in the interests of the strong, since it helps the weak to find their way to independent economic growth, gradually overcoming and closing the wealth gap in the process. Against a backdrop of shifts in the global economy and the rising dominance of individual large countries and corporations, Member States will only be able to protect their own interests if they present a united front on international economic and financial issues and (even more importantly) on security and defence issues.

Industry policy of the future

In the current geopolitical climate, the peace project of a European Community and its promise of prosperity can only be achieved by a union acting together. Individual states – yes, even the EU's founding countries – will never achieve the critical mass they need to respond effectively to the profound economic, social, financial, ecological and political transformations which are visible on the horizon. To name just one example of initiatives which might harness our joint strengths, a coherent EU industrial policy could allow us to come to the table as well-respected and successful global actors playing on the same team. Yet efforts in this direction are currently fragmentary in nature and restricted to after-dinner speeches, with the Member States merely giving lip service to industrial policy initiatives which are launched by the Commission but which are ultimately doomed to end up as dumping grounds for both doable and not-so-doable proposals for a common industrial policy. In the medium and long term, Europe's manufacturing industries will only be taken seriously at global level if its Member States take concerted and genuine action on research, education and innovation. If we do not take meaningful steps to shape a truly common industrial policy for Europe, we will no longer be able to talk about 'European' industry in the medium term; the same is true by analogy as regards the need to align the agricultural budget with the goals of a sustainable environmental protection policy in the interests of fighting climate change.

A stronger EU is not a goal in itself; instead, it protects the interests of all the citizens of the EU's Member States. Leaving to one side the crucial (and quasi-constitutive) milestones

of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the Treaties of Rome, the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Maastricht Treaty, in the past greater integration of the EU was achieved primarily through means other than legitimised political projects, and day-by-day progress towards this entirely plausible goal increasingly took place out of citizens' sight. It expressed itself in a growing body of legislation intended with every one of its rules and regulations to create 'more Europe' (and therefore a 'better life').

Free market rules

A free market was thus achieved in Europe, but with it came a jungle of common standards and rules, and these create loopholes, no matter how well-meaning they may be; for example, 'freedom to conduct a business' under European corporate law is often just another term for 'regime shopping' (making investments in countries with the lowest rates of tax and social security contributions and the weakest employee rights). The debt ceilings, limits and minimum standards of the Fiscal Compact were heralded as the building blocks of a tangible Europe – a Europe of bureaucrats and a land ruled by the European Commission, in which 'communitisation' was the first choice of method and process.

The national governments clung to the 'other European method' as a way of opposing the creeping erosion of national sovereignty. The EU Council (led by Merkel on behalf of Germany) refused to delegate key decisions on matters such as the euro-area bailout, and the intergovernmental 'cooperation method' (*coopération renforcée*) was systematically strengthened in order to contain and curtail the Commission's powers.

This dichotomy between an integrated Community method on the one hand and an intergovernmental cooperation method on the other is not an irreconcilable contradiction. It is the result of years of tinkering around without taking binding action, of failing to take decisions on the Europe we want and need, and of engaging in an unspoken conflict over its guiding principles. Many people agree that they want 'more Europe, a better Europe and a more social Europe!', but few can explain exactly what a gradual shift to greater communitisation and more binding arrangements for cooperation between the Member States would look like, just as they cannot explain how the nation states could still have a hand in the policy-making pot if the European Union were fully parliamentarised. If we want to answer questions about how far communitisation should go, we need forthright responses to questions about the future of the nation state.

Europe where do we come from and where to go?

The EU's wholesale expansions have further blurred an image which was already diffuse. Mathematically speaking, 'European Union' ≠ 'European continent'; the former refers to the most important and defining political configuration of the latter. Expansions bring with them a rise in plurality and difference, making Europe the continent of diversity, history, tradition, strengths and weaknesses – this is where Europe's soul lies,

and evolving and extending what its citizens share and what binds them together is the *raison d'être* of Europe as a political project.

At the moment, however, exactly the opposite is happening in multiple different Member States, where the rule-of-law principles of a liberal democracy – the principles which bind us together – are coming increasingly under fire. The voices pulling Europe apart champion the European method of cooperation and binding agreements between sovereign nation states, and want the scope of these agreements to be limited to the opening up of markets and the establishment of uniform conditions for competition between businesses.

The EU needs to stop ignoring this mutiny in its ranks and to do so without delay. Brexit-style breakaways are no solution, and this domestic quarrel is drastically affecting the EU's capacity to take action at a time when action is needed more than ever before. We must also swallow a much bitterer pill, namely that accessions by new countries are likely to make the clamour of discordant voices louder rather than make the EU fitter for the future – bad news for the Balkans, and sadly also for the strategic sustainability of the EU in the future.

Social Europe?

Social Europe is a shadow of its former self – a fact which is all the more disappointing given that it was announced with so much pomp and circumstance and praised to the skies on so many different occasions. The differing standards of living within Europe and the differing extents to which employees are able to participate in corporate governance are sobering, particularly if we are honest with ourselves and admit that social security benefits and a highly developed welfare state need economic and financial backing to match. Europe has almost no voice on social policy issues, and this is not the fault of the Eurocrats – this is the fault of political players who remain blinkered by their limited nation-state perspectives. Today's movers and shakers in the social policy arena talk the talk but do not walk the walk, being well aware that anyone who has consulted and legitimised the current powers will also be shown the door in the event of serious conflict (however unlikely such conflict may be).

It costs nothing to talk about 'social Europe' in solemn speeches, but the security of workers' situations remains most dependent on the ability of workers' organisations to engage in conflict and cooperation at national level, and it would be foolish for these organisations to relinquish any of their power until reliable European power-sharing mechanisms are in place. The establishment of framework conditions and minimum values at EU level is a valid and important strategy, but it is equally important to avoid weakening employer and employee organisations at national and European level – and not only that, but to give them greater latitude and real negotiating power.

We must neither forget nor repress our experiences in Brussels when making this 'social Europe' a reality. From the perspective of social dialogue outcomes, the era of the Barroso

Commissions was a complete washout.² The lack of legislative initiatives on the part of the Barroso Commissions I and II served as an invitation for European employers' federations to turn 'social dialogue' (which in and of itself can act as a springboard for legislation) into a series of discussion groups which occasionally published joint opinions but produced nothing with any binding force, meaning that a crucial tool for democratic participation by the social partners went to waste. The trade unions need to take the long view, apply pressure at national level and achieve binding commitments if European social dialogue is ever to bear tangible fruit again.

For many within the political establishment, edicts from Brussels on social policy are of much less importance than those on the functioning of the internal market and those safeguarding competitiveness, and the European Court of Justice has set its own lines in the sand which mirror these views. 'Social Europe' is primarily a task for an EU-level constellation of strong national players committed to achievable endeavours such as wage negotiations which place limits on the reach of markets and power. We have little choice in the path ahead of us – we must safeguard and strengthen our ability to take action at national level, while at the same time pushing for 'Europeanisation' and a huge increase in the influence of the European institutions.

Europe's diversity

In historical and social terms, Europe's diversity has been a major factor in its political, cultural and economic prosperity, but respect for differences is yet another casualty of the recent trend towards nation state insularity. One of the foundational pillars of the European Union is the joint belief in a culture of tolerance, protection of minorities, liberal democracy and the rule of law; liberty, equality and fraternity are not just a guiding motto for France, but the inheritance of our entire continent (and far beyond). Every one of our forebears was once a foreigner somewhere in this continent, and this continent gave birth to ideas which led to the greatest catastrophe of civilisation and humanity. It is both conceivable and feasible that the nation states should give up a small portion of their sovereignty in return for the opportunity to safeguard this cultural and political connection, and it would be a scandal if the over-reported gap between communitarians (mostly in rural areas) and the globally minded urban elite were to be misused to stir up feelings against cosmopolitanism and tolerance. We must be aware of exactly where our strengths lie.

Europe and its Nation States

Nationalism and particularism lead to nothing but isolation and marginalisation, and there are countless cases in history where such forces have ultimately been brought to bear against the outside world. It would be absolutely wrong to try to whitewash away our national traditions and idiosyncrasies – our history will always be part of us. At the same time, however, we must not tolerate displays of national flag-waving by

2. See the chapter in this volume on social dialogue by Juliane Bir.

populists, agitators and nationalists. We must engage in an open and clear debate on the relationship between the nation states and the European Union, since at present too much of this debate is being conducted in whispered conversations, and everyone is being left in the dark.

Europe needs to acknowledge its nature as a state and emphasise its unique form of statehood, which involves complementing rather than replacing the nation states. Achieving this statehood in the world as it stands today necessitates a gradual transfer of certain attributes of each nation state's sovereignty, according to guiding principles and with a particular purpose in mind – not as a goal in and of itself, but for the good of everyone in a changing world. It is misleading to refer to the European project as the 'abolition of the nation state', but pseudo-debates predicated on assumptions of this kind are depressingly common in the Federal Republic of Germany and elsewhere. Without bothering to do their due diligence by analysing the situation, and disregarding objective truths and global trends which are plain as day, the fantasists who participate in them are wont to refashion the nation state into a panacea for all the woes caused by political, economic, social and ecological vicissitudes.

Outlandish claims are made to the effect that the proponents of further and far-reaching European integration are ready and willing to give up sovereignty and erase national identity. Yet a belief in the sovereign nation state as all-powerful and all-preserving is nothing but reactionary self-deception in the modern world – globalisation, digitalisation, migration and climate change call for new answers that look forward to the future. Our job is to strike a fresh balance between progressing towards EU statehood on the one hand and safeguarding the essence of the nation state on the other, and to ensure that this process is focused on solutions and appropriate to the tasks we face.

We must also say a firm 'yes' to the transfer of extra sovereign attributes to the EU, provided that this transfer is democratically legitimate and follows a solution- and task-centred approach. This new balance of sovereign powers is what will allow the European Union to assume the shape predestined for it by history, rather than looking back towards some golden age that never was. We must remind people that the concept of a nation centres on the ability of its citizens to take decisions freely and of their own volition, and not on identity-related ideas such as ethnic homogeneity. If we are to answer the question of how far down the path of communitisation we should go, we must first give an honest answer to questions about the future of the nation state, and this political linchpin must not be ignored in the much-called-for EU reform debate simply because it is 'too controversial'. A new 'European Convention' made up of the European Parliament, the national parliaments and the national governments would serve as a suitable political platform for this task.

Uncertainty and rapid change

Despite the many forms it takes, the widespread uncertainty felt by the citizens of the EU Member States can indubitably be traced back to common political, economic and social factors. One of these common factors is a sense of political and cultural insecurity

caused not by actual experiences of economic and social decline, but by the fear of such decline and of being relatively worse off than other people. The world of today offers manifold justifications for this socio-culturally motivated uncertainty and fear; the collapse of the world order and the positions and roles which have structured society since World War Two, the rapid pace of change made tangible through the globalisation of business and trade, the push towards digitalisation and the ensuing gap between those who have access to rapid networks and those who are socially isolated, the overwhelming nature of migratory flows and the helplessness (experienced at first hand by citizens) of politicians to do anything about any of these things. These changes may well be an opportunity and a call to take decisive steps towards modernisation, but the majority of EU citizens do not perceive them as such.

Instead, they perceive them as violent and earth-shattering tremors shaking the very foundations of a way of living which has been passed down over generations and which they believe must be defended. This sense of powerlessness has prompted a resurgence in old beliefs and ideas thought (at least to some extent) to have been relegated to the past – nationalism and the nation state, rejection of and opposition to everything ‘foreign’, the search for solid ground and a fixed identity as a bulwark against internal and external attacks and a guaranteed route to prosperity. What is entirely lacking is a convincing narrative about the need to modernise, to change and to make ourselves fit for the future – and a political paradigm which gains credibility by bringing this narrative to life in full view rather than behind closed doors.

Cash and subsidies can only go so far towards overcoming socio-culturally patterned fear and uncertainty of this kind. One of the reasons why money is not the only answer is because these worries affect not just the poorest of the poor or society’s outcasts in their allegedly hopeless plight – they also prey on people with a decent standard of living, up to and including those who are solidly middle class. Despite the fact that we are living in a time of unprecedented economic prosperity, fear of losing one’s job or one’s assets (and the resulting drop in social status) is rampant. People have stopped believing that they will benefit in any way from the changes which are either visible on the horizon or are already making themselves felt, such as the growing isolation of rural areas and the metropolitisation of the major cities.

The gap between words and action is worryingly large, and there is no overarching narrative or vision of the future which moulds all of these changes into opportunities. We do not need a new story – the story of peace and security on this continent, the promise of prosperity, growth, justice and sustainability merely needs updating so that it can be experienced by many more generations to come. We must also explain in persuasive terms why ‘Europe’ is where we must look for solutions rather than the cause of all our problems.

This is particularly apparent in debates on European policy. The topic of Europe is never far from the agenda, whether it is being dismissed in off-hand and derogatory criticism of ‘Brussels’, or extolled in empty words about the importance of European unity for us all. Yet what is really happening on the ground belies the substance of these fine speeches, particularly in Germany, and particularly within the ruling parties.

Pro-European speeches are given, such as Ms Merkel's recent address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg (Merkel 2018), but details are avoided like the plague (with the exception of a reference to the 'European army', in a subtle nod to Mr Macron). Truisms and platitudes are all that remain for other much more important areas of policy, such as the monetary fund, the banking union, the digital tax, the EU's own revenues, an EU budget and deeper institutionalisation.

Shared destiny?

The same is true for Olaf Scholz' Europe-wide unemployment insurance scheme – a minor detail which is worthy of note, but no more than a minor detail in view of the Herculean tasks facing the Federal Minister of Finance (see above). The fact that the mutual aid granted under this scheme will at best be funded through loans also lends a particular piquancy to the 'shared destiny' of the EU Member States. Despite all of this, however, a sense of forward motion – no matter how gradual and halting – is apparent. The common denominator underpinning much-debated issues such as the financial transaction tax, the well-thought-out fiscal arrangements for the Internet giants and the future of the European budget is that we need Europe, and more of it – yet we want more Europe without spending more money, and certainly without digging deeper into our own pockets. This is the bedrock principle of Germany's European policy in autumn 2018, on the eve of the elections to the European Parliament, and it is one of the main reasons why political progress on Europe has ground to a halt in our country. The man on the street is skilled at spotting discrepancies between what politicians say and what they do, and the damage this has done has caused many people to turn their back not only on our own discredited political establishment, but also on Europe.

Europe remains a source of fascination, but increasingly a source of annoyance too. The introduction of the single currency added rocket fuel to the economy of the entire euro area and contributed significantly to its growth (and Germany is the country that benefits most from European integration and from the euro). We must therefore do everything in our power to strengthen the position of the euro, in the international financial system and elsewhere; its long protracted death in a series of crises would not mean the end of the road for Europe as a continent, but would fundamentally damage the idea and reality of an economically strong European Union, able to hold its own in the international political arena and able to shape the societies in which we live. The euro is the keystone which holds together the core countries of Europe, and shared economic and financial circumstances are the cement that binds them together most effectively.

Europe and its unity

We must nevertheless be wary of losing sight of the big picture, since the political, social and economic fallout of the euro's arrival in Southern Europe has been huge. It would be both foolish and incorrect to use the 'global competitiveness' of Germany (a country which has come out on top in the history of the euro so far) as the sole and final benchmark for political and economic behaviour; competitiveness certainly is and

will undoubtedly remain an important criterion and goal, but it would be deplorable to attempt to achieve it at the expense of mass unemployment, growing insecurity and social isolation. Germany is trying to evade the joint responsibility it more than anyone holds in this connection for Europe's growing problems of economic, financial and social polarisation; if entire countries start to feel left behind, it will once again become normal for nations to act according to their own agenda without first consulting any coordinating instance. This will be the point at which the bell tolls for the Union, and that is not what anyone wants.

Germany benefits from the euro and from escaping the burden of currency realignment; in return, there is a heavier obligation on the country to implement adjustment and compensatory measures as the political price for continuing a mutually acceptable process of convergence and adaptation. Germany must rid itself of the fear of a 'transfer union' – not because the country should prop up inefficiency and idleness, but because it should provide the cash needed for a union of hard workers, and a union which incentivises and demands regeneration and the transition to a way of working and living which is fit for the future. 'Controlled transfers' are the bare minimum needed in this respect, and integrated EU budgets are neither the devil's own work nor a guaranteed panacea. They play a key role in sustaining the momentum of growth during investment slumps, innovative dry patches and periods of asymmetric shocks and crises, as well as promoting and supporting gradual but consistent progress towards equitable living conditions within the EU.

We are suffering from a collective case of cold feet, and everyone is afraid to say out loud what they know to be true. The European Union is vitally important for the prosperity, the security and the very future of the EU Member States. We must be capable of taking action – in economic and financial policy terms on the basis of our own resources and our own budget, and in defence terms on the basis of our own army (carefully negotiated with and within NATO).

A fresh start

The European Union is in need of wholesale reform and a fresh start, and this is a process which can and must be accelerated by Germany. We must engage in a debate on the future which frames these new challenges as opportunities for us all, and which acknowledges that the European Union – as the central regulatory framework for our way of life and for innovation and dynamic growth – must not only be democratised from the bottom up, but must also be endowed with more and better rights and resources.

Developments in early January will have come as a bitter disappointment to anyone still persisting in the belief that the universally applicable 'European story' might remain the main plot element of the European elections, despite the risks we currently face. There is scant evidence of going back to Europe's roots, talking about the crucial part Europe plays in securing all of our futures and taking a credible leap forward in conceptual and strategic terms; instead, the idea of a 'European citizen' is being scaled down (if not to say belittled) in large swathes of Europe.

It is hard to stomach the SPD's decision to campaign for the European Parliament elections on a platform centred around the minimum wage and data protection, which supposedly form the pinnacle of the EU's achievements; these are, of course, worthy issues in and of themselves, but the debate on European integration has long since shifted to more fundamental questions. How do we achieve an integrated Europe which stands strong internationally and has clout on the global stage, but which can also secure peace and prosperity within its borders and across generations, on the basis of solidarity and sustainability? One can only assume that no one working at party headquarters has noticed that it is because of questions like this that people are criticising the EU and turning their back on it. If you were to listen to the soapbox speeches and debates, it would appear that the Europhiles in the country are well aware of the fundamental issues which need to be tackled in order to overcome the crises and difficulties we face – but as soon as the speech or debate is over, everything reverts straight back to narrow-mindedness and business as usual.

Let us be quite clear – a policy of targeted reform is needed, and the absence of any such policy is a strategic misstep which must be rectified with a vision of the future and guiding principles for future integration. One might even suspect a conspiracy – are the elites deliberately keeping this debate on the foundations of the state to themselves, because the common people are not (or not yet) ready or mature enough to engage in a discussion of this kind? Once again, another case of cold feet which obscures the need for a proper debate between the two opposing sides.

As Europeans, we can no longer fight shy of a discussion on the guiding principles which underpin our EU policies. What kind of Europe do we want? This is not simply a question of putting together a political wish-list in a spirit of political voluntarism – historical continuities offer opportunities and set limits.

The nation state is one of these continuities, and it may present more opportunities and limits as it evolves and changes. The nation states will play a significant role either in a European federal state or in an integrated confederation of European states, and there is some justification for the assertion that their importance and stature were underestimated in the past. Reports of the death of the nation state were undoubtedly premature, and the political importance of the diversity which defines Europe has also been underrated on occasion.

Core Europe?

What we should be aiming for is to accommodate this diversity in Europe rather than to eradicate it, using the traditional European solution of the compromise. In the context at hand, this means a 'core' Europe with the sovereign powers needed to conduct not only internal market policy, but also financial policy (on the basis of own resources, with a simultaneous obligation to work towards equitable living conditions) and social, foreign, security and defence policy, along with a traditional two-house system built on the existing EU institutions (Parliament and Council); it also means another 'core' Europe in the form of the euro area, which makes gradual but steady progress and

wins over doubters with its performance. This is not only a realistic utopia – it is also a realisable one, and we must not shirk our responsibility to engage in a debate on the topic.

What is to be done?

The messengers of the gods have become uncommunicative, and the days of knights in shining armour are long gone. It is up to us – the committed Europeans in the nation states – to take matters into our own hands. We must remind ourselves of the power of convincing arguments and be ready and able to use these arguments in debates within our political parties, associations and trade unions, and in discussions with our neighbours, our friends and society at large.

- Europe and European integration must once again become part of a positive and inspiring narrative about where we are going. Europe is our fate and our future.
- Europe’s nation states are incapable of tackling global security challenges, global trade and economic challenges and global environmental challenges on their own; Europe serves as a vital platform for doing so.
- The current crisis faced by the European Union is not a temporary phenomenon that will soon pass. It is a symptom of tectonic shifts taking place below the surface and realigning the major powers of the world. Europe must decide whether it wants to sit at the table with these superpowers and decide – together with the USA, China, Russia and a few others – how the world and its trading relationships should be structured, or whether it wants to play the game according to rules that have been adopted in its absence.
- Europe is a model of living which can no longer be built and defended at nation state level alone. There can be no avoiding European integration if we wish to stand up for our understanding of social responsibility, our understanding of democracy and the rule of law, our social inclusiveness and our tolerance.
- The economic and social divide in Europe is a powder keg which could blow up in the face of European integration. Instead, it must be transformed into a launchpad for European solidarity – we must talk about support for viable and sustainable economic growth rather than the funding of consumption through transfers.
- The benefits delivered by Europe are hard to overestimate, and so it is only right that Europe should cost us money. We must overcome the shibboleth that a higher financial contribution by Germany is equivalent to a ‘transfer union’ devoid of any solidarity.
- Something must be done about the calamitous lack of any forward-looking approach or forward-thinking policies in Germany. Both the SPD and CDU face a

shared problem of legitimacy and credibility; they are all but refusing to discuss the future as a basis for credible action on Europe.

- Now is the time for an ambitious concept of a Europe which is fit for the future. Let us not give up before we have even tried – voters are cleverer than we give them credit for, and we should put our faith in them. We should also have the courage to harness the visionary power of a concrete utopia.
- We must strengthen and restructure the euro area, both for the Europe of today and for the ‘core’ Europe of tomorrow.
- We must ask awkward questions and be optimistic and open to the future, particular within large civil-society organisations. Globalisation and digitalisation will only make us slaves to technology and factual constraints (and supplicants at the table of the world powers) if we do not play our European card with conviction.
- This also includes debating the foundational principles which guide our efforts to shape Europe’s institutional framework. What would a European Federation look like? What role would be played by the major political movements and what role would be played by the nation states in a democratic and unified Europe?
- The European elections offer yet another opportunity for upheaval and reform. Will the parties have the courage to put forward electoral manifestos which are ambitious in their scope? Or will they remain trapped by fear (of populists and others), sluggishness, faint-heartedness and small-mindedness? Will we have the courage to call for ‘more democracy’ in or with this parliament and in the nation states?
- Efforts to build Europe’s legitimacy must ensure that experiences in one country (such as the ‘En Marche!’ [‘Forward!’] movement in France) are not simply transferred straight to other countries (the ‘Aufstehen!’ [‘Stand Up!’] movement in Germany).
- At its heart, the European project is very simple; tell the trues about the shrinking power of the EU’s nation states (till it is comparable meaningless) and at the same time take decisive action at European level!
- In the interests of fostering a European identity for European citizens, we should draw up and disseminate a top 10 list of ways to achieve integration.
- Last but not least, we need a grassroots initiative which turns the spotlight back on the fundamental questions of European integration, in view of the tendency of politicians and parliaments to shirk their duties in this respect. Europe as a promise of prosperity, as a guarantee of our security, as a community of values, as a global player acting in our interests, and as an expression of our way of life – this Europe is a sovereign confederation of sovereign nation states, and also a community which shares risks and liabilities. It is not a place where certain

individuals live at the expense of others, but a place where no one is left behind. A civil-society initiative of this kind is needed now more than ever before.

- Everyone must do his or her bit, every day.
- If not now, when?

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