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EUROPEAN INTEGRATION - QUO VADIS?¹

By
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As part of the Geneva Lecture Series conceived and conducted by prof. Anis H. Bajrektarevic, President of the Republic of Austria **Dr. Heinz Fischer** (2004-16) and current Co-chair of the Vienna-based **Ban Ki-moon** Centre for Global Citizens centered his two-hour long mesmerizing talk on Europe and its future prospects. University scholars and diplomats based in Geneva and beyond

¹ President Hein Fischer answered the call of the Swiss UMEF University in Geneva on December 10th 2020, and gave this lecture under the auspices of so-called Geneva Lecture Series - Contemporary World of Geo-economics. Lecture series so far hosted former Secretary-General of the Paris-based OECD, current Rector of the Tokyo-based UN University, notable intellectuals such as prof. Ioannis Varoufakis and Nobel prize laureates. Some of the following guests are presidents and prime ministers of western countries, distinguished scholars as well as the chief executives of the important intergovernmental organisations.

enjoyed the first hand insights in the very history of Europe and its integrations since the end of the WWII.

Excellency Fischer elaborated on the important historic moments that forged today's relations between member states of the EU and pointed out the weaknesses and challenges that the European continent will have to face in order to not reach a dead end in terms of the so-valued integration process.

Dr. Fischer introduced the topic by asking whether we have learned from our previous mistakes. According to him, we did learn from history. However, he believes that "after one or two generations, lessons of history start to fade away and get lost again [and that] we must keep that in mind to avoid dead end".

Going back to World War II (WW2), the well-known European diplomat reminded us how Germany's defeat changed the global balance of power, especially with the US and the USSR emerging as the two superpowers. The year 1945 has also been a crucial in the history of Austria, which reborn and reconstructed as an independent state in April 1945.

The end of WW2 left Europe with many questions; how to restore Germany? How to rebuild Europe? How to establish and protect peace and avoid mistakes that have been done after WW1? After the traumatizing events that happened during the war, peace "had a very high value and was a great priority almost worldwide". Heinz Fischer remarks that "economic and politic cooperation between France, Germany, Italy and other European countries was the best way to retain and reduce nationalistic egoism and link the economist in a way that war cannot be an option to solve problems anymore as it happened so many times before". However, we should not forget that, at the same time, the tension between Stalin and the western world on the other side was growing.

The Ban Ki-moon Center Co-chair continued by talking about the Cold War and describing the first steps towards the European Union that we know today.

"The US officials urged (western) Germany to take full responsibility for the development in their country and for good cooperation with other democracies. The next importation step was the announcement of the so-called Marshall plan for Europe. [It] was originally designed for the whole Europe but got rejected by countries under soviet dominance. Austria government was in a difficult situation because the eastern part of the country was, in that time, in the soviet occupation zone and, nevertheless, Austria joined the Marshall plan under heavy critics from its Communist party and Soviet officials.

[The] first peak of Cold War was the blockade of Berlin in 1948 and the foundation of NATO in 1949, which consequently made European integration faster and stronger."

Nonetheless, Europe was still divided between the East and the West. It was only when Stalin died in 1953, that the beginning of a new era with a more collective leadership started. Fischer believes that his death was an

important element for successful negotiations about the Austrian state treaty in April because the new leaders in Moscow wanted to demonstrate that they were ready for substantial negotiations and for compromises.

Adding to that, two years later, the Treaty of Rome was signed in March 1957, creating the European Economic Community (EEC) between Western Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. This accelerated further political integration.

By early 1960s, about 30% of the Old continent was gathered in the EEC - like-minded democracies, neighboring states of a growing politico-economic influence with good preconditions to strengthen and deepen such cooperation. The EEC was successful and attractive. Naturally, the decision-making of the Six was far easier than in today's Union.

The step from the EEC to the EU was the basis for a better coordinated foreign policy, a precondition for the introduction of the euro currency and it strengthened the role of the European parliament. It was very attractive to join the EU as the union formulated strict conditions and admissions procedures for membership in the club.

In 1989, after the fall of the Berlin wall, Austria, Finland, Sweden and Norway, four democratic countries with good economic performance, applied for the EU. On January 1995, all of them, excepted Norway, became member of the EU. Then, in 2004, the number of member states jumped from 15 to 25 and soon after 27, etc. These years were the best moments in the European integration process but it was also a turning point, the number of diverging interests was enlarging and it was growing parallel to the number of members. As EU became more and more the voice of Europe, it also brought more and more difficulties in terms of decision making.

Eastern countries were united in their anti-Communist and anti-Russian feelings however in other fields of politics they were more and more not united with each other and the rest of Europe. But the question remained: what was the reason for that development?

Dr. Fischer observed that the national identity of new democracies from the 90s, those that were under soviet dominance, had been brutally suppressed during soviet supremacy and their so-called internationalism was not a genuine development, it had been enforced and, soon after the collapse of European communism and the dissolution of Russia pact, these countries showed that they were fed up with internationalism even European internationalism and nationalism saw a powerful renaissance. With this background, populist nationalism in some countries, but not all the eastern European countries, became step by step stronger than European thinking and European solidarity.

While growing nationalism is one big obstacle, for the European cooperation and integration, the necessity of consensus in the constitution of the European union in many fields of European policy is another big problem. Consensus is, indeed, recommendable and necessary for very far-reaching decisions with long time consequences. However, too many necessities for

consensus are poison for a coherent European policy, the more consensus is necessary, the bigger is the role of national interests and the bigger the role of national interests is the more we have a union with injured wings and the more it is difficult to compete with the other big powers in the world.

Since decades we can observe new developments dimensions and challenges of ecological environmental policy, the figures of climate change and global warming speak a very clear language on global level but also in Europe we have a lot to do in these fields. The Paris climate agreement set the goal of keeping global warming below 2 degrees but the question remains whether we will reach this goal and whether this will be enough to prevent further catastrophes such as biodiversity losses, glacier melting, intensified western conditions, etc. The EU is more and more trying to promote climate-friendly policies. It is indeed trying to reach progress and to mobilize the member countries on this field, they know that this must be a priority. Former President Fischer added that, in the last couple of years, China took more and more the lead in green and renewable energy whereas Trump administration withdraw from Paris agreement. However, the fact that Biden promised to re-enter Paris accord and put effort into fighting climate changes leads to careful optimism.

On the other hand, Excellency Fischer pointed out that the issue of forced migrations should not be forgotten. He added that this represent a huge global problem which the EU cannot solve alone and, even though nobody is expecting them to, they should be ready to contribute to a solution and to do their part. The number of refugees at the border of Europe between 2014 and 2015 increased rapidly to 1,3 million asylum seekers and this caused a lot of problems, troubles, hostilities and a wave of population and nationalism. Observing the policies in some European countries and Austria is not an exception, the problem is not so much, some governments can solve the issue but the problem is whether they want to solve it.

In the meantime, the second wave has counted higher numbers than ever, we had time to place some coordination at EU level to fight jointly the virus. The Commission has made useful proposals in some areas such as cross-border commuting transport of goods, external borders purchase and distribution of vaccines. Also it tackled the international cooperation of comparable statistics and the strategic introduction of the next generation of EU recovery instrument amounting to 750 million euros which is linked to the next financial framework and the EU budget for the years 2021-2027. All being promising signs of a rapid reaction capacitation.

“The EU is facing challenging times. Cross-European cooperation has no alternative - it is today as fundamental as ever” - was the closing point of Heinz Fischer’s farsighted and comprehensive Geneva talk.

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