The European Union at a Crossroads
Robert Goebbels, 16.05.24

1.

We Europeans live in the smallest part of the world, an appendix to the much larger Asian landmasses. Europe is in fact not a Continent in any geographical sense. We are part of the Eurasian Plate and have unprecise borders with both Asia and Africa. Geologically the rocks of Turkey share a common history with those of the rest of Europe, while rocks in what we call the "Near East" originate in Africa.

What we call proudly "Our Europe" is unfortunately divided into many States not always living in peace together. European history is the result of an uncountable number of wars.

But global history also shows that our part of the world shaped human civilization through culture, science, inventions and technological progress, mostly generated in Europe. The same Europeans brought also brutal colonization and many bloody wars to the rest of the world.

After two World Wars started by Europeans, but affecting nations all over the planet, there was an outcry in Europe: "Never again"! This "never again" gave birth to one of the most innovative political constructions in human history, the European Union.

It began humbly with a common market for Coal and Steel. Coal was in these years the main source of energy; steel the backbone for construction, but also for weaponry.

As you know, the countries starting this common venture were France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. My tiny country was invited because Luxembourg produced then as much steel as the Netherlands and more than Italy.

The political motivation behind this first "European Community" was the attempt to breach the German-French antagonism. Which triggered so many wars in the 19th and the 20th century.

The idea of Jean Monnet worked. The common market for coal and steel was extended to all goods and services, creating thanks to increasing

exchanges more wealth, more jobs and more solidarity between the founding nations.

This success attracted others. The first to join were Great Britain, Ireland and Denmark in 1973, followed by Greece in 81, Spain and Portugal in 86, Austria, Sweden and Finland in 95.

Followed by the big enlargement of 2004, which brought 10 new member states, mostly former socialist republics. Romania and Bulgaria followed in 2007 and Croatia in 2013.

Then came Brexit. The not so United Kingdom left the EU. A divorce that weakened the Union but didn't bring back an imperial status for the UK. Brexit, as all economic indicators show, was a waste failure and left Britain in an increasing mess.

2.

The 27 actual member states are not the United States of Europe. The European Union is based on the principle of sovereign equality of all its members. With the ambition of "creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe".

I quoted from the preamble of "the treaty on European Union". Recalling the "historic importance of the ending of the division of the European continent" and the necessity "to deepen the solidarity between their peoples while respecting their history, their culture and their traditions."

Seen from the rest of the world, the EU is widely perceived as the entity, where human rights, fundamental freedoms and social rights are best preserved.

Together, the 27 member states are next to the US and China a major economic power. Enjoy the wealthiest internal market in the world.

The Euro, the common currency to 20 members, is the most attractive currency after the Dollar, representing a quarter of global reserves.

The EU is the biggest provider of international development aid and gives assistance to numerous countries throughout the world.

3.

Allow me a short digression. I entered the Luxembourg Government in 1984 as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. One of my very first duties was to chair a small intergovernmental conference, aiming at progressively abolishing controls at the common borders of Germany, France and the Benelux-Countries. We quickly found a common ground. I invited for a signing ceremony in June 1985 in Schengen. A little spot on the Moselle River, where the borders of France, Germany and the Benelux are joining. Schengen became the founding treaty for free movements of people in Europe.

What started as an experience among 5 states encountered an enormous success all over Europe. Today 29 States share a common area of freedom and security without internal frontiers.

Not all the member states are participating in Schengen. The UK and Ireland didn't adhere. Cyprus cannot join as an internal border is cutting the island in two parts. Which is also Irelands problem. But Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and even Switzerland became members of Schengen.

Schengen allows every year some 2 billion citizens to cross internal borders without being controlled by custom or police officers. 4 million Europeans cross every working day borders to neighbouring countries in order to work there.

As the Schengen area has a common visa-policy, every year up to 20 million foreigners visit Europe with a Schengen visa allowing them to travel freely in the 29 countries. This is one of the reasons why the EU is the first tourist destination in the world. Especially people from Asia love Schengen visas.

With the migration crisis and terrorist attacks in many European countries some politicians claim to reintroduce controls at the internal borders of the Schengen area. But in order to abolish free circulation a change of the EU-Treaty would be required.

Article 77 states clearly:

"The Union shall develop a policy with a view to:

a)   ensuring the absence of any controls on persons, whatever their nationality, when crossing internal borders:

b)   carrying out checks on persons and efficient monitoring of the crossing of external borders;

c)   the gradual introduction of an integrated management system for external borders."

Great Britain was never a partner in Schengen. Was in theory always in control of its borders. But borders are no absolute barrier. Despite maintaining controls, the UK suffered during all those years from illegal immigration, from crimes and terrorism. Since Brexit illegal immigration even increased.

4.

Up to now I insisted mainly on the positive sides of the European integration process. Unfortunately, there is not only butter on Europe's bread.

The EU is an economic giant, but a political dwarf. We are rather strong in soft power, but we are not a Superpower like the US, China and some others.

Our main problem is that within the EU the integrative forces came to a halt. Brexit was occupying and blocking the Union for three years.

The migration crisis showed that there is not enough solidarity between member states. Some new members accept big transfers from the EU-budget but avoid burden sharing. Obviously some former "peoples" Republics took a short cut to "populist" Republics.

Before the great enlargement of 2004 the political mantra was "deepening before enlarging". But the treaties were not adapted in order to allow a smoother functioning of the European Institutions. Neither the Nice Treaty nor the Lisbon Treaty achieved the "deepening" goal.

One example: The European Commission is constituted by one national of each member state. The president elect has blind dates with 26 candidates selected by the different Capitals. Each Commissioner must get a concrete attribution. But there are not enough serious political jobs to fill in. More and more Commissioner get fancy titles like "vice-

president for protecting the European way of life". Whatever this means. There are Commissioners playing Golf as main occupation.

The EU cannot continue like this. Imagine a Commission with 35 and more members. We need institutional reforms, a smaller but stronger Commission; better decision making in the Council; no more vetoes in Foreign Affairs.

Brexit was a warning and a lesson for a lot of anti-Europeans from the extreme right and the extreme left. Even in France the extreme right abandoned the claim to leave the Euro.

But a badly needed institutional reform is not in sight. Such a process is as difficult as cumbersome. First an intergovernmental conference of the 27 Members must be established. Then the 27 must adopt unanimously a draft treaty. Which must be ratified by the European Parliament and 27 national Parliaments. With at least a referendum in Ireland.

I'm convinced that we need a "Common House" in Europe, a concept coined by Gorbachev. The EU cannot be a closed shop, must stay open to all candidates fulfilling the democratic criteria.

But before any further enlargement of the actual house, we first need to consolidate its foundations. And above all: We need new rules about financing the EU.

The EU has a budget, which represents about one percentage point of the combined GDP of the 27 States. This is ridiculously low. The US budget is around 30% of their GDP. The budget of the Federal Republic is above 40% of German GDP. Even the budget of the Swiss Confederation, which has not the reputation of being a big spender, is around 20% of its GDP.

In order to maintain cohesion and solidarity within the Union, we need more transfers between the richest and the poorer regions. That's not always well accepted by the wealthiest. Even though they are the biggest benefiter of the internal market and of the external trade relations of the Union.

There are at least 9 other European countries who want to join the EU. Albania, Bosnia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia. And there is

Kosovo, not even recognized by 5 actual member states. Then there are large and problematic States like Turkey and the Ukraine.

5.

Since Putin invaded the Ukraine, the European Union, beside the US, NATO and others, made a lot of financial and military efforts in order to back the legitim Government in Kiev.

Putin didn't achieve his goal to overthrow President Zelensky and to establish a pro-Russian regime in Kiev. But unfortunately, the Ukrainians will not be able to re-establish the status quo ante existing before 2014. Russia is a nuclear power, has almost 3 times the population of Ukraine. Has the soft backing of important nations like China, India, Turkey and others, which continue to finance Putin's war through trade.

Even if we Europeans, and hopefully the Americans, must increase efforts in order to back and to arm Ukraine, there is at the same time the need to explore all possibilities of ending the killings through a peace-arrangement or, at least, a lasting cease-fire.

Which means that Europe will not escape to establish a new relationship with Russia and some other European nations. That will not be easy, and not satisfactory from a moral point of Vue.

But as we cannot change the geography of Europe, we must organize the best possible relations between all European nations. It is my firm belief that a new Helsinki conference on security and cooperation in Europe is unavoidable.

I close with a quotation of one of the very best diplomats the US ever produced: George Kennan wrote in 1985 that "Nations have to admit the validity and legitimacy of power realities and aspirations, to accept them without feeling the obligation of moral judgment, to take them as existing and inalterable human forces, neither good nor bad, and to seek their point of maximum equilibrium rather than their reform or their repression."