

Dr. Franz Fischler



Dipl.-Ing. Dr. Franz Fischler was member of the European Commission from 1999 to 2004, and responsible for Agriculture, Rural Development and Fisheries. He is president of the Eco-Social Forum Europe since 2005.

The European Union:

From "too late and too little" to a global actor?

The European Union is – to put it mildly – in a challenging phase. One of the major tasks certainly is coming up with a solution after the preliminary failure of the European constitution. With the clear refusal of this set of agreements in some member states, it was clearly shown to politicians that major parts of the population cannot follow a great deal of ideas and concepts. The reason for its refusal is certainly not the text of the constitution but rather the general distrust and discomfort towards a distant European Union which has no satisfactory response to the main social challenges.

We may come across a similar situation with the Turkey issue. It is important to analyze, without plump, polemic alarm raising, which interests a membership of Turkey would really serve. It is a fact that major parts of the population are not content with a membership at the moment and that Europe has to do a lot of homework in order to digest the recently concluded phase of expansion. Without a new constitution to simplify the decision-making processes, without clarifying the funding and without a real progress in Turkey, the membership would probably lead to further paralyzation of the European Union instead of enrichment.

Another obvious point of issue is the disagreement about the future funding of the European Union. This subject makes it obvious that Europe is still too much a matter of the head – in negotiations national interests are prevailing, there is little to see of a community spirit. It was obviously a big disappointment for many who sympathize with Europe that it was the old member states which turned out to be extremely selfish.

In addition to national interests there are economic insecurities and challenges behind all these problems. Being concerned about the social achievements of continental Europe in an increasingly cruel globalized world with immense effects on the employment market, showing no signs of a change in the near future, is the main cause for one or the other obvious crisis. The economic problem is reinforced by the slowly increasing proportion of old age people in the European Union. In the year 2050 the working age population will have decreased by 18 per cent and the number of people older than 65 years will have increased by 60 per cent. This is not only a big social challenge but also a major task for the economic development, because through the aging population the potential growth is reduced from currently 2.0 – 2.25 per cent down to 1.25 per cent and there will be additional expenses necessary for providing care and retirement pension insurance.

All these facts raise doubts whether the European Union can cope with its responsibility as a global actor – which it is just for its mere size. Is it really a symbol of hope? Can it meet our expectations in this matter both for Europe and as a power for international developments? It certainly is a lot to ask from this Europe, but it raises the legitimate question: Who else, if not Europe? And there are several facts which make me feel more positive:

1. Europe has always got out of each crisis stronger. The concept of the European Union is, historically speaking, an innovation. There is no reference model to give any orientation. The consequence is – among other things – that there is often a hard fight for solutions and thus compromises have to be found. Nevertheless, it is this innovative dimension of the European Union that makes it so strong and attractive. And there is reason for hope, because one thing is clear: Only through the European Union we are fortunate that Europe has the longest period of peace in its history. This fact alone makes the European Union an extremely successful model.
2. Europe also takes a position of much more involvement towards the developing countries than other rich countries in the world at the moment. Thus, the expenses for cooperation in development per capita are twice as much in the European Union as they are in the United States of America where the development aid is presently about 0.16 per cent of the gross domestic product. A lot of the member states of the European Union still have a lot to do to fulfill the old but still valid promise of giving 0.7 per cent of the gross domestic product to development cooperation – even Austria does not play a very praiseworthy part in this. But at least there are a few European countries which already invest 0.7 per cent into development cooperation or – like Austria – at least have concrete gradual plans to approach this goal. Furthermore there is an intense cooperation between Europe and the developing countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific region. Through the initiative Everything but Arms for the poorest countries of the world Europe leads the way and became an important trade partner for these countries.
3. Another glimmer of hope is the so-called Lisbon strategy which is basically an eco-social approach and therefore stands for an economic model which economically as well as socially and ecologically follows the principle of sustainability and thus would be a trend-setting model for globalization. Of course during hard economic times there is the danger of dilution and turning towards an economic style where social and ecological interests are neglected. But in the long run we simply cannot afford anything but an eco-social approach without slipping into an ecological, social and thus economic disaster. It is certainly a difficult issue to decide which level of bureaucracy and social expenses are necessary and proper and which changes are necessary for us to be able to stand our economic ground on a global market. This process requires a lot of far-sightedness and intuition and can only work through an intensive dialogue with the population. It is essential to be completely truthful in this matter. But with a correctly implemented Lisbon strategy, the European Union possesses a constructive and positive approach to coping with globalization.

In order to satisfy its role as a global actor, the European Union has to solve the following core problem: "Too late and too little!" More precisely, it is lacking on two issues:

1. The efficiency in decision-making is not sufficient. It takes much too long until decisions are made – it is often only achieved when the problem has already been solved by others. Therefore we urgently need the constitutional contract, otherwise the idea of a community of European states will fail due to their own inactivity, which is reinforced by their expansion.

2. When decisions are made, they are often a weak compromise rather than a visionary effort. Much too often national selfishness predominates and much too often governments find themselves accusing the European Union of bad decisions. Such behavior is of course absolute nonsense and tactically unwise if one does not want to ruin the project of the European Union.

Getting over "too late and too little" would also mean turning to the necessity of solutions with a global approach with more effort and intensity. For instance, we will not solve unemployment with old national employment programs, if by the unrestrained free trade we compete more and more with countries which meet no social and ecological standards and partially are just not able to fulfill these. Without more cost transparency in order to prevent an ecological disaster and without demanding fair global playing rules which above all offer the locally bound medium-sized enterprises – and thus thousands of local jobs – fairer chances and hopes, all Lisbon strategies will be doomed to failure. We have to give up our illusions: A lot of Chinese and Indian people are very well educated and highly motivated – and are still able to be employed at more advantageous conditions. This means that with the slogan: "We just have to be better and faster than the others!" On the whole we will not succeed. In addition, if we imagine what happens if countries in Africa go through a similar development as the Asian emerging nations, we will quickly realize that we are in urgent need of a constructive and fair alternative to the present form of globalization. With fair chances for the emerging countries but also with fair global rules to ensure existing social and environmental standards.

Through the mechanism of international co-financing – such as the Global Marshall Plan Initiative is demanding for a worldwide Eco-Social Market Economy – a gradual implementation of minimum global social and ecological standards and thus the first step towards a sustainable economy can be achieved. For this, however, it needs strong actors; it needs Europe as a symbol of hope – for its citizens and for a fairer, sustainable world more worth living in.



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300 billion US\$ per year: growth of wealth of the world's billionaires
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