THE ROAD TO 2057: ISSUES AHEAD EUROPEAN UNION

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In March 2007 experts, politicians and general public had a good opportunity to reflect not only upon the achievements of the past 50 years, but also upon the prospects of the next 50 years.

If one looks how the idea of "an ever closer union" of 1957 that had among the few clear objectives the establishment of a customs union materialized 50 years later into a 27 member union, with 13 of them enjoying a common currency, common policies and a common market the conclusion is that a 50 years forecast is a risky enterprise. Not only because the entity under study is so large and complex, but also because its environment, the circumstances in the global economy are changing in ways difficult to imagine.

On this 50th celebration the European Commission tried anyway to identify if not the looks of European Union in 2057 then at least the issues laying ahead. And the somehow worrisome fact is that out of 4 issues (Facing globalization, Global warming, Europe in the world, Encouraging democracy and participation), 3 refer to aspects more or less outside EU control and only the 4th one is within.

As for the first issue (Facing globalization) it is ironical that some decades ago some feared that EU would become "Fortress Europe" and would raise walls around its boundaries that would affect world trade, among other flows. On the contrary, today it is EU that fears the rest of the world and is really affected by the world coming upon its "Single European Market" from all directions. In the past decades, by deepening integration EU got rid of internal barriers. Now, under the pressure of globalization, EU has to think about finding the right way in designing acceptable barriers towards outer world. Can this be done? Maybe as non-tariff barriers, maybe by championing environment protection rules, maybe by human rights related regulations. From the standpoint of 2007 EU is in defensive vis-à-vis globalization and it is still thinking about how the Lisbon Agenda dream may come true. Due to its long history and huge expertise in so many fields it is very likely that European Union will find a modus vivendi with globalization. But one may expect that this solution will imply a lot of changes in directions required by the global environment and to a less extent function of its own desires.

The global warming is even a more complicated thing. In fact, for the moment in EU there is a lot of drive towards action, towards offering an example for the rest of the world even at the price of badly affecting the European industry. Unfortunately, the current attitudes are no more than wishful thinking. The risk is that the world of today is really inter-connected and the industrial activities of one country or region cannot be limited to that area. Under these circumstances, it is very difficult to see how any EU decision on fighting global warming will be immediately and fully replicated by China or India, to name only two significant global players of the coming decades. And who can guarantee that if EU really applies the strict environment regulations the European companies will not relocate to countries where those same rules are not applied ? The

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risks of global warming are real and terrible but from a theoretical point of view the only solution is to find new, more environmental friendly technologies that will be made available to all countries. Sounds a bit like utopia? Yes, but the risk is so high that only such an utopia can be a real solution. Again, from the point of view of this issue, EU will depend a lot on what others will be doing and will have to allocate a lot more on research and development in order to offer the rest of the world solutions and not only its good will. Till then, the commuting of EU officials between Brussels and Strasbourg is polluting more than a number of small countries.

The problems related to the 3rd issue (Europe in the world) is also a sort of irony of fate. Because this puts EU in the position of being a victim of its own success. As of 2007 EU counts 27 member countries, with more than 480 million inhabitants and by adding the GDP of its members is the first economic power of the world. The irony is that this position also implies a much more prominent role in the world affairs. If it is that big EU has to act in the global arena. It needs a single voice in significant situations, a consistent position and even a military force. All these have long been debated but results are still to be found. The recent individual responses to energy issues shows how far EU of today is from such a single voice. Thinking about the EU role on global arena another aspects appears. EU has always manifested as a champion of humanitarian assistance and development aid. Can this be done efficiently in a world of increasing competition? Is there a risk for EU of becoming a sort of UN in its foreign affairs dimension? For the moment it is difficult to answer these questions, but EU has to dedicate time for finding the right answers. The other actors in the world economy will put a lot of pressure on EU in the coming decades and maybe this 3rd issue will be the real resilience test.

The 4th issue is the only one internal to EU (Encouraging democracy and participation). That does not mean it is any way easier. EU is trying to form a 'de facto' empire based on democracy and soft power. Its citizens are not entirely convinced for supporting this idea and the goals of both transferring more powers to EU institutions and involving more the citizens at the same time are sometimes contradictory. The EU of the coming years has to change in order to compete globally but how to do so in a democratic way? The European Parliament has more power but the citizens are coming in small numbers to European Parliamentary elections. Is this good for democracy? Can this be changed? And what about the Internet revolution? Will European citizens remain European or they will migrate to Second Life and become virtual global citizens?

These thoughts are not meant to be pessimistic. In fact they are anxious with expectations. Because the road from now to 2057 is a road to be discovered, a road of great expectations, great adventures and unthinkable challenges. United in diversity but still Europeans we can succeed. Let the journey begin!