

Interview with Joschka Fischer published in Die Welt (14 December 2000)

Caption: On 14 December 2000, Joschka Fischer, German Foreign Minister, gives his views on the outcome of the Nice European Council in the German daily newspaper Die Welt.

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Realistically, no more could be achieved in Nice

Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer assesses the EU Summit: the Union was made ready for new accessions, and the Franco-German relationship remains stable — interview with *Die Welt*

Although the principle of a ‘double majority’ in the weighting of votes was not adopted, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer sees the EU Summit in Nice as a good working basis. In particular, the aim of making the Union ready to receive the new Member States was achieved. Sophie Mühlmann talked to Mr Fischer.

DIE WELT: *Minister, you seemed to be in the best of spirits in Nice. Was the Summit a success for you?*

Joschka Fischer: the Nice Summit is a step forward and, from the point of view of preparing the Union for enlargement, a very important one. The Federal Chancellor and I had a strategic aim: to make the Union ready for new accessions, thereby hastening the reunification of Europe by enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. That was achieved.

DIE WELT: *Was the standard not set at an artificially low level so that the Summit could still be sold as a success?*

Fischer: No, I have no wish to sell anything as a success. We fought hard, and we would have liked more — there is no question about that. But let me take the important points individually: we have taken a decision about the Commission, although there is to be a review some time after the number of Member States has reached 27. Secondly, we have a result on the question of the weighting of votes: the new weighting between large and small countries will be pitched in favour of the large countries. And that is necessary, because many small countries are joining. I would have preferred a different principle to be adopted there, that of the double majority, but that was not possible. To that extent, what was achieved also takes account of the demographic factor in Germany, without leading to any conflict of principle with France. I think that it was even a very ingenious result, after long, tough negotiations. On the question of the qualified majority, it has to be said that what we wanted was, quite simply, no longer achievable.

DIE WELT: *But on crucial points, such as the veto, nothing happened.*

Fischer: No, I would not say ‘nothing’. Asylum issues, for example, will be determined by majority voting as soon as the EU has agreed a common policy. Since the subject is now covered by the Conclusions and the Treaty, the Commission will present proposals on it. That means that there will now be a tangible process, one which, admittedly, will take certain amount of time, but eventually it will be dealt with by majority voting. Enhanced cooperation alone would have had us dancing for joy only a year ago. That is very important in connection with the post-Nice process, as it concerns the increased democratisation of the Union. I am not putting a gloss on anything here. I would have liked more, the Federal Chancellor would have liked more, especially on the qualified majority issue. But when we look at it realistically, there was, firstly, nothing more to be had and, secondly, we have made the Union ready for enlargement. And that is a clear step beyond Amsterdam.

DIE WELT: *Is it not possible that, in the process of reaching majority decisions, smaller countries may exact a heavy price for their votes in the future?*

Fischer: No decisions will be bought in that sense, but in any financial perspective, different countries have different needs, as we do, too. Those are legitimate interests, and to some extent a great many jobs depend on them.

DIE WELT: *Was it evident in Nice that national self-interest was stronger than the commitment to solidarity?*

Fischer: Europe has always reflected both. The question is: balance. If national self-interest were to predominate, it would jeopardise the mechanisms of the Union and, if it were finally to prevail absolutely, it would destroy them completely. The pursuit of economic self-interest at the same time as accepting

compromise in the spirit of integration has always been the secret of the European integration process. It was never national self-interest alone that counted but always the spirit of Europe growing together as well. And if this spiritual aspect of Europe, so to speak, if this idea of European integration becomes too weak, that also jeopardises the economic mechanism, the mechanism of political cooperation. And I think that, after Nice, we must work harder to ensure that it takes centre stage in an enlarged Union.

DIE WELT: *Do you think that the only progress to be made in the future will be by what is known as the avant-garde, by a resolute few who want to forge ahead?*

Fischer: No. It is quite simple: either the European Union will be able to act or there will be a crisis, and from this crisis individual countries particularly committed to the European spirit will draw the conclusion that they need to act in the spirit of enhanced cooperation.

DIE WELT: *Is there not a danger that such a differentiation could blow the EU apart, will it not become an unmanageable proliferation of individual groups?*

Fischer: No. There will be no proliferation. There has long been variable geometry in Europe, in fact it has always been there. Obviously questions arise which I cannot answer today. But they can be answered when we have a bit more breathing space. That question can be resolved without the formation of inextricable clusters, which would be worse than what we already have today. No one wants that, it would be counter-productive.

DIE WELT: *How will power and influence be divided in the future? What will be decided in Brussels and what in the Member States?*

Fischer: That is a very difficult demarcation debate which will not be so simple, because many things cannot be allocated that simply. We must not, of course, jeopardise the progress made in the common market. That would be very foolish for all concerned.

DIE WELT: *Do the other Member States also see Nice as a positive signal?*

Fischer: President Chirac of France said: no one will leave here content. Everyone will leave in pain. Because that is the nature of this difficult compromise. On this point, I have to agree with him.

DIE WELT: *Helmut Kohl once said that, if all the EU countries were to vote on enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in secret and behind closed doors, the majority would be against it. Did Nice prove him right?*

Fischer: Some join in with great enthusiasm and others with less, as is always the case in life. In Europe, nothing is uniform. Some lag behind, others are more in the forefront, many have more of an emotional commitment, others less, but that has nothing to do with sabotage. On the contrary, all are committed to this historic project, and some appreciable compromises have now resulted from that commitment.

DIE WELT: *France has emerged somewhat battered from the Summit: on the one hand, the French are criticised for having directed the Summit badly, on the other hand they now feel disregarded. Has the relationship between Germany and France been damaged?*

Fischer: No. The relationship is of very great importance. The French Presidency, in my view — I do not share the criticism — has done well in a very difficult situation.

DIE WELT: *The French press speaks of submission, there is much criticism in their own country.*

Fischer: In our country, too. That speaks for the correctness of the Chirac Conclusions.

DIE WELT: *Is there a danger that the achievements of Nice may yet be overturned? After all, the Treaty still has to be ratified.*

Fischer: Anyone who might wish to hold back enlargement will argue for non-ratification. I think that is a very bad idea. And all those who try to bring that about will be taking upon themselves a heavy responsibility. They would be holding back or even obstructing the growing together of a divided Europe, which must now begin, and I do not think that that would be a good thing.