

'Fifteen sign Treaty of Amsterdam but admit its shortcomings' from Le Monde (3 October 1997)


Caption: On 3 October 1997, the day after the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam by the Foreign Ministers of the Fifteen, the French daily newspaper Le Monde considers the shortcomings and weaknesses of the text.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Colombani, Jean-Marie. 03.10.1997, n° 16 386; 53e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Les Quinze signent le traité d'Amsterdam, dont ils admettent les insuffisances", auteur:Lemaître, Philippe , p. 2.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU
All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.
Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/fifteen_sign_treaty_of_amsterdam_but_admit_its_shortcomings_from_le_monde_3_october_1997-en-783ab1e2-8eb6-4fbc-9807-ec1eaado4d79.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016



Fifteen sign Treaty of Amsterdam but admit its shortcomings

The new text was supposed to fill the gaps in the Maastricht Treaty by reforming the European Union and giving it a common foreign policy. Its weaknesses are likely to incite the member countries to revise it before enlargement.

Brussels (European Union)

from our correspondent

Despite two years of negotiations and a series of regular and extraordinary European Councils, the Treaty of Amsterdam marks some progress but falls far short of fulfilling the task which the Heads of State and Government assigned themselves at the end of 1991.

Expressly provided for in the Maastricht Treaty in order to make good its deficiencies, the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) that began in Turin in March 1996 (after six months' preparation in a 'reflection group') ended in confusion in Amsterdam in June 1997. Its aim was threefold: to give substance to the sketchy outline of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP), gradually establish a common judicial and police area, and adapt the Union's institutions to ensure that the forthcoming enlargement to the countries of Central Europe does not result in paralysis.

'Enhanced cooperation'

Europe's impotence in former Yugoslavia, the monetary tensions of 1992–1993, economic stagnation and rising unemployment, not to mention harassment by Britain's Conservative government, did not help to create an atmosphere propitious for progress. Moreover, during the two years of discussions, the Franco–German tandem was often short of imagination and proved less effective than in previous negotiations.

The outcome is disastrous. With regard to institutional reform, the Fifteen were unable to agree on a minimum platform consisting of a reduction in the number of commissioners, a new weighting of votes in Council better reflecting the size of the population of each State, greater powers for Parliament and, most importantly (since this is the clearest sign of failure), an increase in the scope of decisions that can be taken by a qualified majority. As a consolation prize or let-out, the Fifteen adopted the principle of 'enhanced cooperation', which will allow countries more intent on integration to move forward without their more reluctant partners being able to stand in the way.

That same evening in Amsterdam, a number of EU leaders, including Jacques Santer, the President of the Commission, assured us that enough progress had been made to begin the process leading to enlargement in 2003 or 2004.

With regard to the CFSP, the Fifteen adopted some procedural arrangements (creation of a Commission–Council 'cell' and enlargement of the mandate of the Secretary-General of the Council) that appear very modest. The 'General Affairs Council' (the foreign ministers), which is moreover completely paralysed, will continue to tinker in this area during its Brussels lunches — though without too many illusions, given the demonstration of Europe's weakness in Bosnia, the Middle East and Zaire.

With regard to internal security, i.e. combating organised crime, illegal immigration and drug trafficking, citizens have real expectations. The prospect of enlargement to four or five Eastern European countries — poor emigration countries hard put to ensure efficient border control — gave reason to strengthen the third pillar of the Maastricht Treaty. There was no lack of good intentions, and some progress was made, an example being the incorporation of the Schengen Convention in the treaty. The States proclaimed their resolve to cooperate more closely in police and judicial matters. But, there again, the institutional virus seems to have spoiled everything: the procedures remain cumbersome, and decisions by a qualified majority have been ruled out.

After Amsterdam, Europe has taken a holiday break, though not without proposals from the Commission

concerning initiation of the enlargement process and the prior reform of common policies (CAP, structural funds, budget). The governments have gradually learned their lesson from the setback, and the debate on Europe seems to be resuming on a sound footing. The change of government in the United Kingdom and the hesitant but finally successful arrival of a new French team on the European scene have facilitated a new departure, in a climate in which economic growth again seems possible.

The Fifteen have understood that the main priority is to make a success of the introduction of the single currency. The enlargement process will start in Luxembourg in December according to plan, but issues likely to lead to confrontation will be avoided. France and Italy backed a Belgium proposal to attach to the treaty a declaration that the enlargement negotiations shall not be concluded until reform of the institutions has been completed successfully. On Wednesday 1 October Werner Hoyer, Germany's deputy foreign minister, told journalists he was 'very sympathetic' to the proposal. There is no more talk of political union. But Paris, like Bonn, hopes the advent of the euro will provide fresh impetus for ambitious projects.

Philippe Lemaître