

'Consulting for a little longer than a cigarette break' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (30 June 2004)

Caption: On 30 June 2004, the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung publishes an article by Armin Laschet, German Member of the European Parliament (Christian Democratic Union — CDU), who speculates about the enlargement of the European Union to include Turkey or Ukraine and would like the Europeans to be consulted by referendum on each future enlargement.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. 30.06.2004, Nr. 149. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Länger beraten als eine Zigarettenpause lang", auteur:Laschet, Armin , p. 10.

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Consulting for a little longer than a cigarette break

By Armin Laschet

In Helsinki, in 1999, it took fifteen Heads of State or Government four minutes to decide to accord Turkey the status of European Union candidate. Four minutes in which the history of European integration, forged over five decades, was denatured.

The EU Treaty provides that every enlargement must be ratified by the Member States, in a manner consistent with their own constitutional arrangements. Thus, once a Treaty of Accession has been signed, the population of each Member State is asked to determine, through its parliamentary representation, whether it agrees to admit the country concerned. In 1972, France went so far as to vote by popular referendum on UK membership of the European Union, wishing as it did to confirm the democratic underpinning of the shift away from the Gaullian view that the island did not belong to Europe. France voted 'Yes'!

Accession of a country such as Turkey would at all events be unexampled in the history of European integration. None of the previous enlargements is in any way comparable with the possible admission of Turkey, whether one is talking about the political, economic and social implications or about the institutional consequences. With an existing population of almost 70 million, forecast to rise to 90 million by 2020, Turkey would become the largest Member State of the European Union, whose eastern borders would thus be shared with Iran and Iraq. Turkey would also become by far the largest net recipient of EU funds, in view of its size, its low per capita GDP and the prominent role of agriculture in its economy. To admit Turkey into the EU would be to fundamentally alter the nature of the Union and finally to abandon the vision of a federally oriented political Union of the European nations. Before taking a step of such significance, the Heads of State or Government must therefore be even surer than with all previous enlargements that they enjoy the support of their peoples.

This is why the CSU has proposed that a popular referendum be held in Germany to establish whether people want to go with this fundamental shift in European integration policy. The CSU is both right and wrong at the same time. Right, because such a decision should not be taken by national leaders alone, certainly not in four minutes, and not even after four decades. Wrong also because the CDU and the CSU are, with good reason, supporters of representative, parliamentary democracy. Popular referenda when it suits one's book: that sits ill with their basic philosophy.

The peoples of Europe must not be bypassed in determining Europe's future and that of its frontiers. Hence the need for new mechanisms. The peoples must be involved at the right time, that is to say even before the planned commencement of accession negotiations.

As matters stand, the decision to enter into accession negotiations with a would-be candidate country is taken solely on the basis of political considerations and power of decision lies solely with the Heads of Government, even where there is massive pressure from the United States. In the EU Member States and the candidate countries alike, the people's opinion is not sought until the process of ratification of the accession treaties has begun. This does however mean that those who would prefer in the end to turn the negotiating outcome down are generally left with the choice of two evils: either, and this has already happened twice in the case of Norway, they come out against the proposal, thereby bringing to nought all the hard-won results of the negotiations and finding themselves 'carrying the can' for an unbelievable waste of time and resources, or they vote against their own conviction. Clearly, therefore, the views of the people and the people's representatives have hitherto always been canvassed far too late. Norway has already recognised this and, in the next EU membership attempt, intends to seek the views of its citizens before the government begins negotiating with the EU.

The EU should follow this example. Any decision on the initiation of negotiations with a potential Member State would thus be preceded by ratification by national parliaments and the European Parliament. This would enable the pros and cons to be weighed in advance in the course of a public procedure. It would then be for the elected representatives, in their constituencies, to assume responsibility for the widely shared

result at which they have arrived.

Ratification, in the Bundestag and Bundesrat, of the Constitution for Europe provides the Federal Government with an opportunity to embrace such a procedure.

The decision concerning the possible accession of countries such as Turkey or even Ukraine or Russia has implications too for the institutional 'overstretching' of the EU. A decision in favour would spell the end of the integration project pursued so successfully to date. The decision process ought therefore to last longer than a cigarette.

The author is a Member of the European Parliament (CDU).