An Imperfect Union; Europe's Experiment Faces New Obstacles

The Washington Post

July 23, 2000, Sunday, Final Edition

The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: OUTLOOK; Pg. B01

Length: 1897 words

Byline: Hugo Young

Dateline: LONDON

Body

Not long ago, a member of the Green Party in the German parliament, the Bundestag, was returning home from abroad. Carrying a diplomatic passport, as all German politicians do, he was challenged by an immigration officer who believed, on account of his Turkish name and appearance, that he was an illegal immigrant.

There are some 15 million Muslims living in the European ***Union*** (EU) and many Turks whose parents and grandparents were born in Germany. But the meaning of this has not penetrated every border post. To the immigration officer, the politician's diplomatic passport evidently made him suspect as a foreigner.

"But I am a German myself," the politician finally protested.

The officer grudgingly accepted this, but nonetheless thought it did not close the question. "Yes," he replied. "But how long will you be staying?"

The episode may say something special about Germany, which, unlike most countries, has long accorded citizenship almost exclusively to those who have a blood connection with the Vaterland. But there's a European dimension, too. It has been 42 years since the European Community, now the European ***Union***, was founded, and there are at least as many nationalities within it as there are within the United States. Yet who belongs to "Europe," and exactly what that means, are questions that continue to surge unresolved around the European project.

For many Americans, this issue reeks alarmingly of xenophobia. Seen from ***New*** York or St. Louis or Los Angeles, Europe is now a continent that appears in many ways to be coming together. Isn't this a place, with its free movement of capital and labor, that is beginning to follow the U.S. model? One continent, one people, irrespective of color, creed or internal geography. That surely is what Europe is about.

At a high level of idealism, there is some truth to this notion. The integrationist trend continues to move forward. But the details, both cultural and legal, get more, not less, problematic. Among the present members of the EU, as well as those struggling to gain admission to the club, there are crises of identity that relate to one issue above all others: the right to roam and work freely across the place called Europe. The meaning of that right may be on the verge of wrecking the noblest ***experiment*** in geopolitics of the past 50 years.

In theory, at least, the right exists throughout the 15 member countries of the EU--and it is integral to the single market that is the most developed feature of the ***union***. Germans can work in France, Danes holiday in Italy and Spaniards travel to Belgium, without a frontier check between them.

But there are already limits. Britain, for example, won't accept free movement. The tunnel under the English Channel, former prime minister Margaret Thatcher's surprising gift to the Europeanization of Britain, is held up by passport control. That has meant, by a destructive irony, that Britain becomes the haven of choice for illegal immigrants who cross oceans and deserts, from jobless poverty in Africa or Asia, to enter the promised land of Europe.

That is because even though Britain insists on passport control, it exerts much less control once its borders are crossed. Vos papiers, monsieur, the French policeman's demand that stops the heart of anyone traveling without an ID card, has no equivalent in London. ***Europe's*** rule, when illegal migrants are found, is to dispatch them beyond the zone of free movement--and that often means into Britain. French and Belgian authorities, while famously harsh on illegals, have also been known to turn a blind eye if they see them on their way across the channel.

It was no accident that the 58 Chinese men and women who died from suffocation in a container truck last month were trying to enter Britain through the port of Dover. These were people whom Europe would never accommodate, but for whom Britain, having chosen to be outside the framework of continental immigration control, offered a last-chance opportunity worth risking their lives for.

National disavowals of being fully European are a feature of the developing EU. There is no country called Europe and probably never will be, no matter how vividly that nightmare features in the discourse of anti-Europeans, especially in Britain. For example, a single currency and a united security force are two features of what could be called a single country, but both, though being developed with serious intent, fail to command universal support. Britain, Denmark and Sweden are outside the currency; Sweden, Ireland and Austria outside the defense force.

The limits of Europe, in other words, are flexible, even among those who have signed on to the idea and sunk part of their national sovereignty within it. Europe is an evolving concept, still an ***experiment***. It is a place that is federalistic without being a federation; where national jealousies continue to exist, yet are being subordinated; where each citizen is expected one day to be at ease with the proposition that he/she is British or Portuguese or Dutch, and simultaneously is European.

So much for this process of integration, the limits of which are disputed and will come to a stop who knows where. But Europe covers terrain wider than the 15 countries in the EU. The real issue now is how Europe can become the legal entity that encompasses many more nation-states. They are knocking at the door. Indisputably, they belong to the cultural entity, Europa. Prague, after all, calls itself the geographical center of European civilization. The claims of Budapest and Warsaw on any ***union*** that purports to unite the interests of this continental land mass in a globalized world cannot be rejected.

Nobody in the EU is publicly denying their claims. They are, nonetheless, being stalled. This is the coming crisis of Europe. At the heart of the problem is the attitude underlying the immigration controller's encounter with the Turkish-German politician. Do you really belong here? You don't look or sound like one of us. Whose job might you be trying to take? Surely there must be limits to whom we let in.

Part of this issue will come to a head in December, when the existing members of the EU meet in Nice, France, to do what technically needs to be done to make an enlarged ***union*** manageable. A system that was set up for only six members in 1958 is fit to bust with 15. It would fall apart with 20 or, as is finally envisaged, 30 or more countries stretching from Latvia to Turkey, Romania, perhaps even to Morocco. The weight of each country's vote, the size of its representation and the range of its veto all have to be adjusted if the ***union*** is neither to fall apart nor to congeal into stasis.

These basic tasks, the essential prelude to enlargement, probably will edge toward completion, after grubby horse trading right through the 11th hour of the final day, and be inscribed in the Treaty of Nice. But they are only a beginning.

Behind and beyond them stand questions that cast doubt over the process, delaying if not stultifying it before it is complete.

The biggest question is illuminated by the recent history of a single state: Austria. A full member of the EU, Austria was nonetheless penalized last March for electing a government that included, as minority partners, members of the right-wing Freedom Party led by Joerg Haider. Haider's flirtation with Holocaust denial and Hitlerism, along with his party's strident xenophobia, caused the other 14 members to impose diplomatic sanctions on Austria. France and Belgium, which are especially determined to marginalize their own far-right parties, believed that the arrival in power of another neo-fascist grouping must be defined as inconsistent with the basic values of the EU.

This controversial repudiation challenging a freely elected democratic government--and the diplomatic sanctions imposed--remains in place, despite the fact that Haider has stepped down. Many EU countries, having sent their message, would now like to restore normal relations with Austria. If this doesn't happen, Austria threatens to block the Treaty of Nice and hence the entire enlargement process. But the Austrian position is more than diplomatic pique, just as Haider's line was more than that of a posturing far-right playboy.

Enlarging the EU to include first Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia--and Romania and possibly the Balkan republics later--raises the specter of mass migration from poor countries to relatively rich ones, which shakes an already fragile political environment. Austria, with borders touching four aspirant member nations, has already received more migrant Europeans than many others. This history helps explain Haider's rise. The migrant phenomenon, often the only aspect of European ***union*** that many ordinary voters are aware of, threatens to liquidate such popular support as there already is, which isn't much, for extending the ideal of Europe over the whole area on the map that goes by that name.

Already the extension has been delayed. It was once expected that a first group would come forward, ready for entry by 2003. Now the more realistic date is January 2005, and it is conceivable that Poland, the largest entrant, will not be there. Poland's preparations for this immensely complex transition have not been the speediest. Meanwhile, this hitherto undisputed entrant has found itself the focus of a curmudgeonly reluctance to embrace full-hearted Europeanism.

The outs as well as the ins now find themselves unraveling the idealism that once drove the great idea of Europe, and overlaying it with incessant, often harsh, national objections. Making "Europe" never was a simple exercise. The more elaborate it becomes, the greater the challenge it presents to political leadership.

As a political project, Europe cannot survive unless integration grows deeper. The practicalities of running a ***union*** of even 15 member nations require them to cede more powers to a united center. The single currency probably cannot work unless there is more collective economic government. How far this must go is intensely disputed, not least by the British, who like to pretend, from their stance outside the euro, that no such governance is needed. But it will be needed, up to a point--a point that falls short of a United States of Europe, but conforms to French President Jacques Chirac's "United Europe of States."

Equally, as a political ideal, Europe cannot survive if it excludes the center and the east, much of the old communist world. Its destiny is breadth as well as depth. But what it needs more than either of those elements is a revival of popular excitement and understanding about what Europe can be. Only leaders can make the case for all that Europe means, including the freedom to move around the continent.

And they seem to have forgotten how to do so. As a result, the great ***experiment*** falters. Who belongs, and what that means, have been reduced to questions for bureaucrats, not idealists. And the instinct of European bureaucrats is the same you find anywhere in the world: When in doubt, the answer is no.

Hugo Young is political columnist of the Guardian in London and the author of "This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair" (Overlook Press).

Graphic

Illustration, JOHN COPELAND FOR The Washington Post

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (91%); EUROPEAN ***UNION*** (90%); POLITICS (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (89%); INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ORGANIZATIONS (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); POLITICAL PARTIES (78%); HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (78%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (77%); PRIME MINISTERS (73%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (73%); GERMAN PARLIAMENT (73%); RACISM & XENOPHOBIA (72%); RELIGION (71%); TRENDS (65%); CAPITAL MOVEMENTS (63%); BRITISH PRIME MINISTERS (60%)

Company: SA EUROPEAN CARGO SERVICES (82%); SA EUROPEAN CARGO SERVICES (82%); EUROPEAN ***UNION*** (83%); EUROPEAN ***UNION*** (83%); EUROPEAN COMMUNITY (55%); EUROPEAN COMMUNITY (55%)

Organization: EUROPEAN ***UNION*** (83%); EUROPEAN ***UNION*** (83%); EUROPEAN COMMUNITY (55%); EUROPEAN COMMUNITY (55%); EUROPEAN ***UNION*** (83%); EUROPEAN ***UNION*** (83%); EUROPEAN COMMUNITY (55%); EUROPEAN COMMUNITY (55%)

Geographic: EUROPE (95%); EUROPEAN ***UNION*** MEMBER STATES (94%); GERMANY (93%); UNITED STATES (93%); FRANCE (79%); SPAIN (79%); ITALY (79%); UNITED KINGDOM (79%); BELGIUM (79%); ENGLAND (78%)

Load-Date: July 23, 2000