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| Language of the article | Dutch |

THE MORE THE MERRIER?

Ever since I can remember I have lived in Europe. A large, united Europe, which has already offered me all sorts of opportunities and advantages. A union of which I am proud. Because I live near Brussels and have been able to travel a lot, I even feel more European than Belgian or Flemish. The European Union is not perfect - far from it, but further expansion is not the answer.

The EU is currently in the throes of a ghastly puberty. Over the years it has grown from a small select club of countries with an economic agenda into one of the world's largest unions and the world's largest economy. But that is precisely where it is going wrong; the focus on the economy is what is jeopardising the whole European project. The lack of political unity and a coherent vision is creating something verging on inertia and is undermining the stability of the entire system. Establishing consensus amongst the representatives of 500 million people is more difficult than starting up a free-trade zone between a handful of countries. Different countries have different challenges and requirements, and although the EU sets certain minimum conditions for membership, differences still remain.

Let us be clear: political unity was not the objective of the EU at the outset, but it is now one of the possible solutions. The European project in its current form is not viable - the ongoing crisis is proof enough of that. What are the options available then? One solution that more and more people are proposing is to dismantle the EU. Euroscepticism is burgeoning across Europe and some people envisage a return to nation states with bilateral treaties. A return to the familiar formulae that worked in the past. Another possible route is further integration. That means integration on a political level above all, but on military and social levels, too. Some even dream of a "United States of Europe".

The EU has reached a crossroads: do we integrate or disintegrate? Standing still is not an option. My fear is that further expansion will lead to disintegration. More countries, often with their own agenda, will want their say. Although the new Member States are often the most avid supporters of the European project, difficult decisions are easier to take with fewer members. If the EU continues to expand without political unity, I see no other option than to reduce the EU to a purely commercial partnership, and not a monetary union. The first signs are already there; the possibility of a Greek exit from the Eurozone is being looked at and even Germany is inclined to go along with it.

Further integration on a political level is also problematic. It was smoothest in the 1990s, when countries were still growing and there were only fifteen Member States. But the focus then switched to the euro, a currency that is now bearing the consequences. In my opinion, what makes the governance of the Eurozone so difficult is the way the Eurozone and the EU only partially overlap. In this scenario the EU would have to become more closely integrated, and some



countries would have to choose between completely exiting the EU or committing to further unification of the continent. The EU cannot function when Member States choose to be just partial members. The way some Member States decide to opt in and out of Europe shows evidence of opportunism and hypocrisy - two things standing in the way of further integration. For me the EU is a project involving solidarity and shared responsibility, but also one of hope and the bravery of achieving something huge.

What I propose is for the EU, and above all the citizens of all the various countries that make up the EU, to conduct a debate on what they want right now. We all need to start aiming in the same direction again. Together we need to decide what we want. Who wants to continue with the European project and who wants to backpedal? It will definitely not be easy, but there is no time to lose.

Many people view the European Union as something very remote and of no relevance to their lives, that they only notice when things go wrong. A shadowy pack of unelected bureaucrats in Brussels, with powers in areas that many know nothing about. The EU, and the European Commission in particular, is doing its best to involve citizens more, and I can only applaud those initiatives. But if the EU expands more, then many will turn their backs on this vast project. Technically speaking, they are represented in the European Parliament which approves the new Member States. But in practice I am concerned by the way many people vote. A vote based on gut feeling is often far removed from what gets implemented in practice, and that can lead to frustration.

My vision is to work on creating more unity. We need to increase the solidarity between the countries that make up the EU, and ensure that they are once again fully behind the EU. The slump in confidence in European institutions needs to be reversed. The 'Banking Union' is a step in the right direction. A political union would be an even bigger step. Once Europe has developed a more coherent project with a clear vision, then there will once again be room for new members.