

[OPINION]

2009 – the Year of Europe? Yes, we Must!

by Dr. Sven Grimm*

This year is likely to see the European Union hit the headlines. The year 2009 is an important year that holds a number of opportunities for Europe. Challenges are big and global changes occur rapidly. Europe can potter along and risk falling into global oblivion – or use the crisis to actually make it a year of Europe. Two key opportunities are already on the European agenda for 2009:

- (1) we are deciding about key political personnel in the EU, and
- (2) there are structural changes looming, at long last.

Global pressure is mounting: Europe is facing expectations. Solutions are demanded for global challenges. And Europe's contributions to these solutions are needed – now. The economic prospects are dire – we face a world economic crisis. All augurs point to 2009 as the year in which the global economic crisis is going to hit hardest. This will have harsh consequences for developing countries, too. We have seen commodity prices slump in late 2008, and we can expect less foreign investment in high-risk areas or countries, as investment decisions are likely to become more prudent. And how strong will emerging countries actually come out of the crisis? How much can and does China take over responsibilities?

Europe is arguably already well placed to address challenges. Provided, it gets its act together, as global challenges are obviously too big for individual European states to handle by themselves. There is, indeed, increasing need for political leadership from Europe. And a stable and increasingly visible Europe is in a good position to help overcome the global crisis. Dirk Messner, Director of the German Development Institute/Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik and Simon Maxwell, Director of the Overseas Development Institute, have argued in November 2008 that the EU should work for a new global

order¹. In 2009, external pressure might be strong enough to make the group of 27 often bickering small states into a globally more active Union.

As argued elsewhere, the key challenge for effective EU aid is to better organise the system of EU external relations, not least so with developing countries – the Commission by itself is no longer the key problem². The EU as a whole increasingly works as a system, setting standards and goals for all parts of it, i.e. all 27 Member States and the Commission. To give but two examples:

(1) The EU has repeatedly promised increase aid amounts, namely to attribute at least 0.51% of Gross National Income to foreign aid by 2010. All EU states have signed this goal (with reductions for the 13 EU-newcomers). In times of tight budgets, it will be more of a political uphill battle to sustain growth rates for international development assistance or prevent budgets for aid from slipping. Yet, the need for well-targeted and effective aid also rises tremendously in times of crisis, in order to prevent the most vulnerable countries to suffer most. It is a question of European credibility to deliver on promises.

(2) Secondly, it is also true for climate change that it is those least responsible for global crisis that are most vulnerable to them. The poorest countries in the world are least prepared to the effects of climate change and they are likely to be most affected. Another moment of truth

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1. Messner/Maxwell: A new global order: Bretton Woods II...and San Francisco II. Published 11 November 2008 at www.opendemocracy.net. The German version was published under the Title: "Europa, hilf!" in DIE ZEIT on 13 November 2008.
2. Grimm, Sven (2008): Reforms in the EU's aid architecture and management: the commission is no longer the key problem. Let's turn to the system. Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik/German Development Institute (Discussion Paper 11/2008).

for Europe and others will be the decisive Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen in December when a post-Kyoto regime has to be completed. Europe in 2008 has agreed on its Triple 20 formula: 20% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions compared with 1990 levels, 20% of energy coming from renewable energy sources and cutting energy consumption by 20%, all by 2020. Europe might have disappointed in Poznan. But achieving these targets will already demand continuous commitment – which becomes harder in times of economic crisis. Yet, the demand for policy change is not less urgent!

The European electorate has key decision-making tools at hand to re-invigorate European policy for global development this year. We need to use them in 2009:

Deciding about political personnel in the EU: Are we really deciding about it as citizens? Is the EU not a remote elite project? The EU-Presidency changes every six months, in July 2009 from the Czech Republic to Sweden. But EU-Presidencies are only one part of the European institutions.

Actually, voters have an impact, too – and even a direct one in Europe. Maybe not as much as in our nation states, but we can determine key lines. The European Parliament elections are due to take place in June 2009. Some 400 million Europeans can elect 736 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). A direct vote for one of the European institutions is no small opportunity. The question is how, i.e. to what degree, the electorate will use it. Obviously, a high turnout will make the use of “voice” for citizens louder, regardless of whether the voice will speak in favour or against “more” Europe. Citizens do have a say – if they decide to voice their opinion.

Following these elections, and linked to the election results, this November will see a new Commission take office. Commission President José Manuel Barroso can expect to continue his mandate only if the Conservative European People’s Party carries the elections home. In case of a decisive election victory of the European Social-Democrats and Socialists, there will be a change at the helm of the Commission. The candidates for Commissioners have to perform in political hearings in the new Parliament in autumn. So there is impact of voters, despite imperfections. And giving a new mandate to political staff in Europe means setting priorities.

Deciding about political structures: Structural decisions matter. And they matter much in a complicated entity like the European Union. The first structural decision will be the shaping of portfolios for the 27-member Commission. While the size of the Commission will remain at one commissioner per Member State – a tribute to Irish scepticism that led to a clear No to the Lisbon Treaty back in June 2008 – the shaping of its portfolios will be crucial. We can expect to see senior and junior Commissioners again, if not by plan then by default. This also has implications for the importance of issues on the political agenda and will send messages to the electorate and the international partners.

Secondly, and more importantly, the Lisbon Treaty will come on the table again. A second Irish referendum this autumn provides a chance to make matters simpler or more complicated for implementing changes not least so in the area of EU external relations. Will we see the investiture of an EU ‘Foreign Minister’ in 2009? Even if the title will be more complicated, that is what it is about. And the Irish should not fool themselves: 24 out of the 27 EU Member States have ratified the Lisbon Treaty already. The question is rather on WHEN we will see changes, not IF, and on whether the Irish will be part of this or not. A second Irish No would plunge the Union even further into deep crisis, yes. It will only slow down changes and be harmful. But changes will happen, anyway. If Europeans want to have a positive impact on the world, the Union of 27 will need better structures to govern an ever bigger Union in a turbulent world.

Let’s not miss the opportunities presented in 2009. We should have in mind the Obama election slogan “Yes, we can”. Let’s assume that Europeans get less enthusiastic about themselves. But the slogan for Europe in 2009 should at least be: “Yes, we must”.

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