

Prolonging the discussion of a constitution must not be permitted to cause delays in substantive issues

The Bertelsmann Stiftung argues for a pragmatic approach to reforming the European Union

ANSPRECHPARTNER



Dr. Dominik Hierlemann

The European Union cannot afford to delay institutional reform. In view of the approaching accession of Bulgaria and Romania, it is crucial that the EU's institutions be restructured as quickly as possible if it is to remain capable of action. The European heads of state and government need to be quite clear on this point as they meet this weekend in Brussels to discuss further developments in the constitution process.

The debate within the member states on the future of the European Union continues to be inadequate, as no broad public discussion is taking place. The "pause for thought" that was announced after the French and Dutch voted "no" on the constitution a year ago has turned into a break from thinking. There are no signs of a new strategic policy initiative on Europe's future. The European governments find themselves in a no-win situation: on the one hand, the overwhelming majority of member states want to enhance the ability of the EU to act. But precisely those who are most supportive of the constitutional treaty cannot bring up alternatives at this point, as that would give the impression of caving in and weaken their negotiating position vis-à-vis countries critical of the constitution. The constitutional treaty continues to be the best of all solutions currently on the table. On the other hand, EU reform is urgently needed. The danger is that if discussion of the constitution continues until 2008 or even 2009, the importance of the provisions contained in it will gradually be downplayed. Central parts of the draft constitution might be abandoned, and EU reform would be delayed. Accordingly, it is crucial for countries favoring integration to consider immediately what needs to happen if

the constitutional treaty is not ratified, and how the political substance of the treaty might be secured in a form that is acceptable to all member states.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Center for Applied Policy Research have drawn up a joint proposal outlining a pragmatic arrangement by which the EU might, on Day X, find its way out of its current constitutional impasse and maintain its ability to act. This involves taking the most important changes that the European constitution would make to existing law and incorporating them into the existing treaties. As Executive Board member Prof. Werner Weidenfeld points out, "The controversies in the EU member states have not centered around the institutional and procedural heart of the constitution. People in France and the Netherlands have not rejected the proposed enhancement of the EU's ability to take action, nor the planned increase in democracy and transparency. These crucial changes definitely need to be implemented?and they can be."

The proposals put forth by the Bertelsmann Stiftung would concentrate on accelerating the EU's decision-making processes, preventing obstructionism by individual countries and encouraging further cooperation among countries that support integration. The European Council needs to have a president; the Union should have a Minister for Foreign Affairs with a separate European diplomatic service; the EU Commission should be reduced in size and its president strengthened. According to Werner Weidenfeld, "We need to give Europe a face and a voice. This is precisely why the contents of the constitution are so important."

Since the interests of the EU member states are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, individual members must be permitted to practice separate forms of cooperation in specific political areas. Here, too, the current treaties should be amended, as is also provided for in the constitutional treaty. This includes introducing new instruments, particularly in the areas of common security and defense policy (permanent structured cooperation, EU missions and cooperation within the European Defense Agency).

Furthermore, the procedures for decision-making and coordination within the EU need to be reformed; there is substantial agreement among the member states in this regard. The introduction of a "double majority" as provided for in the constitutional treaty and the expansion of majority decisions in the Council of Ministers would enhance the EU's problem-solving capabilities. Only if these steps are taken will the EU and its institutions be capable of taking in further countries.