THE MALAISE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

SALAHİ R. SONYEL

Salahi R. Sonyel is visiting Professor of International Relations at Near East University, The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of my paper entitled 'The European Union and the Cyprus Imbroglio' in the Perceptions, June-August 1998,1 the problems facing the European Union have become more acute and are now described as a 'malaise' by numerous well-informed researchers and analysts. In this paper I shall reflect and analyse some of their views.

In my first paper, I referred to a report by the think tank Demos,2 according to which, across Europe the EU's standing with its citizens has hit rock bottom: only 46 percent support their country's EU membership and 41 percent think that their country benefits from that membership. This figure is lower than at any time before. Only half of Europeans identify themselves with the EU institutions or with Europe as a whole. Euro-scepticism, for so long regarded as a 'British disease', has spread across the EU —even to the heartlands of France and Germany.
Today, the EU is more unpopular with many of its citizens who are kept in the dark about its functions and aspirations. People do not feel part of the EU. They believe that the EU is under the domination of a secretive and unrepresentative élite, and they want something to be done about it.

THE MALAISE

The malaise of the EU is confirmed by numerous sources. The London Daily Telegraph, of 25 June 2001, in a leading article refers to the many difficulties facing the EU and claims that it is "sluggish, overtaxed, and over-regulated". The Danish referendum rejecting the single currency, the Swiss vote to stay out of the EU, the Irish rejection of the Nice Treaty and the continuing British indecision about whether to abolish the pound sterling and join the euro, are all symptoms of popular disenchantment with the EU. The demonstrations, without which no European summit is now complete, indicate a rising level of anger against a "powerful, rich, distant élite of bureaucrats and politicians who seem to arrange the affairs of the Continent for their own convenience", claims the paper. This élite seems increasingly to define itself by EU's superpower pretensions, rather than by what the Union can do for its member states. The EU should concentrate much more on making its institutions work, and much less on imperialism, suggests the paper.

Moreover, no EU institutions can work without legitimacy, and legitimacy must come from the bottom. The paper finds it astonishing that the meetings of the Council of Ministers take place behind closed doors, and treaties, which make the law of the Union, are "diplomatic intrigues". The EU, according to the paper, should not aspire to be a superpower or super-state, and should not project diplomatic, economic and even military power without the constraint of law and democracy.

The EU is not an end in itself: it is only good insofar as it is good for the whole of Europe. The paper believes that all European countries will suffer if the EU becomes a bloc designed to exclude the rest of the world. What is needed is practical co-operation, not trying to turn Europe into a new top nation, threatening to fight anyone who fails to be impressed by its claim of "moral superiority". The paper concludes as follows: "Europe must remember that it has inflicted unparalleled barbarity upon the world twice in the past hundred years, inspired, in both cases, by dreams of European domination. One should be pro-European in spirit, in humility, not of triumphalism."3

On the other hand, Stephen Plowden of London, in a letter published in the London Independent, of 3 July 2001, observes: "My experience as a consultant in the late 1970s and early 1980s led me to believe that much, if not most, of the (European) Commission's work could not be justified and was inspired only by empire-building. What I have learnt since has tended to reinforce that opinion."

Although slightly exaggerated, there is an element of truth in these views, which are partly reinforced by the Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, who is the current EU President. According to him, after last year's Danish rejection of the euro, the Irish 'no' vote of June 2001 to the Nice Treaty and the mass protests at the summit in Gothenburg, it is time to listen to the people. He believes that there is an identity crisis, a huge tension between the EU and the citizens, and it would be "a very arrogant attitude to deny that". The Belgian presidency, which runs for six months, has tried to pick up the pieces because, at the December summit this year in Laeken, it will frame a declaration on the next, crucial round of EU changes in 2004.

Verhofstadt argues that the EU's citizens are pointing out the "lack of efficiency and transparency" in the Union; there is not enough "democratic legitimacy" and there is also a feeling of a loss of identity. He believes that, with twelve countries queuing up to join, in a few years, the EU will be "totally different", requiring different working methods. Instead of proposing new European institutions, however, Belgium wants a reform of the existing ones. "The EU is facing a real problem —we have to take it seriously, to analyse it and propose a solution. There is no alternative", Verhofstadt declared.4 The new EU presidency is also keen to restore EU's self-esteem.5

ENLARGEMENT PERILS

The EU is also believed to be facing enlargement perils. A survey by Eurobarometer, an arm of the European Commission, shows that more than a third of EU citizens oppose the forthcoming enlargement of the Union. Half the Frenchmen and Austrians and 43 percent of Germans are against it in principle. The figures paint a picture of apathy and hostility to the EU's "single most important current challenge" at a time when the fifteen member states are haggling over the terms, dates and finance involved for enlargement. Opposition is based on self-interest: half of EU citizens believe that enlargement will cost their own country more money, 40 percent that it will increase unemployment rates. There is fear of influx of cheap labour from the East. The support for enlargement is as follows: Sweden 51 percent, Greece 49, Denmark 48, Italy 42, the Netherlands 40, Spain 40, Finland 39, Ireland 36, Portugal 35, Luxembourg 33, Germany 30, the UK 29, Belgium 29, Austria 25 and France 22 percent.6

According to Charles Grant, director of the London-based Centre for European Reform, it is now likely that the EU will enlarge by a "Big Bang". This shift from fifteen to twenty-five members

would be a massive shock to the Union. Yet very few of the EU's governments have thought seriously about the implications of what he calls "so many relatively politically immature and economically underdeveloped countries joining". The need to reform the EU's farm and regional policies is often discussed. However, Grant mentions at least five other challenges posed by enlargement which tend to be overlooked:

1. Enlargement is likely to impair the quality of EU decision-making, which will make it difficult to reach meaningful agreements;

2. It is likely to aggravate the already serious problem of the EU's lack of legitimacy;

3. Greater diversity will weaken the sense of solidarity that helps to bind the Union together;

4. It leaves those outside the Union at a disadvantage; and

5. There will be problems of ratification of treaty changes.

"To highlight the potential perils of enlargement is not to call for a postponement; but Europe's leaders must think most seriously about the consequences", Grant warns.7

Most of these suggestions are supported by Anand Menon, director of the European Research Institute at Birmingham University (UK), who believes that the EU is "an invaluable political institution", and enlargement —bringing new central and eastern European members in— may seriously damage its health, and may even paralyse it. He thinks that European institutions function relatively well, but are "starting to groan" under the weight of two challenges: the EU's size and its significance. With increased membership it has become more difficult to arrive at consensual decisions because of the numbers. Successive enlargements have also increased the heterogeneity of membership. "Greece and Luxembourg have little in common and certainly much less than the original six", he remarks.

The EU now deals with more issues of public policy and touches the lives of citizens more directly than ever before. Public opinion notices what goes on in Brussels. The stakes in EU bargaining —what individual governments stand to win or lose from disputes in Brussels— are higher than ever. As they rise, so does the reluctance of member states to compromise. In the council of ministers where member states meet to discuss and ultimately vote on legislation, the tone has hardened; there has been a move towards zero-sum styles of negotiation. This hampers attempts to solve important problems. The Commission is increasingly under-resourced and criticised by governments, and is increasingly prey to the tendency of member states to ensure that their nationals get the most sensitive jobs, whatever the Maastrich and other treaties may say about the Commission's independence. Enlarging Europe threatens its future effectiveness, claims Menon. A larger Council of Ministers will be less effective and even less able to take decisions. Each member state will have less control over the legislative agenda.

Menon also observes that nation-state politicians will have to be "more honest in acknowledging both the importance of the EU system and the threat that enlargement poses to it". At least in this way the real problems could be explained to aspirant members and to the public. So, too, the possible need for either delaying enlargement until solutions can be found or the creation of different

tiers of membership, thereby avoiding the danger of "placing unbearable strains" on the community. Pushing ahead regardless should not be an option, he warns.8

However, both Grant and Menon do not mention the advantages of bringing many more markets within the sphere of the EU, and the danger of an influx of workers from the new member countries is rather exaggerated. EU membership will accelerate the economic activities of these member states and expansion in production and trade will absorb many more indigenous workers who will not feel the necessity to move to other EU countries.

FLASH POINTS

Another of the many complications in the EU's enlargement to central and eastern Europe and to the Mediterranean, which directly concerns also Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, is the creation of a number of possible flash points within the enlarging Union. According to Paul Cornish and Geoffrey Edwards, as the EU enlarges, it will increasingly make contact with what they call "zones of intractable conflict", defined as "underdeveloped, historically violent, and filled with seemingly insurmountable religious and identity conflict".9 In such places "the gulf between the EU expectations and modus operandi and the realities of life could become uncomfortably apparent, and the claim that the EU's security community is a paradigm of stability-making rather than an introspective club of comfortably well-off developed countries could appear a little tenuous."

Both Cornish and Edwards suggest that the EU, in order to bring its security community into close contact with "zones of insecurity", while maintaining its broad approach to stability and not seeking to remodel itself as a 'peace enforcer', should accept that, in or near such insecure areas, certain, otherwise unremarkable EU activities attach a special category of risk —either of an armed attack by hostile parties or of demonstrating to critics the EU's triumph of ambition over capability. Many such risks could be met and neutralised by the ability to deploy low-level military force. Such force could be used by the EU to pursue goals which fall within its scope and which complement other areas of Union activity, Cornish and Edwards suggest.10 In view of their suggestions one may ask, is it surprising that Turkey insists in having a say on the use of NATO resources by the EU?

TREATY OF NICE

Meanwhile the Treaty of Nice (signed on 26 February 2001) came under heavy criticism. Quentin Peel believes that that treaty is "a lousy package of institutional reforms" that in all probability will make the working of the EU worse. He calls for its scrapping, and reminds his readers that Michel Barnier, the European commissioner responsible for institutional reform, calls it "a short-term treaty" that tinkers with the EU mechanics without giving any sense of direction. He, too, wants it revised in the next inter-governmental conference in 2004. But the real problem, according to Peel, is not lack of direction. It is that the tinkering was counter-productive. The treaty was supposed to make the EU more efficient, in spite of expanding from 15 members to 27 or more, and no less "legitimate" in the eyes of its citizens. The net result is that it will reduce both efficiency and legitimacy, he believes.

Peel also reports that four leading economists linked to the London-based Centre for Economic Policy Research published a report entitled Nice Treaty: Should the Treaty of Nice Be Ratified? that concludes that the Nice reforms will actually make matters worse. Peel believes that the treaty is "a

guarantee of gridlock" because of the complex voting system agreed by the EU leaders at Nice. The entire system of weighted votes, etc., is skewed in favour of "decision-making paralysis". The Treaty, according to Peel, is a Euro-sceptics' dream. He claims everyone knows that it is "a bad deal" but no one can face the reopening of the debate. If the Treaty is ratified as it stands, the backlash against enlargement in the present member states, already appreciable, could become unstoppable. If enlargement is politically essential, as all the EU leaders agree, they must demonstrate that it will make the Union better: more efficient, more transparent, and more accountable. "Nice is a disaster on all three accounts", claims Peel.11

Even Prime Minister Tony Blair warned Britain's European partners that they had less than a year to implement fundamental reforms, or forfeit the EU's credibility as a modernising force in the global economy. He revealed to the Euro-sceptic British media that the EU's economic summit in Barcelona in March next year —where crucial reforms must be agreed— was vital to what he called "the whole enterprise of the future prosperity of Europe".12

EU'S SELF-INFLICTED PROBLEM: THE CYPRUS IMBROGLIO

It is rather strange that the EU, despite its shortcomings and the many problems it is facing, has allowed itself to be browbeaten by Greece into agreeing to consider the unilateral application of South Cyprus for EU membership, with the pretence of being the 'government' of the whole island, without first ensuring that the Cyprus imbroglio has been solved. It must be aware that the Greek Cypriot side is preparing with great zeal to become a member and thus use the EU as an instrument to neutralise Turkey and to isolate the Turkish Cypriots so that they can bow down to Greek demands. In the event of South Cyprus succeeding in its ambition, the EU would be taking on board a second Greek state of no legality, with an unsolved problem, which would only worsen the EU's own problems.

The EU, whose expertise in conflict resolution is still in its infancy, set a rule at the conclusion of the Helsinki European Council that a solution to the Cyprus issue is not a precondition for EU membership. The EU is thus exempting one of the parties to the dispute, not only from seeking a solution in good faith, but also from its own criteria for membership. Despite the international Cyprus Treaties and the Constitution of 1960, which clearly state that the Republic of Cyprus cannot enter into any alliance, international organisations or pacts in which both Turkey and Greece are not participants, and that the President and Vice-President of Cyprus each has the right to veto any law or decision concerning foreign affairs (see Article 8 of the Basic Articles of the 1960 Constitution and Articles 50 and 57 of the Constitution; see also the related clauses of the Treaty of Guarantee), these fundamental provisions have been ignored and international law violated by Greece, South Cyprus and now by the EU. This attitude of the EU is seen as contradictory, undemocratic and based on double standards. The question arises as to how the EU, which considers its own treaties as sacrosanct and sets its own criteria as preconditions for accession, could abandon them when it comes to Cyprus, and acts rather arbitrarily.

It is evident that there is something deeply wrong with the EU approach to Cyprus and that its persistence in following this path will lead to many problems of its own making. One wonders whether this is where the real interests of the EU lie. It is hard to believe that the EU has an interest in causing new tensions in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean areas that will not subside easily.

Some officials and experts even warn that a time bomb is already ticking —a bomb created by the EU itself. The Turks believe that it is only by establishing a confederal system that the two states in Cyprus, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Republic of South Cyprus, can have a chance to free themselves from the burden of the problems of the past, and to decide themselves on their future. This would enable, not only the two peoples of the island, but Turkey, Greece and the EU to overcome the present dilemma in a way that would preserve peace and stability in the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean areas.13

In the final analysis the EU needs to realise that, the granting of favours to Greece and Greek South Cyprus, the latter of which has a population and market of less than 700,000 people, and the marginalisation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Turkey, which has been a staunch ally of Europe for almost half a century, and has a market of almost 66 million people, will not only fail to solve the Cyprus issue, but also, in the words of Heinz Kramer, "will lead to disruption of the strategic pattern in the Aegean and the Mediterranean region, with serious consequences for Europe's future security",14 and I may add, EU's profitability.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

All these problems have exacerbated the malaise of the EU and have made it unpopular with many sections of its citizens and associates. The EU's leaders are rightly beginning to worry about the EU's unpopularity. Hence, Commission President, Romano Prodi, published a document on 25 June 2001 entitled European Commission's White Paper on European Governance, which says, inter alia, the following: "Many people are losing confidence in a poorly understood and complex system to deliver the policies that they want. The Union is often seen as remote and, at the same time, too intrusive. The Commission accepts that democratic institutions and representatives of the people, at both national and European level, can and must try to connect Europe with its citizens". The main aim of the White Paper is to reform the government of the EU.15 It unveiled plans to throw open decision-making, cut red tape and regain the trust of disenchanted citizens. Romano Prodi acknowledged a "widening gulf" between the EU and its voters, who saw Brussels as remote and too intrusive. The Paper promised to step up contacts with pressure groups and regional politicians. The proposals disclosed in the White Paper also include moves to guarantee consultation with outside groups under a new code of conduct and to boost online information systems to inform ordinary people. Brussels also wants to simplify its structures. Prodi disclosed that an early aim was to trim the body of EU legislation, which, at 80,000 pages, was "far too much", and streamline the Commission's 700 advisory committees. The EU's key themes would be openness, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. Other ideas include publication of guidelines on the use of expert advice and on how the Commission investigates breaches of EU law.16 However, one writer, Ian Black of London, claims that Romano Prodi launched an "ambitious drive to win back the flagging support for the EU, but failed to offer a big or novel idea for countering hostility and ignorance towards the EU."17 Whether the EU will manage to put its house in order only time will show.

1 Perceptions, Vol. III, No. 2, pp. 73-83.
2 The Guardian, London, 10 February 1998.
3 'The Future of Europe', Daily Telegraph, London, 25 June 2001.
4 Stephen Castle, 'Brussels Backs 'Big Bang' Plan for Ten Nations', Independent, London, 29 June 2001.
5 Peter Norman and Daniel Dombey, 'New President Needs to Restore EU Self-esteem', Financial

Times, London, 2 July 2001.

6 Ian Black, European Editor, 'Rich EU Citizens Oppose Enlargement', Guardian, 30 April 2001.

7 Charles Grant, 'The Perils of European Enlargement', Financial Times, 28 June 2001; see also Stefan Wagstyl, 'Exclusive Club Pledges to Open its Doors", ibid., 2 July 2001. For views supporting enlargement, see Heather Grabbe of the Centre for European Reform, 'Bigger is Beautiful', Guardian, 13 July 2001.

8 Anand Menon, 'Bigger not Better', Guardian, 30 July 2001.

9 See also P.P. Richmond, 'Emerging Concept of Security in the European Order: Implications for 'Zones of Conflict' at the Fringes of the EU', European Security, Vol. 19, No. 1, spring 2000, p. 42.

10 Paul Cornish and Geoffrey Edwards, 'Beyond the EU/NATO Dichotomy: the Beginning of a European Strategic Culture", International Affairs, Vol. 77, No. 3, July 2001, pp. 598-603.

11 Quentin Peel, 'Europe's Guaranteed Gridlock —the Absurdly Complex Voting System Enshrined in the Treaty of Nice Threatens Democracy, Efficiency and Enlargement', Financial Times, 9 July 2001.

12 Michael White, 'Blair Warns EU over Reforms', Guardian, 31 July 2001.

13 Korkmaz Haktanır, paper submitted to the international symposium on the Cyprus issue, held at the Near East University, Nicosia, 12-14 June 2001.

14 'The Cyprus Problem and European Security', Survival, Vol. 39, No. 3, autumn 1997, p. 19.

15 Christopher Huhne, 'If the EU Wants to be Popular, it Must End its Culture of Secrecy', Independent, 26 July 2001.

16 Stephen Castle, 'European Commission Promises to Cut Red Tape', Independent, 26 July 2001.

17 Ian Black, 'No More Jargon in EU, Prodi Urges', Guardian, 26 July 2001.