



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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From vision to action: putting citizens at the heart of Europe

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Main Messages

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And it took also some time to change the "justice is and will stay an intergovernmental policy" mind-sets. But it was worth it. We moved from intergovernmentalism and fragmentation to a true European policy.

Our "new deal" is based on solidity and solidarity. A European banking union was set up. Co-ordination of fiscal and economic policies at EU level was increased. Automatic sanctions against misbehaving Member States were foreseen. Member States understood that purely national solutions to problems which affect all European states were no longer enough. **The crisis had thus dramatically reinforced the action towards a united policy concerning economic, fiscal and banking affairs.**

Europe is at a defining moment. Many political leaders understand this: during the crisis management several decisions could only be taken at intergovernmental level. **Now we need to build the new structures to bring these intergovernmental structures home;** we need to integrate them into the EU Treaties and we need to add to those a stronger political Union.

[W]ith a strong currency, a market of 500 million citizens and a clear set of values encompassing peace, freedom, democracy and the rule of law, **all the elements are in place for Europe to become a real Federation** and thus a strong voice for a key role in the world.

[T]his vision will require Treaty changes as is already foreseen in the "Fiscal Compact", which has to be brought into the EU treaties by 2018. But it should be **more than closing gaps in European laws.** It should be a quantum leap, enhancing the democratic legitimacy of a solid political union.

I fully reject the liberal idea that the Union should be limited to its internal market dimension, as presently articulated by the British government.

I also plead for going much further than a Eurozone intergovernmentalism. I note with **satisfaction that President François Hollande, after meeting with Members of the Commission last week, made a strong plea for the community method** and for achieving political union within two years. The Franco-German engine seems to be back on track. This is a positive development and I call on Member States to support the Commission in jointly developing the move towards a political union beyond a mere economic community.

Without confidence, democracy is in danger. To **regain the confidence**, a concerted action by national and European political leaders is needed.

The Commission will make its contribution in several steps: the Blueprint for the economic and monetary union was presented in November 2012, **the proposals for rule of law mechanisms will be worked on this year and the elements for a new Treaty will be put on the table at the beginning of 2014.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Three years ago, the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights put European citizens at the centre of European integration. Following the latter's preamble, the Union "places the individual at the heart of its activities by establishing the citizenship of the Union and by creating an area of freedom, security and justice."

Putting citizens at the heart of the EU was a quantum leap. A new vision was set.

Yet, a vision which is not acted upon remains forever a dream. It is only when vision and action come together that we achieve truly great things.

When building the future, it helps to listen to those who walked this path before us. There is still much we can learn from the founding fathers. How did they succeed in translating their vision into action?

Let's look to Robert Schuman, born right here in Luxembourg, some hundred metres away from where we now stand. He said "Europe will not be made all at once or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create de facto solidarity."

Let's look to Jean Monnet. He noted "many [...] said I was an optimist, to which I responded "I am not an optimist, I am determined."

Concrete achievements and determination. The two secret ingredients for turning vision into action.

I have chosen Luxembourg to speak about these two essential concepts because there is no better place in Europe to understand how vision and action can become partners, in real terms.

On the one hand, history and geography have made us a nation of pragmatists. Acting without our neighbours has never been an option. Leaving the situation as it was would have led to sheer poverty. We had to work with neighbours and to invent new sources of wealth. We had to deal with the real, the do-able, the concrete.

Yet, on the other hand, we are also a nation of visionaries. Despite our small size, the determination of our countrymen – and women – has pushed forward European integration again and again – from the beginning of the dream in the 50s to the achievement of the Union decades later. There were always Luxembourgers at the helm! I tried not to deceive this reputation, when for the first time in history, concept and tools to build a justice system in Europe were in one hand.

This is most rare in politics; we had a blank page in front of us, with the possibility to draw the construction of a genuine continent of justice from scratch.

Following the logic of the Treaties and of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Commission decided to concentrate on two main pillars: rights for citizens and justice for growth.

13 Regulations and 11 Directives later, the building has taken shape, not because of the number of legal actions, but because the real value of these policies lies in their impact on the daily lives of EU citizens. And as you will see from the following, the continent is different now than it was 3 years ago!

Justice for Citizens

Three years ago, during my hearing in the European Parliament, I spoke of a revolution and of the Lisbon Treaty which made this revolution in the field of Justice possible.

Justice lies at the very heart of the European construction. It is the foundation of our Union: a Union built on the rule of law and bound by a shared commitment to respect the jointly created rules. By combining different legal traditions, Europeans have created a rich supranational body of law, resulting in strong EU laws.

It is thus one of history's great paradoxes that justice for citizens was the "Cinderella" of EU law. For over 50 years, justice was locked away, excluded from the "community method" and left to intergovernmentalism.

All this changed with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. The Treaty gave us the tools to design a Europe of justice, firmly anchoring the area of justice into the Community method and clearly defining the Union's duty to provide an area of freedom, security and justice to its citizens. Together with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Lisbon Treaty has allowed us to turn the vision of justice for citizens into reality.

So, concretely, what action has been taken to make citizens' lives easier and protect their fundamental rights as private individuals, residents and travellers?

Well, for starters we have cut red tape, making citizens' cross-border lives easier and legal certainty stronger.

When proposals allowing international couples to choose the law to apply to their divorce were blocked in the Council, I thought it would be unfair to make the concerned couples pay the price for governments' reluctance. For this reason, for the first time in history in 2010, the Commission, on my initiative, used the "enhanced co-operation" procedure, allowing 14 EU countries to move forward with a Regulation that will give couples legal certainty about which law applies and which court is in charge, thus preventing a "rush to court" in case of a divorce, avoiding emotionally and financially costly proceedings. Similar rules were added in the field of succession.

We also took action to dismantle many of these barriers which frustrate citizens' core right to free movement. The Commission proposed a Regulation to abolish unnecessary bureaucratic requirements for recognising citizen's public documents as authentic in another Member State. We are taking action to end the era of unnecessary apostilles, certified translations and rubber stamps. In the same way we facilitated the transfer procedures for cars and the recognition of cross-border court decisions. Small steps, but important for the everyday-life of our citizens.

Empowering citizens is one aspect. However, protecting them is even more important.

Since 2010, the Charter of Fundamental Rights is the compass of all policies decided at EU level. Therefore the members of the Commission pledged, on 1 May 2010, to respect the EU Charter during a ceremony in the European Court of Justice. This was of more than just symbolic value. This was a strong political commitment from the whole College to ensure that the Charter is respected and complied with. Moreover, ever since the introduction of a strategy for implementing the Charter in 2010, Commission proposals need to be subject to a fundamental rights impact assessment.

This new approach has produced concrete results. In questions as varied as "body scanners", "asylum rules" or clinical trials, Commission proposals have been adapted to reflect the values inscribed in the Charter.

Since 2010, we have put in place EU-wide procedural rights (letter of rights, right to translation and interpretation, access to a lawyer) in criminal procedures. For the first time in history, all citizens of whatever nationality, in whatever EU Member State, enjoy the same minimal rights. For the first time, EU-wide policy intervenes in criminal justice!

Every year up to 75 million people fall victim to crime in the European Union. So far, they were rarely taken care of in criminal procedures. We have taken action to ensure that victims of crime, in any country of the European Union, are treated with dignity, and protected from further victimisation. The "victims package" not only intervenes in cross-border cases, it also applies minimal protection rules in national criminal procedures. Also a "première"!

In the 2010 Citizenship report, the Commission set out 25 concrete actions to help people overcome obstacles when they cross borders. 25 actions have been delivered. Two weeks ago, I announced 12 new concrete actions to make citizens life easier, actions to be put into practice in the coming 18 months. These measures are specifically aimed at dealing with concrete concerns. How to support citizens as consumers, as entrepreneurs and as employees? How to help them find a new job? How to facilitate their life in a cross-border context? Many small steps which – taken as a whole – simplify the daily life of citizens.

Allow me to point to another action which is of a more fundamental importance: upholding the Rule of Law and fundamental rights. Let me just recall the "enough is enough" intervention when groups of Roma people were expelled from France without the necessary procedural guarantees in place. Let me underline the Commission's stance when the Romanian Constitutional Court was in danger of being undermined. Let me also recall the Commission's continued interventions in response to the recurring changes to the Hungarian constitution, working closely with the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and where necessary, calling upon the European Court of Justice. Also here, a fundamental policy has been established: the Commission as the guardian of the rule of law. I will come back to this later.

Justice for Growth

The second strand of action which the Commission developed goes under the chapter "Justice for Growth". The main lesson learnt during the crisis, as set out by the Commission's blueprint last November, was that a comprehensive vision for a deep and genuine European Monetary Union, conducive to a strong and stable architecture in the financial, fiscal, economic and political domains needed to be put into practice.

In response to the crisis, Europe took unprecedented action in record time. Our "new deal" is based on solidity and solidarity. A European banking union was set up. Co-ordination of fiscal and economic policies at EU level was increased. Automatic sanctions against misbehaving Member States were foreseen. Member States understood that purely national solutions to problems which affect all European states were no longer enough. The crisis had thus dramatically reinforced the action towards a united policy concerning economic, fiscal and banking affairs.

The crisis also made clear that justice can play an important role in fostering growth. The basic idea of "justice for growth" was born when it became evident that a non-functioning civil and commercial justice system is a barrier to investment.

Essentially, justice means confidence. The confidence to invest, the confidence to buy, the confidence to sell. Confidence, in turn, means growth – more profit and more jobs. So does the opening of the Single Market, the elimination of barriers which still hamper the smooth functioning of a commercial space for 500 million people.

I put this logic to work in a package of measures under the title "justice for growth".

First we started by eliminating red tape and opening the internal market. We have made it easier for companies to expand their business into other EU Member States.

The costly 'exequatur' procedure was abolished in December 2012. This purely administrative procedure used to cost EU businesses time and money just to rubber-stamp a court judgement in another EU country.

By taking an innovative legal approach, we designed an optional European Sales Law, boosting e-commerce and expanding consumer choice. Consumers and companies will be given the freedom to trade and shop cross-border using a single contract model for the whole of the single market. The Common European Sales Law will particularly help small and medium sized enterprises, who will be able to market their products all over Europe on the basis of one single law. This proposal could lead to the creation of many thousands of new jobs in Europe.

We presented new insolvency legislation, built around the principle of saving a still viable company instead of eliminating it. This "second chance" is vital as half of all businesses do not survive the first 5 years of their existence. An average of 200,000 firms go bankrupt in the EU each year, resulting in direct job losses of 1.7 million every year. A quarter of these bankruptcies have a cross-border element. Thanks to the new rules, we can save many of them.

We proposed to eliminate 27 complicated and often contradictory national laws with one set of European data protection rules, reducing administrative burdens and removing barriers to market entry, putting the slogan "one continent, one rule" to work. This could lead to savings of around 2.3 billion euro per year in administrative requirements, eliminate the market fragmentation and allow European data-protection standards to expand on the world-market.

Additionally, our proposal to improve women's participation in economic decision making will help boost company performance. Scientific studies show the link between more women in senior jobs and companies' enhanced financial results. Women mean business. Female talent is available: we should stop wasting these highly needed skills!

Justice also plays an important role in ensuring sustainable growth from a systemic point of view. An efficient and trustworthy justice system brings economic benefits. Trusting that the rule of law is fully upheld directly translates into investor confidence. Predictable, timely and enforceable justice decisions all have a key impact in making a country an attractive location for business and investment. That is the reason why – in the framework of the European Semester – on my initiative, the Commission has introduced (since March 2013 for all Member States) a Justice Scoreboard. This is a tool designed to promote effective, independent and high-quality justice systems in Europe. It aims to provide comparable data on the functioning of justice systems in the Member States. The Scoreboard is meant to be an early warning system, helping governments to improve justice systems and thus to strengthen the structural foundations needed for sustainable growth. It can also serve as a first step on the road to a new "rule of law" mechanism.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have just presented you with some of the concrete actions under the headings "Justice for citizens" and "Justice for growth", in order to underline how a vision (Europe as an area for justice, as foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty and in the Charter) can in a short period of time, with a consistent step by step-approach, become a tangible reality. Who would have thought, some years ago, that justice would become a fully-fledged Community policy? Few people, indeed. It took a solid effort of persuasion to show the potential of the Treaty changes. And it took also some time to change the "justice is and will stay an intergovernmental policy" mind-set. But it was worth it. We moved from intergovernmentalism and fragmentation to a true European policy. In only 3 years! The foundations have been laid. They are firm enough to allow the continent of justice to grow on solid grounds.

From vision to action: the ideas inscribed in the Lisbon Treaty made the justice revolution possible. The crisis served as an eye opener and accelerator, clearly showing that "business as usual" was not an option anymore. We took action in monetary and fiscal matters. As just described, we took action in the field of justice as well. While doing so, one thing became evident: a number of actions can be taken under the current Treaty rules; other actions were possible only with intergovernmental rules and the indispensable "communitarisation" of these rules calls for Treaty changes.

Europe is at a defining moment. Many political leaders understand this: in crisis management, several decisions could only be taken at intergovernmental level. Now we need to build new structures to bring these intergovernmental structures home; we need to integrate them into the EU Treaties and we need to add a stronger political Union.

Political vision requires the courage to transcend your own time and its limitations. Over 100 years ago, Victor Hugo wrote:

"A day will come when the only fields of battle will be markets opening up to trade and minds opening up to ideas. A day will come when the bullets and the bombs will be replaced by votes, by the universal suffrage of the peoples; by the venerable arbitration of a great sovereign senate which will be to Europe what this parliament is to England, what this diet is to Germany, what this legislative assembly is to France. A day will come when we will display cannon in museums just as we display instruments of torture today, and are amazed that such things could ever have been possible."

100 years ago, the idea of a peaceful and democratic Europe seemed unthinkable to most. Yet this did not deter Hugo in his vision. History showed that Hugo was right.

Today, Europe needs visionaries of Hugo's caliber. Now is the time to consolidate what we have achieved 56 years after the Treaty of Rome, 20 years after Maastricht and 4 years after the Lisbon Treaty.

In the end, the crisis took us beyond the economic dimension and led us to the very core of EU integration. Europe has always been the sum of the crises it has experienced. We learn from the past and build on it to construct a strong Union and strong Member States.

Indeed, the current crisis has shown why a federal Europe is more necessary today than it has ever been. This is why I had already outlined a vision for a United States of Europe in September 2011 in a speech at Sciences Po in Paris. These changes will not happen overnight. But with a strong currency, a market of 500 million citizens and a clear set of values encompassing peace, freedom, democracy and the rule of law, all the elements are in place for Europe to become a real Federation and thus a strong voice for a key role in the world.

To equip ourselves to face these challenges, this vision will require Treaty changes as is already foreseen in the "Fiscal Compact", which has to be brought into Union law by 2018.

But it should be more than closing gaps in European laws. It should be a quantum leap, enhancing the democratic legitimacy of a solid political union.

This clearly means that I fully reject the idea that the Union should be limited to its internal market dimension, as presently articulated by the British government. I also plead for going much further than a Eurozone intergovernmentalism. I note with satisfaction that President François Hollande, after meeting with Members of the Commission last week, made a strong plea for the community method and for achieving political union within two years. The Franco-German engine seems to be back on track. This is a positive development and I call on Member States to support the Commission in jointly developing the move towards a political union beyond a mere economic community.

Moreover, this vision cannot be imposed top-down, it must grow bottom-up. To continue the construction of our European Union, we need to regain the trust, the confidence and the involvement of 500 million citizens. As President Barroso has said in his 2012 State of the Union Address "Europe has to be ever more democratic." Europe's future must be shaped and defined by its citizens. Before any Treaty change takes place, they must be part of a European wide, broad debate about a common future.

It is with this logic that we created the "Citizens' Dialogues" to debate with citizens, to respond to their questions and to listen to their fears and dreams. Over the last nine months, my fellow Commissioners and I have travelled from Berlin to Dublin, from Cadiz to Coimbra, from Thessaloniki to Paris under the belief that we should talk with our citizens, and not just about them. On 30 June 2013, we will be hosting the 22nd Citizens' Dialogue, this time in my home town of Esch-sur-Alzette and I hope to see many of you there!

It is interesting that everywhere, from North to South, from East to West, citizens give us the same message: Europe should be more united and have stronger continent wide policies. This experience confirms the Eurobarometer polls, which clearly show that citizens have more confidence in the European Commission than in their national governments. But it also shows that the overall confidence in European and national institutions is fading away.

Without this confidence, democracy is in danger. To regain this confidence, a concerted action by national and European political leaders is needed.

We are therefore laying the foundations for a pan-European debate by making the European elections more transparent. They are a prime occasion for European citizens to make their voices heard. This is why the Commission recommended, for instance, that it be made clear to which European political parties national parties belong and which European political programmes candidates stand for. Voters will see how their choice at the ballot box fits into a wider, European, context.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By putting our citizens at the heart of everything we do, Europeans will be empowered individually, more protected legally and more involved politically than ever before and more listened to. That is why the grass-roots debate about how to build the Europe of the future has to begin soon. Political leaders must open their plan to debate.

The Commission will make its contribution in several steps: the Blueprint for the economic and monetary union was presented in November 2012, the proposals for rule of law mechanisms will be worked on this year and the elements for a new Treaty will be put on the table at the beginning of 2014.

These and other contributions will be the basis for a sound European discussion for a future Treaty. It is now time to build on the progress of the last few years and take the European vision further, this time together with those for whom the Union has been created: Europe's 500 million citizens!