

Reflecting on Europe's Future

EU panel emphasizes immigration, jobs and security

An old classroom exercise urged students to lay out a map of Eurasia and view the land mass from the perspective of China. From that vantage point, the states that make up the European Union appear to be a small appendage to the larger Asia.

That geographical reversal — a swollen Asia increasingly dominating a shrinking Europe — is a major thread that runs through a 46-page report produced by the Reflection Group on the Future of the EU 2030. Presented to the European Council in June 2010, *Project Europe 2030: Challenges and Opportunities* starkly lays out problems needing the coordinated attention of EU member states lest they slide into irrelevance on the world stage.

Despite maintaining nearly 2 million Soldiers under arms, the EU struggles to mobilize even a few thousand of them for its common defense, the report says. Plunging birth rates will deprive European economies of 68 million workers they need to compete in the world. The report went even further, criticizing Europe for failing to attract skilled immigrants, modernize its universities, curb reliance on imported energy and lower unemployment.

“2010 could mark the beginning of a new phase for the EU, and the next 50 years could be about Europe’s role as an assertive global actor,” declares an early



The 12-member Reflection Group put together a report that expressed fears that, barring economic and political reform, Europe would lose influence in the world.



European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, left, displays the Project Europe 2030 report handed to him by Felipe González, chairman of the Reflection Group on the Future of the EU.

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section of the report. "Or, alternatively, the Union and its member states could slide into marginalization, becoming an increasingly irrelevant western peninsula of the Asian continent."

The Reflection Group is a 12-member panel chaired by former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe González. Prominent on the panel are Lech Wałęsa, the former Polish president and Solidarity union activist; Wolfgang Schuster, mayor of Stuttgart, Germany; and Jorma Ollila, chairman of Finland's Nokia Corp. The European Council, made up of the EU's 27 heads of the state, formed the group at its December 2007 meeting, informally dubbing the panel the "group of wise men."

The team worked independently for more than a year, intentionally avoiding consultation with the 736-member European Parliament. In a June 2010 interview published on the website EurActiv, Žiga Turk, the Slovenian secretary-general of the Reflection Group, explained that he and his colleagues wanted to steer clear of the "Brussels bubble," which he defined as a worldview obsessed with grand historic projects such as combating global warming. "My feeling is that maybe it's not time to make history anymore. It may be more boring, and be a lot of hard work, but it's about making sure Europe is a good place to live, have kids, work, study and do business in," Turk said in the interview. "Europe must appear attractive to talent and capital from abroad. It's not historic, but it's what people expect."

The EU views itself as a "soft power" that resorts to military engagement as a last resort. But if the EU is to remain a world player in that softer role, its problems are inseparable from the issue of population decline. At the current average birth rate of about 1.3 children per woman — the replacement rate is nearly 2.1 children per woman — the EU will face massive worker shortages requiring at least 100 million immigrants to fill. Although the report notes that such a large number of newcomers is neither "likely" nor "necessarily desirable," the EU must coordinate and regularize visa applications and border control. An EU-wide blue card, similar to the green card used in the United States, would grant permanent resident status to immigrants, particularly high-skilled immigrants from Asia and elsewhere. The problem is not unique to Europe. Asian economic competitors such as China, Japan and South Korea face plunging populations due to low birth rates.

"Too often immigration is perceived as a burden to be shouldered rather than an opportunity to be seized. Europe has much to learn in this regard from Australia, Canada and the United States, with which it is in direct competition for talented and skilled immigrants," the report said. "Yet Europe will only become an attractive destination for skilled immigrants if the latter feel accepted, have full access to formal labour markets and the possibility to set up their own businesses."

The release of Project Europe 2030 coincided with the Greek financial meltdown that shook the eurozone. With the crisis fresh in everyone's memory, the report warned nations against dumping a single market in favor of economic nationalism. While reaffirming the continent's commitment to a "social market economy" that stresses redistribution of wealth, the "wise men" pressed the EU to highlight economic growth and job creation, even at the price of trimming some social benefits Europeans have grown accustomed to. Too many Europeans live off

of the public purse though they are years from retirement, the report said. Not only should they return to work but older workers should delay retirement, in some cases to the age of 70. The call to modernization also encompasses universities. Only 27 of the world's top 100 universities are in Europe, the report noted, with a detrimental effect on scientific research and development. "In the last two decades, the EU's potential to generate growth and jobs, and consequently to improve living standards, has lagged behind that of its main trading partners," the report reiterated.

The report also calls for a new "European security model" to deal with an unpredictable world in which terrorism, nuclear weapons and organized crime are durable threats. The Reflection Group suggested greater investment in Frontex, the EU border security agency based in Warsaw. Properly financed, Frontex could provide member states with a uniform and integrated border control force. The report also notes that Europe spends about half of what the United States does on its combined militaries, but can project forces overseas at a rate of only 10 percent to 15 percent of U.S. capabilities. Investment is lacking in air transport, helicopters, military police and tactical communications.

"With 1.8 million Soldiers under arms — half a million more than the U.S. — the EU is not capable of deploying a 60,000-strong rapid intervention force and it finds it hard to deliver a 5,000-strong force for a Common Security and Defense Policy mission," the report said.

Some critics of the Reflection Group suggest its report, like others produced by specially selected committees over the years, will receive only a brief hearing before being unceremoniously shelved. As they emerged in May and June, the findings of the report were, in fact, partly drowned out by the contemporaneous Greek crisis. Others accused the "wise men" of working in undemocratic secrecy.

Others complained that EU guidelines unnecessarily constrained the report. "To reflect about the long-term future without being allowed to consider changes to the basic institutional structure of an entity (i.e. the Treaties of the EU) does not invite inordinate creativity," German political scientist Cornelius Adebahr wrote on the website Global Policy. "But in such a situation, it would have been better for the Group to show the leadership they are asking from others: by either bravely going beyond their mandate, or by refusing to work within such limitations."

In defense of her work, former Latvian President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, vice chair of the Reflection Group, urged the EU to keep the report's recommendations front and center, even if those recommendations call for sacrifice. "This report of the 'group of wise men' is a moral exhortation to European leaders," Vīķe-Freiberga said in a June 2010 interview published on the French website www.touteleurope.fr: "Short-term thinking is the root of our democratic crisis." □

If you wish to read the whole report, visit: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/en_web.pdf

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