

THE NOBEL PRIZE, THEN WHAT?

Yves Bertoncini | *Director of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*

António Vitorino | *President of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*

The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU has sparked a mixture of enthusiasm and of criticism which needs to be put into perspective: it is the purpose of this Viewpoint of *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute* co-signed by Yves Bertoncini and António Vitorino.

The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU has sparked a mixture of enthusiasm and of criticism which needs to be put into perspective, on the basis of three complementary observations: it is right to welcome the historic job of reconciliation initiated by the European construction; the euro zone, set up to consolidate peace, is more than ever a factor for stability; we now need to move on from “peace in unity” to “unity is strength”.

1. It is right to welcome the historic job of reconciliation addressed by the European construction

The message from the Nobel Prize jury in Norway is crystal clear: this message is not that the European construction is perfect, it is meant to remind people that we owe to that construction the reconciliation process which has offered its member states an unprecedented era of peace and stability; the European construction has not put paid to differences between those states, but it has forced them to settle these differences peacefully, through negotiation and compromise. The people of Europe have learned to “quarrel around a table rather than on a battlefield”, as Jean Monnet put it. Thanks to the European construction, they have got into the habit of “living together” rather than of killing each other off, and that fact alone marks a genuine, epoch-making revolution.

As Jacques Delors stressed¹, it is a moral message hailing the values of solidarity and of mutual understanding promoted by the Schuman declaration a mere five years after the end of a bitter conflict. And it is also a political message encouraging the EU to persevere in its existence, as its member states and citizens pit their wits against one another in lively debates.

These debates explain why critics have occasionally downplayed, and even denied, the peacemaking virtues of the European construction, for instance by pointing to the major role played by NATO. These critics confuse the state of “cold war”, based on a balance of terror, with the establishment of a lasting peace, whose very

duration is based on an in-depth process of reconciliation among the countries and peoples of Europe.

The Nobel Prize jury’s intention was to recognise the inestimable contribution made by this reconciliation process, noting that it could also have a further, positive impact in the Balkans or in central Europe, including in terms of safeguarding minorities. The current crisis has also confirmed that the efforts for mutual understanding require further work, particularly in terms of the North-South divide.

2. The euro zone, set up to consolidate peace, is more than ever a factor for stability

It was to consolidate the peace established in Western Europe that the members of the EEC decided to set up an economic and monetary union at the turn of the ‘nineties, not just to accompany the fresh boost to the single market. The fall of the Berlin Wall acted *de facto* as a second “integrating shock”, in the wake of which Germany reaffirmed its will to bind its fate to Europe, thus putting paid to the doubts and fears aroused by its reunification. This geopolitical origin explains both why the EMU, planned as far back as the ‘seventies, was only implemented at that moment, and why it was possible to launch the EMU on an unbalanced basis reflecting the political compromises of the time.

The current crisis has led to revise those compromises, through the implementation of unprecedented acts of solidarity for member states in difficulty (in particular, through the European Stability Mechanism) and for banks. It is as an offset for that solidarity that the European tools for the supervision of national budget and economic policies have been strengthened and that European banking supervision is about to be set up. This process is undoubtedly going to develop further, with the combined implementation of some form of mutualisation of national debts and of clearer tracking and coordination of member states’ economic policies.

It is one of History's ironies that the euro zone crisis has, at the same time, triggered so much social and political tensions that many observers have felt justified in faulting the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU. While such critics are understandable, they have got the wrong era: what the Norwegian jury has rewarded is not what the Troika has been doing in Greece over the past three years, but Europe's contribution to peace over the past sixty years. If you do not wish to be accused of being wide of the mark, you do not criticise a movie star who has just received a prize for his entire career, on the grounds that he is a poor musician...

It would be more relevant to underscore another political event which has marked Europe's recent history: the euro zone crisis has placed Europe at the heart of national political debates and it has helped to strengthen the European public space. But above all, it has forced the states and citizens involved to become more aware of the rights and duties that their membership of a monetary union entails. That awareness has been painful to acquire, but so far it has not led a single country, a single parliamentary majority, a single election or even a single opinion poll to conclude that it would be preferable to return to national currencies. Thus it is also a "crisis of confirmation" for the monetary union, in which the Europeans have agreed to pay the price of that union in terms of solidarity and of discipline, and thus to strengthen to euro zone's stabilising [political role](#)².

3. We now need to move on from "peace in unity" to "unity is strength"

Lastly, the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU has triggered a kind of scepticism, or even of indifference, especially in those countries where the European construction did not bring peace, democracy or human rights, because they already had them before joining (the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom and so on). The same indifference can be perceived in the younger

generation, for whom peace is a natural condition, or even an irreversible fact, in much the same way as they think of freedom of movement.

These reactions suggest that, even if the rationale of reconciliation is a valuable asset which needs to be safeguarded, it is no longer sufficient to impart meaning to the construction of Europe, or at least to give it the thrust it needs to promote significant new actions and cooperations. The other reason for avoiding making peace the "be all and end all" of the European project is that it gives out the idea that the EU is necessarily beneficial for all, when in fact its decisions and its policies produce winners and losers - hence the need for the EU to be subject to the common right of democratic debate.

The people of Europe undertook to put an end to their internecine confrontation in order to rediscover the stability that would allow them to regain control of their fate. They need to strengthen the EU's stabilising role well beyond its borders, in particular through its external aid, through its diplomacy and through its peace-keeping missions. Above all, they need to carry on down the path of union in order to acquire [greater clout in the globalisation process](#), and to defend better their values and their interests in the competition with other continent-wide countries or regional groups.

As the chairman of the Nobel Prize jury pointed out, the EU is the appropriate level for settling many of the problems facing the member states today. Strength lies in unity, but there is still a need to persuade Europe's member states and citizens of that fact, by offering them new ["concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity"](#) and can prove capable of rallying a strong majority of them.

The European elections in June 2014 will be a key moment in this perspective, 100 years after the start of "World War I" - which was also one of the last great episodes of carnage on European soil, thanks to the founding fathers' political genius.

1. [Press review of Jacques Delors' comments after the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.](#)

2. ["The euro zone, core of a political union"](#), Jacques Delors, António Vitorino and the participants to the European Steering Committee of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, Tribune, November 2012.

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info@notre-europe.eu
19 rue de Milan
75009 Paris - France
www.notre-europe.eu

