Transcription

Interview between Dr. Stefan Auer and Joschka Fischer.

SA: Welcome. We are in Berlin now and I am very privileged to introduce the former Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, Mr. Joschka Fischer; a great European, a thinker, a public intellectual. We are going to talk about the future of Europe. I would like to start by asking you about your vision for Europe. You presented a major speech more than ten years ago at Humboldt University when you envisaged a transformation of Europe into a United States of Europe. And I would say that ten years ago the future of Europe seemed bright, today a lot has changed. How are your views today?

JF: What the problem is nowadays is that there is no vision of Europe any longer, which is powerful enough to push forward the European project. Europe is on the one hand, if you look back, a huge success story in the integration of the new member states, a Europe-wide political order, a social order which is working pretty well. Even in the midst of the present crisis Europe is working pretty well. Also in the economic sector with the common market, the common agricultural market, even the Euro is doing pretty well. But there is a lack of vision and this is reflected in the lack of leadership. Europe today is in a crisis, a political crisis. It’s not an economic crisis if you compare Greece or other challenges we have, with the United States or other big economies. Europe is not in such a severe economic crisis, but there is a lack of leadership and this is based on the lack of vision.

SA: Would you still advocate a United States of Europe?

JF: What is the alternative; going back to the nineteenth century? That’s the alternative. Is that our future? Then we will end up like Venice; it’s a good place to go but...other will decide about our destiny, we will lose our importance. For me it’s a completely irrational to believe that the European nation-state, which is not very old (at least in a huge part of Europe) including my own country, the nations are very old. More or less a thousand years old, but not the national states. The German national state, the first one was founded in 1871, so the second=half of the nineteenth century. It ended in a mess, as we know, in 1945. Others are older; the UK, Spain...but even Spain nowadays; is that the future? No. So the historical framework of the nation-state isn’t a historical framework. It emerged and in the twenty-first century, if the Europeans have not got the capability to unite: we will not any longer be the subject of our destiny; we will be an object for the interests of others. It’s very simple.

SA: You said that the Eurozone is doing well; comparatively speaking. That economically at least, it has worked pretty well, when you look at the United States which also struggles with massive debt, and sluggish growth, etc. But isn’t the key difference between the United States and Europe; the existence of nations that you just referred to, and that it is simply unacceptable for the Greek people or the Irish, or the Portuguese to feel that their destiny is determined somewhere else? Whether it be Brussels, Berlin or Paris?

JF: Well if this would be true, forgot Europe. Then we are back to the nation-states with all the problems. Europe will not be powerful enough to threaten the rest of the world as we did in the twentieth century. Then forget Europe.

SA: But don’t you fear that even if economically the Eurozone can still recover, that politically as a project it has failed to the extent that Greeks if anything feel more hostility now towards Germany...

JF: Yes, but this is a result of very bad politics. I don’t understand what our government is doing; to be quite frank. First we pushed the Greeks into default and then we will pay the bill because otherwise we will hurt ourselves. For me it’s not understandable, it’s not rational. This created very bad feelings in Athens, understandably, from my point of view. But this could be overcome. But if you are right, if the Europeans...if there is no political will to unite; then forget Europe. And then forget the Europeans. And then we’ll deal with China, with India, with Russia, with a neighbourhood which is very challenging, with the US. What will the Europeans be? France, the UK, Germany? Come on, in the twenty-first century these are not serious powers any longer.

SA: Well I don’t want to forget about Europe yet; perhaps you could elaborate a bit on that, on your vision for Europe. I mentioned the concept of shared sovereignty; you talk about a United States of Europe. How would it work in practice so that the situation lies...

JF: By pooling sovereignty, that’s the miracle of the European Union. I mean, there is an important difference. The European nations are reality; it would be very short-sighted and counter-productive to deny that fact, and this will not go away. So the Germans will continue to be German, the French; French, the British; British. I mean even the Czechs and the Slovaks separated. This is a part of the European reality, the question is; the framework, the political-economic-social framework and whether the nations are ready to pool, step-by-step, their sovereignty; especially where there is a need for it. I wouldn’t be in favour of pooling sovereignty if things were fine in the present order. Why should you change if the things are fine? If things are working, why should you change? But if you look to the European currency, to the Euro, I mean even the Brits must have an interest that the European currency will not fall apart? The Swiss...I mentioned the two nations which are pretty euroskeptic outside the EU and inside the EU; but their interest is linked to the Euro. The Euro is the second world currency and I think this reflects also, the importance of the European integration process. It’s not only a financial message, it’s a political message. Therefore, it’s very hard at the moment because we have this lack of vision and nobody is willing to invest part of its political success and carry it into this European Project. But, I firmly believe that if you look to our interests, there is no other way. Look how the Russians are treating us. If you look to the objective facts, the Russians depend more on Europe, than Europe on Russia. Yes, there is a dependency on Russian gas and oil, but they depend more on us. But subjectively, Russia is on a much stronger road, because they are united and they can play divided Empire games with the Europeans. Very simple. If we were united in energy policy, gas policy, the situation would be very different. This is only one example.

SA: You were a little more optimistic, I studied your lecture...

JF: My pessimism started in the Fall of 2008, it was in November, early December. It was at a talk in Oxford. There I said I am very alarmed and concerned about the global financial and economic crisis, which then started in November. I said, first of all; enlargement will be threatened, secondly; the currency union will be threatened, and thirdly; the common market will be threatened. So, the EU project as such will be threatened. I am pretty pessimistic since then.

SA: But at your lecture in Dusseldorf last year, you pointed towards the establishment of the Eurozone rescue package and you said it was a decisive step in the right direction. [Indecipherable] ...From a historical coincidence, just sixty years after the Schuman Declaration. Then you also talked about the need for the ‘Union of Solidarity’, where massive financial transfers would be accepted between the more prosperous powers of Europe and all others. But isn’t the problem that the solidarity between nation-states is difficult to sell in those member-states that have their...

JF: Nonsense. Complete nonsense.

SA: I’m not only thinking about...

JF: Why is it...I mean we are solidarity in the framework of the EU; it’s not only a gesture of moral or so, it’s based on interests. The Chinese are financing their biggest customer; the US. In 2009, Germany had a trade surplus with Greece, of about six billion Euros. It’s gone, it’s completely gone. In Spain; even bigger. In Portugal, in Ireland...look, when we talk about ‘Union of Solidarity’, solidarity is not based on positive moral, but this is not the key issue; the key issue is common interests.

SA: But, talk about countries like Slovakia, that have performed well in terms of...

JF: Yeah well, I think it’s very short-sighted. One day Slovakia will have problems and will ask for help. And it will be told, ‘Well..’

SA: Just in terms of individuals in Slovakia that have not had a proper welfare state, precisely in order to fulfil the Maastricht criteria in entering the Eurozone and are still per capita the poorest country in the Eurozone. Now Slovak tax-payers are de-facto asked to help people in Ireland, in Greece. Ireland, with one of the highest per capita GDPs; this is where European solidarity...

JF: Why did they join the Eurozone?

SA: Well...

JF: With which ideas did they join the Eurozone? Why?

SA: Well they expected more political and economic stability.

JF: And what is the price for that?

SA: So our tax-payers simply have to accept that...

JF: It’s not ‘simply’. Why did they join the Eurozone, if they don’t accept it? I understand that you don’t accept it, but why did they join the Eurozone? The Eurozone from the very beginning was based on solidarity and was a pooling of the financial sovereignty.

SA: The argument that is often...

JF: If you don’t accept that, then why did you join?

SA: The argument that is often brought up in German papers is the one against the ‘Transfer Union’. That the Treaty of Maastricht created the common currency, also stipulated very clearly that the individual member-states will not be bailed out and there would be no transfer.

JF: Ok, and if they would fail? And the whole project would fail without a bailout; what’s that? End of the Euro, end of the Eurozone? Obviously not.

SA: Do you believe that if the Eurozone had to be re-adjusted...

JF: Of course, otherwise it would disappear.

SA: The European Union as a whole?

JF: The Eurozone. The European Union, I don’t know. But you didn’t answer my question about Slovakia...

SA: Well I am more interested in your views.

JF: Yes. But this is a very interesting, key question. Why did they join? What is the idea to join the Eurozone; always to be on the sunny-side?

SA: I think in hindsight, personally, that the whole project might have been...But seriously, my question is that it’s not only Euroskeptics now who are critical about the Eurozone. The former Commissioner, respected Dutch politician, Bolkestein, was just quoted in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung saying ‘it is not prudent to say that the adjustment of the Eurozone will lead to the destruction of the European Union; that it may well be needed for Ireland, Portugal and Greece.’

JF: With all due respect, I think that is very irresponsible. If the Eurozone will collapse, and if the first will leave, then it will continue. Would Bolkestein really think that we could make the Eurozone or Europe, without Spain and Italy? I mean, it’s very simple to give an interview; but you don’t believe if Greece will leave tomorrow, Portugal the day after tomorrow, Ireland two days after tomorrow; that this would stop and not go directly to Madrid or Rome? I mean the short-sellers are very ‘sharky’ in their behaviour and that’s the rationality of the global financial markets. It would mean the end of the Euro, and the end of the Euro-do you really believe that would have immediately a strengthening of protectionism inside the common market? Of course, the weakest economy will immediately react with more protectionism against the rules of the common market. And what will be the consequence of that?

SA: Well if we move a bit away from the Eurozone, as pressing as those problems are, how do you assess the more recent developments in terms of the governing structures of the European Union, through the Lisbon Treaty for example? [Indecipherable]

JF: First of all, I think the heads of states and governments wanted no real progress therefore they appointed the three persons (Sic.) we have now; that is the head of the Commission; Barrosso, it’s the head of the Council, the former Belgian Prime Minister; Van Rompuy and Foreign Representative; Lady Ashton. And these are extremely weak persons (Sic.), that’s part of the problem. Secondly, of course everything now is dominated by the political crisis of the European Union. Certainly, Germany is playing a very counterproductive role; Libya was a severe push for the common foreign and security policy. Also, in fixing the economic crisis, Germany is playing a very counter-productive role. At the moment, I think we are still at the fringes of an existential crisis for the European Union.

SA: What would be the alternative for these appointments? Say, Tony Blair or the Head of the European Council; Joschka Fischer for EU Prime Minister?

JF: No, that’s not the issue. But there are enough strong persons (sic.), there’s no lack of strong personalities, definitely not.

SA: You just mentioned Libya, and you referred to the German position on Libya against France and Britain, which are criticised publically. I wonder sometimes whether both the situation in the Eurozone and the changing geo-political situation admittingly is the opening for the German question, that is the position of Germany...

JF: The great idea to go back to the old European political system; this brings back the German question, of course it brings it back. Great idea, a great idea; let’s go back.

SA: I’m not advocating that, I’m just asking how you see it?

JF: I agree. This would be the consequence; it would be a real mess for Germany.

SA: Do you see already signs of that occurring in terms of Germany becoming a bit more assertive, for instance, saying that it is more concerned with its own national...

JF: No, I mean, this is not the major challenge. The major challenge is that you don’t know the long-term definition of interests in Germany, because the state is a young state based on a disaster; 1945. And the nation still has a soft core. You know, if you talk to French or an Italian, or a Brit, or a Czech, or a Pole, or whoever, you always know to whom you are talking because you know the long lines; the tradition, the history, political culture, the definition of interests. In Germany it’s more complicated, you never know. Everybody is looking at us, and to be honest I am looking also at us, and asking which direction it will go. At the moment I mean, all the complaints that Germany wants to dominate are completely foolish because no-one wants to dominate. There is more a passive provincialism; ‘don’t ask us, leave us alone; let’s do our business but don’t ask for leadership, for money or whatever, just leave us alone’. It’s more the opposite of dominance.

SA: This means in fact Germany should take more responsibility...

JF: Yes, but this means also, that if they were to take more responsibility, they would do it in a way that would not insult others. I mean, at the moment we are the bully who is kicking on the Greeks who are lying on the ground. And this gives a very bad impression by the way, to all the others that are watching this. There’s a very serious question in there for me as a German. I am so much in favour of a United Europe, because it’s a core of our national interests; in terms of money, it’s about a firm political order which keeps Germany in the centre of Europe, in a constructive position.

SA: Could you elaborate a bit on what Europe, in your view, should look like? We spent a lot of time describing how it is but, what of how it ought to be?

JF: I believe firmly in the United States of Europe. This will not be like the United States of America because their states are much weaker and there are no nations behind the US states. Here we have nations and we can’t deny these nations. Take for example, the Czech nation and the German nation. They existed from about the year 1000 A.D. The first time they lived in their own states in modern times was very late. The nations are a reality we can’t deny. The question is whether as political framework, there should be nation-states or whether there could be a federation, a confederation has never worked in all of history, never ever. The only way would be a federation where these elements in the economic sector, but also in foreign policy, security policy-which must be pooled for a more efficient political structure in the global scheme; I think this would be the United States of Europe. It would really be ‘united states’ and not a federation at the top. That’s the only way; I can’t see a European central state and this would be the alternative. Or what I fear is that we will fall back into the old European state system with all the problems. This would be a disaster for the Europeans.

SA: Would you dare make a prediction on where Europe will be in five to ten years time?

JF: We will overcome the crisis. Maybe we must go through a more severe and deeper crisis but in the end we will overcome it because; if you look to history there is a certain long term rationality in history, ‘long-term’. But the price you have to pay in the time before reaching the long-term goals is the key question. If you look to the beginning of European history, if you look to the beginning of the twentieth century-August 1914 and look then to the year 2000 or 2004 when enlargement took place, you could say at the end the Europeans were on the sunny-side of the twentieth century. But for God’s sake; what price we had to pay for that.

SA: Mr. Fischer, you have been a passionate advocate for Modern Europe; who is your source of inspiration?

JF: Well maybe my generation; which was born in the late 40s and grew up in the 50s and into the Cold War. We could connect the experience of at least the reality of the ruins and remnants and the devastation of the Second World War, the reality of the Cold War and now be the bridge into this post-national ‘EU Europe’. Its history and the understanding of history which drives me.

SA: Mr. Fischer thank-you for your time, it’s been a great pleasure.

JF: Thank-you, my pleasure.