

*Further integration of Europe does not necessarily mean that the nation States will have no power anymore, says Herbert Tombeur, Director in the Policy Section of the Flemish Department of Foreign Affairs. A truly federal system guarantees two levels of self-government: the national sovereignty and that of the whole, the Federation.
(Dutch original published in Belgian newspaper 'De Standaard', dd. 20 Nov. 2012)*

THE EU COULD BE LIKE AN APARTMENT BUILDING

A federal system is not troubled by national agendas

Recently, wrong messages are spread about the federalization of Europe. Some argue that a federal Europe equals the arrival of a Super State that absorbs the sovereignty of the Member States. European top politicians feed this by shouting that Europe should 'integrate' even more.

Integration means mixing and dissolving. Using the word 'integration' and equating it with a Federation, leads to the thought that the nation States will disappear in a federal Europe. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Fortunately, there are experts in federalism. In an interview that appeared in the Dutch newspaper 'De Volkskrant' last October 18th, Martin Schulz, European Parliament President, said: "What we urgently need is what we in Germany call a 'Kompetenzordnung': a precise demarcation of what Brussels, the national States and the regions should do. I propose that the European Government focuses on four policy fields: international trade, Monetary Union, migration and environment. Those are the four biggest challenges of the 21st century. Brussels should return power to the capitals: matters that are clearly not intended for the European level, only generating senseless rules and annoyance."

The current operating system of the European Union (EU) is an intergovernmental system. This means that the Member States, represented by national ministers, come together, to make decisions that apply for all in the EU. A system looking from national interests for a common divisor and in this way imposes European rules.

This operating system worked in 1950 at the start of the EU, but not anymore. The long series 'summits' and treaties prove that. The system works even counterproductive, since citizens feel that it is redundant and even bad when national ministers make decisions for the entire EU, about something what, according to them at least, would be 'integrating'.

Against this system resistance grew slowly everywhere. But that understandable resistance is tripped into a wrong reaction of the national ministers: they gather with a purely national agenda in their pockets. That does not work at all if one has a common target in view.

On the contrary, a federal operating system is not affected by national agendas. Why not? In a federal system two levels of self-government or sovereignty are protected, because any system reform requires unanimity of its members. Each national sovereignty and that of the whole, the Federation, are guaranteed to exist, side by side. This is also possible in the EU. Let me give an example of a federal organization form in the private sector.

Vegetarian eating and water supply

In Belgium and elsewhere, an Association of Co-owners (ACO) exists for the owners of all apartments in a building. In his or her own apartment everyone is sovereign: the furnishing of the space, the use of it, eating as a vegetarian or not and so on. But the concern for the roof of the apartment building, the maintenance of the lifts, the water supply and the cleaning of the halls are common interests. To look after all that is the task of a Board chosen by all co-owners, which decides on the conducting of these shared interests, in return for charging service fees.

All owners decide together about any change in the power of the Board. Separated from your decisions as an individual owner, because the Board of the ACO does not interfere in what you do in your own apartment. In essence, this is a federal form of management. Paying the service charges you lose nothing, you only get something extra, namely the certainty that the roof is not leaking nor collapses, that the lifts work, that water is available, et cetera.

What with the integration? Integration is in this example only relevant at the level of the ACO Board, which makes certain decisions in everybody's interest. Integration does not take place at the level of the co-owners or, speaking of the EU, it would not occur at the Member States level. If the ACO would operate in the same way as the EU does now – enforce integration at the level of the co-owners – then the ACO would prescribe one commune for all owners and residents. That is a kind of integration that most of us do not want.

The intergovernmental system of the EU makes a mess of things, which is harmful for all of us. It prescribes 'top down' – keeping the example – that everyone should take a shower weekly and that no one should read a newspaper on Monday. The EU should free itself from this system and must embrace a federal one.