Elmar Brok: A Voice for European Security

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Elmar Brok



Europe's Past and Future: Elmar Brok on Foreign Policy, Enlargement, and Leadership

In this interview, we have the privilege of speaking with Elmar Brok, a prominent figure in European politics and one of the longest-serving Members of the European Parliament. With a career spanning nearly four decades, Mr Brok has been at the heart of major developments in the EU's foreign and enlargement policy, from German reunification to the Lisbon Treaty. Together,

we will explore his political journey, his reflections on the current challenges facing the European Union, and his vision for its future role in the world.

Theodor Himmel: Mr Brok, thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. I would first like to talk about your career as a European Member of Parliament and understand how you came to this position. At the beginning you were a journalist. Can you tell us why you were interested in journalism and how you got into the business?

Elmar Brok: I first became a member of the Junge Union, Konrad Adenauer's youth organisation, because I had read a book written "German Statesmanship from Bismarck to Adenauer" written by Gordon Craig in the 60s. Adenauer was the first German politician to overcome the narrow nation-state mindset. The next day, I was a member of the youth organisation. I also did what you do as an instructor, reporting on shooting festivals or football matches when I wasn't playing myself to earn some pocket money. That later turned into a traineeship at Deutschlandfunk.

Theodor Himmel: It's very interesting that you mention these initial activities: you wrote something and tried to get a feel for this everyday situation. Were there experiences that later became important to you in your work as a member of parliament in terms of formulation and powers of observation?

Elmar Brok: Of course. It led to me learning the journalism tool, which is no longer modern in the age of social media. I was able to underpin political ambitions and goals with this craft and was quicker in the public eye than some others. I also learnt the right wording on the radio. For example, when journalists want a tone of 1.50 for a news programme, then you notice it's 1.50. It was a useful technique that often helped me. This was a helpful technique that often helped me.

Vincent Sipeer: 1.50 is an interesting term because all the reels, these little video snippets on Instagram and TikTok, are currently being used more and more for political communication and in the political media. Would you have dealt with these social media today?

Elmar Brok: Well, I would have been more interested in the technique of keeping things short, but on the other hand, I don't know if I would have wanted to. Because there are no rest phases, there are no corrections. This race of blaming is unbearable. I'm not sure if I would have wanted to go into politics in this time when it's unlimited to expose someone with lies.

Vincent Sipeer: Looking back on your almost four decades in the European Parliament, are there certain events or formative events which you would put in your top three?

Elmar Brok: These are different events; sometimes they are small events that have had a big impact. Of course, the time of German reunification was of decisive importance. At the time, I was one of the two authors of the European Parliament's declaration on the fall of the Berlin Wall in November. Later still I was the coordinator of the EPP Special Committee on German Unity. Even then, 40% of euro laws had to be taken into account.

That's probably why nobody today remembers that we had to get it through the European Parliament. The nine German states became members of the European Union in October 1990, eleven months after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Poland and other countries had to commit themselves for 14 years.

The other thing, of course, was that I was lucky enough to represent the European Parliament at all intergovernmental conferences and treaty amendment conferences since Maastricht, from the Amsterdam and Nice treaties and the amendment conferences to Lisbon. I also was always one of the two representatives of the European Parliament.

And the third, as Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, I was General Rapporteur for the enlargement of the European Union from 2004 to 2007. I accompanied, supported and took responsibility for the European states that then became members of the European Union. These are certainly three focal points of my political life, and I am very lucky to have been able to do this.

Theodor Himmel: As you were one of the first negotiators of these European treaties from Maastricht to Lisbon, how did you feel about the failure of the European Union Constitution in 2004?

Elmar Brok: A high degree of bitterness. Firstly because of Chirac's unbelievably reckless attitude, who, although he had a two-thirds majority, had done this referendum without need, just to show up the opposition, which was not actually required. This is purely personal, tactical behaviour, which is unbearable. That went well again, and only because the new President Sarkozy and Angela Merkel managed to write the constitutional treaty so well that it was once again in treaty form, but 95 per cent of the content was secured. And that was the Lisbon Treaty. If Angela Merkel hadn't happened to be there at the very beginning of her time as Federal Chancellor, it would have gone wrong. It was the historic leadership of Angela Merkel, and Sarkozy opened the door for this to be achieved.

Theodor Himmel: Many of the EPIS fellows are currently in a phase where they are finishing their studies and trying to integrate themselves into political life. Role models and guidelines are often important. What role models did you have? Did they also come from other political orientations?

Elmar Brok: Well, becoming a politician wasn't my career aspiration at first. I was a member of the Junge Union and the CDU, but I wasn't actively seeking a mandate, or even a European mandate. It didn't take long. I can only advise you against studying political science and then becoming an assistant in order to become a member of parliament. It can lead to a bad mood and disappointment. "I want to be a politician," said one person, and that was the worst we've ever had.

The second point about role models for me was undoubtedly Adenauer and then Helmut Kohl, with whom I was able to work closely. But I had also read a lot about Adenauer in my younger years, and the nature of his policies, the motivation behind them, was decisive. But also many other countries, Robert Schumann, John F. Kennedy and Pope John XXIII with

the Vatican. These were the pop stars of the time on the international stage that we all adored. Kennedy was the new face of a new, fragile world, a movement for civil rights and equality for all. And that has shaped everything decisively:European history but also the question of equality and justice and the rule of law. That's why I get so upset when I see Trump and some of his admirers attacking the rule of law, attacking the independence of the courts. It's the same with Orban or Putin. These people are shaping the future. This is not the free world in which I see Europe, North America and the whole world, and that must always be our goal, always defending on a small scale; that is the current history.

Vincent Sipeer: Speaking of the EU-US relationship, you have always been in favour of close cooperation between these two identities. Would you agree that the relationship has deteriorated because of its complexity?

Elmar Brok: There is no complexity: democracy and the rule of law on the one hand and rejection of these on the other. This complete non-acceptance of the opinions of others. The behaviour at Harvard is intolerable, as is the burning of books.

You can argue about what you do individually but never question the principles of democracy and the rule of law.

In many committees and in Congress I have always admired whether someone was a Republican or a Democrat. It didn't matter; they formed alliances across the ranks; they were friends across all ranks. That was a model for me of how you can live together across party lines. And today they don't talk to each other. There are real issues, as there always are, but overall this atmosphere is unbearable and destroyed.

Theodor Himmel: If we focus again on your work, how did you, as chair of the committee, manage to moderate the overall European interest of the various committee members and deal with the various national interests?

Elmar Brok: That is the task of politics. There are also different interests in the city council. If you only need the New Fountain in the city centre, but the outer district doesn't get a kindergarten, then the whole thing doesn't work and can fall apart. Then it doesn't work in the long term, and there is conflict and no common ground.

I have also represented national interests, but the interests flow together, and here you have to be able to show understanding to colleagues from other countries that it is in your interest to use ours. It's the same in business. I can only negotiate and moderate with France if I know what interests the others have. And if I can find an answer that he is still satisfied with and that I can get along with, then we have the result of the compromise.. But every good negotiator must first know the negotiating position, the starting position, and the historical and cultural background of the other.

The last book by Henry Kissinger, in which he wrote about 10 European leaders he met in his life, is also a contribution about Konrad Adenauer. And he always writes about the term "leadership through modesty", which is no longer understood today in Berlin across party lines. nauer pushed

things through in his own interests but always took the interests of others into account. You don't have to bang on the table to be assertive. I think this understanding is particularly important for the small states.

Kohl once said to me at the Treaty of Amsterdam, "Guys, you're doing everything right; negotiate the treaty, and don't bother me every day so that I trust you. But if you're not careful on the last day of the last summit, if Germany doesn't stand by the small countries, then you've done everything wrong." I will never forget that. Would you ever say that again in Berlin

Vincent Sipeer: What I'd like to look at again in the last three questions, and we're making a small leap here, is peacekeeping and the whole issue of crisis management. How do do you rate the effectiveness of the EU in its peacekeeping and crisis management missions compared to other current ones, such as the UN and NATO?

Elmar Brok: For the first time, the European Union has been in a position to lead a territory of 27 voting states into a voluntary and economically better future and to make war among themselves impossible. In this respect, if you look at European history, peacekeeping is the most successful peacekeeping mission in the history of Europe.

Theodor Himmel: If we look at the Western Balkans as an example of a peacekeeping mission, what role does the EU play in the post-conflict phase in the development of long-term peacebuilding? Does the EU have a responsibility to be a long-term partner there? And if so, how should this responsibility be expressed?

Elmar Brok: Well, it has paid off in 19 years. Slovenia and Croatia are now members of the European Union. And they are relatively successful members of the European Union. Secondly, there have been no more armed conflicts with minor uprisings in Kosovo, for example.

However, we can see that the political structure in most of these states is still very backward. When I look at the development in Albania, I realise that such a narco-city could become strong. When I see how Bosnia and Herzegovina's own constitutional issues are not being resolved. And when I see how things are developing in Serbia, then I have to realise that everything that goes into peace is sewn on the edge.

This has to do with the fact that we are talking too much about EU membership as the only goal. This will now take 30 years with the perspective. Not that they have candidate status and have been given hope. I think that's wrong. But we have to build in intermediate stages that show the people there that we have achieved success by establishing close economic cooperation. For example, by creating the model of a common economy, as in Norway.

Theodor Himmel: You stated that there should be several intermediate stages between the EU and possible states in order to create a rapprochement. Are there any other means that the EU can use in peacekeeping missions?

Elmar Brok: Yes, apart from Kosovo, I don't think we have any more peacekeeping soldiers. This goes far beyond what we are doing with the Western Balkan states. It has successfully grown beyond that. But it has stagnated because the next steps are not being taken.

I have attended a thousand of these conferences, where our foreign minister and our enlargement commissioner made reports. These are called "progress reports". For 35 years we have been making progress reports on the progress of the relationship with the membership of the European Union. That is 35 years of progress without getting anywhere. In my opinion, it doesn't have credibility with people.

Instead, there are intermediate strategies that you can agree on. And then everyone can decide whether to go for pre-membership or not. That's what we had with the EFTA, which also dissolved because it was unsuccessful. Great Britain, Ireland and Denmark, former members of the EFTA, joined the EU early on.

Great Britain has now left the EU,, but the other countries have all negotiated their way into the European Economic Area first. And then the Austrians, the Swedes and the Finns used it as a base camp to negotiate with the member states.

As I said with the European Economic Area, for example, we did it bilaterallyor in a slightly different way with Switzerland and, at some point, Norway. They turned it into cooperation and are happy with that.

Theodor Himmel: How do you see the future development of European foreign policy? Should the European Union continue with the mechanisms with the attitude it currently has?

Vincent Sipeer: The European Union must change, as everything must change. It must become more capable of acting. It must turn conditions for enlargement into good forms of enlargement. We must have better decision-making options.

The European Union is good wherever it has a majority decision. That includes the European internal market and cross-border tax policy, but especially in foreign and security policy, where we have these obstacles due to unanimity, which are blocking and not conducive. If you have a cohesion effect, a veto, or or a training effect, this must be overcome with other decision-making methods.

We must have flexibility with the Treaty of Lisbon, with enhanced cooperation, a coalition of the willing and a permanent structure of cooperation in defence. But it is not used sufficiently. One thing can be done via the passerelle, which is listed in a number of points. We can thus arrive at other decision-making mechanisms without amending the treaty.

But all of this needs to be tackled courageously and not just talked about. I hope today that the new federal chancellor will once again join forces with Tusk and Macron as a leading power. We must take the Poles on board in order to have these structural changes.

You only have to read the Draghi Report. The question of procurement,, for example, is one of our important strategic issues. We have now decided on 400 billion euros, as long as possible for defence.

But there are 180 European weapons systems. Everything is produced here in Germany and Europe in small quantities with thousands of different variations. For some reason, we are not making any progress. And do you see the starting points, apart from making fine speeches, for actually changing this? We have a Treaty of Lisbon, the European Defence Agency, which can do this. Everything is planned, and all this is lying around in a hut, not moving forward because we don't have people like Kohl or Mitterrand to organise it, to get a grip on it.

Theodor Himmel: You just mentioned strategic autonomy in relation to President Macron's proposals. If you summarise this, what are the key capabilities that the EU has lacked to date in order to be able to act globally?

Elmar Brok: Clearly the decision-making mechanisms,, and Ms von der Leyen has done nothing so far to improve the structures. She has even rejected the proposals from the Commission itself, which were discussed substantially and given a council together with the parliament to organise an intergovernmental conference.

And the other point is that we must have a new difference in our interests from the previous European concepts of security: military, defence, foreign policy, trade policy, economic policy, and geopolitics.

Finally, the trade agreements with Mercosur, India with the Philippines, India Australia is also safe politics in the high style, and that must first be found.

We must do a much better job of implementing this strategic unity. Trump and Putin want to drive the European Union apart. They prefer to deal with the individual states; they say that too. But if we look at it as a single entity and also pursue a common policy, the common strength that gives us in this new world order in which there are world powers is no longer three – China, the USA and Russia – but four.

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