

OPINION EUROPE

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Obama's Lisbon Agenda

The U.S. president is implementing what the European Union has been working on since the beginning of this decade.

By ANN METTLER

Nowhere was Barack Obama's call for "change" more popular than in Europe, where his electoral platform of transforming the economy to meet the challenges of the 21st century -- such as climate change, an ageing population and skills shortages -- was met with great enthusiasm.

Consider Mr. Obama's proposed recipes: green growth, investment in education, technology and science to bolster health systems, sustainable energy, eco-innovation, and human capital. Sounds familiar? Of course it is, it's a blueprint for economic and social development that is virtually identical with the European Union's much-maligned Lisbon Agenda. How ironic that Europeans could be so inspired by a vision that they have been working on since the beginning of this decade.

Granted, there has never been a European Obama who could so eloquently formulate such a compelling and visionary narrative. But nonetheless, it points to the colossal communication failure accompanying this key EU strategy. Coming up for a relaunch in 2010, European leaders would be well advised to take a few lessons from the new U.S. president.

First and foremost, Mr. Obama walked the talk. Instead of just preaching the importance of technology, he actually used technology, deploying innovative, Web 2.0-based platforms to reach out to voters, making them part of the process and giving them ownership of their future.

His Web site "My.BarackObama.com" was conceived and manned by Chris Hughes, the 24-year old co-founder of Facebook, and was designed to capitalize on people's increasing interest in social networking and collaborative tools. Mr. Obama practiced innovation instead of just talking about it.

This is in stark contrast to the European way of fabricating carefully negotiated, top-down messages, cooked up by political elites and vested interests. Mr. Obama understood that an agenda that advocates societal change needs broad acceptance and genuine understanding. It cannot be driven forward in seclusion with uninspiring messages delivered by a handful of bureaucrats and politicians.

Of course, turning the vision of the Lisbon Agenda into action needs above all investment on a massive scale. Making a low-carbon, knowledge-based economy a reality is the modern equivalent of a second industrial revolution. Mr. Obama acted accordingly and decided to allocate over \$90 billion of the recently enacted stimulus package for education spending, while some \$30 billion will go to information and communication technology, with the goal of computerizing medical records, creating smarter electrical grids and expanding high-speed Internet access. The ICT investment alone could result in as many as 900,000 new jobs in the first year, according to a study produced by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation.

Compare that to the acrimonious haggling recently over €5 billion of unused EU funds the European Commission wanted to invest in sustainable energy and Internet projects. While the European Commission finally succeeded, there is in general much to be desired about the stimulus packages across the EU, which for the most part are more concerned about protecting old industries and big business rather than empowering the innovative players and growth sectors of the future -- not to mention the EU budget, which still allocates the lion share to agricultural subsidies.

While we are still very much in the middle of this global economic crisis and it is hard to see what kind of world will emerge from the rubble, a few trends are clear. The global winners will be countries that pay heed to Lisbon Agenda priorities, such as nurturing talent and human capital; that get serious about building a low-carbon economy; that invest in the future areas of growth -- health, biotech, education, sustainable energy; and that embrace innovation and empower entrepreneurs.

In other words, nothing has really changed from the beginning of this decade when European policy makers identified these goals. The only change is that pursuing these goals has become more urgent than ever before.

President Obama understands this and is now tackling many of the issues that we Europeans have only been talking about for years. Perhaps it can serve as a much-needed wake-up call to turn a powerful and enlightened vision into a practical, compelling and inclusive policy blueprint also for Europe. The post-2010 Lisbon Agenda should be guided by two principles: "Live What You Preach" and "Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is." It's an opportunity that European leaders cannot afford to miss.

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