



INSTITUTE OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRATS

# Building Europe: networks, nations, and citizens

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Working Paper

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## Introduction

The current state of the European integration project is paradoxical. On the one hand, crises keep piling up, sometimes cooling down, but without ever being decisively solved, until they heat up again and again. On the other hand, the relevance of uniting Europe beyond transactional inter-state relations has never seemed so strong and concrete.

For the first time, a major country, the United Kingdom, has decided to leave this project<sup>1</sup>. While not enough considered as such from the EU point of view, this is a major crisis with far-reaching consequences (especially with regard to the EU's weight on the world stage). Moreover, this crisis is developing in a messy and unpredictable manner, as it is likely that the UK will need a long transition period. But the difficulties of Brexit and its disastrous impact on Britain itself have also shown why it made sense to “build Europe” in the first place; since the referendum, polls have shown in the remaining countries a clear reversal of the decline in support for the EU. Many of the Euro structural problems remain unsolved, with frustratingly slow progress in even discussing them, let alone addressing them. But, contrary to many expectations, the common currency did not break apart and, when faced with the explicit choice of leaving it, populist governments or parties relented. The rise of populist parties and the establishment of illiberal governments in some countries is a direct threat to the proper functioning and thus the survival of the EU; but it also reminds of the importance of having fundamental rights guaranteed at a higher level than the nation-state, in order to avoid the tyranny of the majority. The war in Ukraine and the isolationism of the USA under Donald Trump have laid bare the weakness of the EU in terms of raw power and the fragility of its reliance on NATO; but these developments have triggered new pan-European initiatives, such as the permanent structured cooperation, as well as a deep change of attitude in Germany with regard to military power. Even the refugees and migrants crises, the most acute and intractable at the time of writing, while exposing national egoisms have also shown that it was illusory to pretend dealing with huge population movements in a national or inter-governmental framework, as they necessarily impact all countries, through domino effects.

These paradoxes themselves are confusing and debilitating, even more than the related crises. Crises are normal for political entities of all sizes, and the bigger the entity the more complex and interrelated they are. They can be caused by internal structural inadequacies requiring reforms, or they can be external shocks for which one should prepare, and which should be faced with resilience when they do happen. Currently, Europeans find it hard, as a community, to distinguish what they are doing wrong vs. what is already relevant and a proper basis to be preserved and reinforced. The purpose of this essay is therefore to discuss “How to build Europe?” in terms of methods, tools, and principles, rather than exhaustive and detailed policy proposals. Given the context of this writing and the fields of expertise of the author, a particular weight will be given to geopolitics and to the German, French, and Polish perspectives. Beyond these limitations, the goal is to isolate general principles and ways of dealing with the complexity of the European system, which could be reused with other scopes and starting points.

First, we will consider Europe as a whole, and the failed attempts through history to unify it as unitary entity. Zooming in, we will explore in more details two mechanisms for collaboration between states within its current structure: the Weimar triangle and the Visegrad group. The second part of this essay will contain a negative analysis. While written from a resolutely pro-integration perspective, we need to be able to think the possibility of failure of this project as well as the criticism of its essence or mechanisms, which has become so loud over the last decade. The goal is to go beyond parroting that “there is no alternative” and “more Europe is the solution to all problems”, by considering the threat of illiberal global powers, the destructive effects of the Euro on European integration, and the populist criticism of “Brussels”. Finally we will develop a vision of a Europe interconnected with its neighbourhood and the rest of the world, which would be able to wage war or prevent it, and which would solve the tensions between nation, elite and democracy via an educated European citizenship.

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<sup>1</sup>Greenland, a constituent country of Denmark, left the European Economic Community in 1982.

## Europe, a space for networks

### ***The connected peninsula***

The biggest democracy on earth covers and organizes an Eurasian peninsula. It contains a stunning diversity of landscapes, cultures, and languages. While it is for millennia intimately related to a particular religion, it is also home to other spiritualities, and the temptation to reduce it to this peaceful religion systematically leads to violence. It was inspired and was made possible by visionary men and women committed to peace and non-violence. We are of course talking here about India, implicitly pointing out the similarities with the other big Eurasian peninsula, which is our subject of study. While many of these similarities could be inspiring and provide a good basis for much closer relationships between India and the EU, let's rather focus on the differences from a geographical point of view.

The Indian subcontinent is a southward-oriented peninsula which is directly bounded by huge natural obstacles: the Himalayas mountain range in the north; the whole extent of the Indian Ocean in the south with nothing beyond it, down to Antarctica; the Iranian plateau to the west; and the jungles of south-eastern Asia to the east. India was always been bound to neighbouring regions, but mostly by long-range sea travel. The European peninsula, oriented westward, is part of a bigger system, which we could call the Euro-Mediterranean-Volga-Mesopotamian system (EuroMed, for short). This is this system which is bounded by huge obstacles: the Sahara and Arabian deserts in the south; the Arctic in the north; the tundra, steppes and deserts of middle Asia to the east; and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. The obstacles to the south and east were never insurmountable, and just as India was always connected to the rest of Asia, the EuroMed system was always connected to other parts of Asia and Africa, via caravans. But until fairly recently most of the exchanges (and conflicts) have taken place within this system. After the great discoveries of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and until the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, one could argue that even the Americas got somehow integrated into the system, with the Atlantic Ocean suddenly narrow enough to become another "mare nostrum".

Here lies the difficulty of determining what the borders of Europe are. Given the complex shape of the European peninsula and its interconnectedness with the rest of the EuroMed system, parts of it have been regularly as much integrated with outside of it than with it. While the Roman empire had and still has a significant impact on Europe, this was not a European but a Mediterranean empire; Andalusia and the Balkans have been parts of Islamic empires; the Soviet Union was integrating Eastern Europe with Central Asia; and in a quote attributed to Winston Churchill, Britain would rather choose the open sea than Europe. But, contrary to India where the vegetation and distance to the sea prevented the development of the centre, Central Europe has always been intimately connected with the dynamics of Europe. From the diffusion of the Hallstatt culture in the iron age to the industrialization of Bohemia and Silesia, the interconnection of the great Rhine, Elbe and Danube waterways as well as the relative proximity of the Baltic and Adriatic seas made it naturally a very connected area of the connected peninsula.

Central Europe is therefore an interesting area from which to observe the repeated failures to unify Europe within a unitary state or under the hegemony of a single power. As it must be controlled in order to control Europe, the same reasons that make the area prosperous and vibrant in times of peace and stability make it suffer a lot in times of generalized war and weaken it when Europe is divided. The War of Investiture, a struggle for primacy between the Pope and the Emperor in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, caused civil wars and revolts; the Thirty Year's War against the Hapsburg hegemony during the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century left Central Europe in ruins; many of Napoleon's decisive victories were in the region (Austerlitz, Jena, Wagram, ...); Hitler annexed Austria and the Sudetes, before invading Czechoslovakia and then Poland, triggering the Second World War. Finally, the Cold War can be seen as a static struggle against the potential hegemony of the Soviet Union in Europe, given its control of the Eastern half of it, and the strength of the Communists in France and Italy (and Greece) after the war. It led to the disastrous division of Central Europe by the Iron Curtain.

### ***Weimar and Visegrád: coalition of the (un)willing vs. Mitteleuropa***

The "Weimar Triangle" and the Visegrád Group are two distinct networks of European states which were created in the aftermath of the Cold War in order to deal with the (re)integration of Central Europe within the European system. Both were established in 1991, the Weimar Triangle as an informal grouping of France,

Germany and Poland, the Visegrád Group as regular summits of the heads of government of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia (becoming after 1993 the Czech Republic and Slovakia). While the Weimar Triangle never had much impact and is now widely considered irrelevant, the Visegrád Group has steadily fulfilled its limited purpose, with a rotating presidency changing each year since its creation, and its members clearly identified as such in political and academic circles. It is therefore interesting to study which structural reasons lead to these outcomes, as well as what it can tell us about the possibilities and limitations offered by the European Union in its current form, in order to “build Europe”.

The most striking feature of the Visegrád Group is its pragmatism. While its members are all developed Central European countries with a rich culture and history, the point was not romanticism and pretending mythical bonds between them, as is often the case in national narratives. Three of these countries speak relatively close Slavic languages, while Hungarian is unrelated to most other European languages. Three of them were entirely contained within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but it was never really seriously considered to have Austria joining<sup>2</sup>. The original purpose was a common will to join as soon as possible the transatlantic alliance and the European integration process (which was irrelevant for Austria, a neutral country which was then about to join the EU). Beyond their differences (for example, Poland has a bigger population than the three other countries combined) and the subsequent changes of political orientations of their governments, these countries were realistic about the long-term challenges they would face with the transition of their economies and with their political integration within the existing Western structures.

Rather than an alliance, the Visegrád Group is truly a mechanism for cooperation: there is nothing to be lost and a lot to be gained by exchanging and by coordinating policies when appropriate. Interestingly, the institutional structures were kept at the bare minimum, with only regular summits organized by the rotating presidency, and the International Visegrád Fund for cultural and scientific cooperation as their sole formal institution with a regular budget. At the time of writing, each of these countries is going through a tense phase with regards to some core values of the European project: Poland on the rule of law, Hungary on its promotion of “illiberal democracy”, Slovakia after the assassination of a journalist working on exposing corruption, and the Czech Republic with a controversial new leader who is one of the richest persons in the country. But the relative success and durability of the Visegrád Group actually exemplifies one of the great benefits of the European Union for its member states, especially for the smaller ones which joined recently: a space allowing to build informal but sustained networks where such networks can be relevant, without the overhead and complexity of additional institutions and the constraints of traditional alliances. And without having to give up or compromise on national identity.

By contrast, the Weimar Triangle is/was based on an idea which sounds good in theory but is not really grounded in the reality of the needs, incentives, and perceptions of its constitutive parties. The idea was that, given its size, Poland would be the natural leader of the Central and Eastern European countries on their way to join the EU, and that it would make sense to associate it with the French-German motor, which had always been the biggest driver of integration. Already with this formulation (and, arguably, also with the benefit of hindsight) one can see a lot of misconceptions. First, given their recent history, the recently freed nation-states of Central Europe were definitely not looking for a leader, and Poland was not inclined to have such a role. As we have seen, the Visegrád Group works on a completely different logic, with all states being treated equally and assuming the intrinsic limitations of this format<sup>3</sup>.

Second, the reunification of Germany and the enlargement to the east would drastically change the dynamics and equilibria within the European Union, challenging the centrality of the French-German motor for two reasons: Germany was about to become significantly bigger than France, and this motor was too western-oriented while Germany would switch from being a peripheral front-line to being at the geographical and economic centre of a (re)unified Europe. Almost thirty years after the fall of communism, this is a development that successive French governments still fail to acknowledge and convey to their fellow citizens.

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<sup>2</sup>Although this has already been suggested, most recently by the leader of the Austrian far-right party FPÖ, which is part of the ruling coalition.

<sup>3</sup>For example, in 2017, the other Visegrád Group states did not support Poland when its government tried to block the re-election of Donald Tusk as President of the European Council, obviously for internal political reasons.

Finally, this triangle is/was not balanced in terms of prioritizations and expectations. Actually this is Germany, given the position described above, which has an interest in a close relationships with its two big neighbours and former foes. While its relationship with France is certainly the deepest bilateral relationship between member states, Germany has often been frustrated in its relationship with Poland, especially with the current government, which has provocatively reopened old wounds by asking for reparations related to the Second World War, in stark contrast with the spirit of reconciliation between France and Germany. But the weakest (political) link is between France and Poland, probably due to the lack of interest and understanding by French political elites with regard to the issues of the new member states, especially in the field of security. While French companies have invested significantly and with success in many Central and Eastern European countries, at the political level the tone goes from indifference to insulting, with the quip of Jacques Chirac in 2003 about their “lack of education” doing lasting damage.

The last meeting of the heads of state and governments of the Weimar Triangle was in 2011; in 2016, Poland’s foreign minister explicitly declared that it had lost its relevance. However, the idea to revive it comes back again and again, most recently when Chancellor Angela Merkel met Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki after taking office for her fourth mandate<sup>4</sup>. In February 2014, at the height of the Euromaidan crisis in Ukraine, the Weimar Triangle could have had a huge impact, when its foreign ministers succeeded in bringing the government and the protesters to negotiate a compromise<sup>5</sup>. But during subsequent developments the main European diplomatic tool became the so-called “Normandy Format” (Russia, Ukraine, Germany, France), which de facto excludes Poland on a matter where it has many interests at stake. The fact that it has these interests and a clearly articulated position against Russia is also the reason why it has been excluded, but then, wasn’t it supposed to be the whole point of the Weimar Triangle to coordinate powerful countries on eastern matters?

## ***The Italian Journey***

From our focus on Central Europe we have underlined a few points which are relevant for the broader European system: the quest for a unitary overarching hegemon in Europe is inherently a factor of instability; pragmatic grouping of states can prove durable and relevant, as long as they have a clear purpose and align the right incentives; such networks are actually consistent with the EU considered as a space of shared norms, and they do not threaten it. There are quite a few other groupings of states within the EU which broadly fall into two categories, either geographical (Visegrád Group, Benelux, Nordic States, etc.) or sharing a common property (eurozone, founding states, etc.)<sup>6</sup>.

Two relatively recent such networks are interesting in light of our harsh analysis of the Weimar Triangle. The Ventotene Format groups France, Italy and Germany, and the Trimarium Initiative groups the Visegrád countries, Austria, the Baltic countries, and the EU countries of the Western and Eastern Balkans<sup>7</sup>. The latter as been described by some as a counterweight to the power of Germany, especially since Donald Trump took part to their second summit in Warsaw in July 2017. Whether this qualification is appropriate or not, there is no doubt that the power of Germany is currently causing resentment in the EU and has become one of the hard-to-solve problems that we are currently facing. This unbalance does not stem from a will to hegemony, but from structural factors, which make it hard even for the Germans to correct it. Given the intergovernmental nature of the EU, especially in the fields which have been the most problematic over the last decade, Germany has an incentive to defend its own interest, and its sheer size, prosperity, and central position make that it will prevail more often than not. Once again, Europe is facing a “German problem” (too

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<sup>4</sup>“Weimarer Dreieck – So wichtig wie nie” (“The Weimar Triangle – More important than ever”) in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung from March 29<sup>th</sup> 2018.

<sup>5</sup>The systematic killings of protesters, right after this compromise was negotiated, led to the messy fall of the government, which then provided the narrative justifying the annexation of Crimea by Russia and its intervention in Eastern Ukraine.

<sup>6</sup>A recent study (in German) of the Foundation for Science and Politics (SWP) analyses this theme in depth, “Minilateralism in der EU” (“Minilateralism in the EU”, January 2018). It is argued that while there is a risk that the multiplication of these formats reinforces an intergovernmentalism which is detrimental to EU integration, it also allows to overcome some of the problems created by the big increase in the number of member states: issues can be “pre-processed” and pre-negotiated within these informal forums and networks.

<sup>7</sup>Trimarium stands for “three seas” (Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea)

big to be equal, to small to dominate), even despite itself. While France used to balance it, we have seen that this approach is outdated.

As we have seen too, the Weimar Triangle failed because its claimed purpose was not sufficiently relevant for all its members. It is not unlikely that the Ventotene Format will suffer the same fate (so far there was only one summit). But if we consider coldly the original idea of the Weimar Triangle to be actually a way to balance Germany and stabilize Central Europe, maybe these two approaches should be merged in order to obtain a truly relevant forum of four big member states (Germany, France, Italy and Poland) with a stake in the prosperity and stability of the “core”/centre of Europe, while being connected and representative of the “periphery” (north, west, south, east). The point would of course not be to bypass the EU institutions, but to go beyond the outdated French-German motor, the irrelevant Weimar Triangle, and the powerlessness felt by southern countries, while providing a credible balance to Germany when pre-negotiating issues<sup>8</sup>. Just like the greatest inhabitant of Weimar, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, took a break from the city for his “Italian Journey”, the central European powers should look more south in order to stabilize Europe.

## **Towards Europe v2.2**

### ***The problem with the Europe of Maastricht***

By definition, a system is made out of many components interacting with each other. These components make sense in themselves, have their own characteristics, capabilities, and constraints, and they don't have to be atomic (that is, they can sometimes be themselves considered as systems). But at some point, the system, as their sum plus their structure and articulation towards some given purposes, becomes an object as such, with its own life cycle. In systems engineering, and especially in the field of information technology, this is where versioning becomes very important: giving a version and updating this version according to some rules prevents the inherent anarchy coming from complexity. An example of such versioning, which started as some marketing concept and became widely known and popular, is “Web 2.0”. We will use an analogy between this evolution of the Internet and the evolution of the European Union.

Internet is the network of networks. A network connects computers together, and Internet connects globally these networks, making computer resources shareable and potentially available to anyone. The concept of Web 2.0 describes the evolution during the years 2000's of the dissemination of information. The top-down web pages of the 1990's, with only limited user inputs via forms, became fluid two-ways exchanges between the end-users and the web servers, and therefore between the end-users themselves. This evolution was made possible by progresses in web technologies (innovations unleashed by their standardization, after Microsoft's attempts at monopoly were thwarted) and gave rise to social media, as well as to remotely accessible productivity applications (software as a service, or SaaS).

Europe v1.0 was the European Economic Community (EEC). From the 1950's to the 1980's, visionary thinkers, politicians, magistrates, and civil servants laid the solid foundations upon which the EU is built. Similarly, Internet is still built upon the standards and many low-level software written between the 1970's and the 1990's (such as the Internet Protocol, or the GNU/Linux operating system). And similarly to the Internet of the 1990's, while the European integration project was a well-known and important theme, it was not really used and experienced on a day-to-day basis by the vast majority of people. Its benefits would trickle-down via the member states. The citizens were on the receiving end, but living in their traditional national context.

The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, which was prepared throughout the 1980's, was Europe v2.0. The project changed its name (to “European Union”) and became much more ambitious, aiming at covering fields such as monetary policy and defence, which were at the heart of the sovereignty of the member states. This did not work that well. It has now been two decades that we keep trying to correct the problems of the system that was put in place, just like a buggy software system which would have been put in production too early, and that can only be fixed incrementally, often adding new bugs on the way. During the years following the Treaty of Maastricht, there was a flurry of new treaties every few years, tweaking the institutional set-up. A clear-eyed attempt to put issues back on the table and to write a proper Constitution failed, and its main practical provisions were introduced by the back-door in yet another incremental treaty, the Treaty of Lisbon.

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<sup>8</sup>Bozen/Bolzano in South-Tyrol could be a nice location for this quadrilateral...

There are two fundamental problems with the Europe v2.0 that what put in place in 1992. The first one is the great accident of history that took place between 1989 and 1991, with the fall of Communism and the disappearance of the threatening Soviet Union. As we have seen, it was clear from the start that these events would have a deep impact on Europe and its integration, with the enlargement to new members and a necessarily different security architecture. It was also clear that these evolutions would take decades before a new equilibrium would be found. But because the preparation of the Treaty of Maastricht took place shortly before or while the events were unfolding, their likely consequences were not factored in. The decision mechanisms were not meant for plenty of countries of various sizes; the Euro, and the constraints built around it, such as its mandatory nature, were not meant for transition countries; the Common Security and Defence Policy was not meant for a unipolar world, let alone a multipolar one.

The second problem is structural. The architecture that was put in place is a kind of half-baked federalism, which, critically, falls short of clearly providing the highest level with an all-compassing sovereignty. The structure is hierarchical like in traditional federal systems such as the Federal Republic of Germany or the United States of America, but the highest federal level does not have its own independent financial means and direct democratic legitimacy. De facto, this highest level is the European Council, thus putting its members in a difficult and unstable situation: on the one hand they must act for the general European interest, but on the other hand their democratic mandate is to defend the interests of the individual member states they represent.

It must be noted that of the “three pillars” (community, economic, security) the two which have been problematic or frustrating are the intergovernmental ones. The community pillar (which covers norms, competition, trade, etc.), which is much more “federal”, continues to work more or less properly. However there is a chicken and egg problem here: the other two pillars are certainly problematic because they are intergovernmental; but they are intergovernmental precisely because the issues they deal with are much more related to the sovereignty of a state. Underlining the problem, doesn’t mean implying an obvious solution, the “saut fédéral”, which would create a proper United States of Europe, with all the attributes of a federal state. As we have seen, beyond nationalism and populist scaremongering, there are many historical reasons to be reluctant to force the unification of Europe into one overarching structure (that is, before it would emerge organically which would probably take generations). We need to find other approaches, building on the long history of Europe, its nations, and its transnational networks, and on the legacy of the European integration project itself. Such approaches must be less ambitious (meaning: less hubristic) than a mindless and increasingly unrealistic “ever closer union”, but they should also be more creative.

## ***The World won't wait for us***

While the EU was struggling with the issues that we have described, the world has changed, with an accelerating pace over the last decade. Except for the largely successful enlargement, the Europeans have been unable to shape these changes according to their values and interests. This is especially true and costly in the European neighbourhood. When the Arab Spring started in 2011, the EU was distracted and introverted because of the Euro crisis, and it missed the opportunity to use its enormous wealth and power of attraction to nudge with carrot and stick the existing elites and the emerging political movements towards peace, stability, and a transition to democracy. The current destructiveness and intractability of the refugees crisis is also a good reminder that doing nothing, or too little, can also have huge long-term costs.

The problem is that time has now run out and the EU is facing two direct external threats to its very survival as a political entity. The first one is the aggressive behaviour of the current Russian government. The strength of Russia should not be overestimated: its economy is as big as the Benelux, and the Ukrainians have shown that the Russian army could be effectively stopped, even in its “near abroad”. The current Russian leadership is the only one among the significant powers which has effective training and experience with security issues in the broader sense: they are very realistic about their leverage as well as their limitations. The best that they can do (from their zero-sum game perspective) is to steadily weaken the European Union where they can, in order to extend their zone of influence. The most visible is their destabilization of Ukraine and Georgia, and the implicit threat of creating an exhausting arc of instability from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. They also have systematically supported political forces in Europe which were against the project of European integration, and they have shamelessly “weaponized” the stream of refugees from Syria by supporting, first diplomatically, and then militarily, the scorched-earth policy of Bashar al-Assad. If the EU were a proper

power, with a proper military, it should react more forcibly so as to make such policies more costly. Economic sanctions have their effectiveness, but one should not underestimate how immensely rich the individuals who actually hold power in Russia already are (so, the marginal effect on their economic utility even of huge losses is limited), and how resilient the Russian population can be. On the long run, Russia is a great potential partner for the EU and its current leaders are wasting its potential and weakening it, especially with regard to the rise of China. If the EU were a proper power, with a proper diplomacy, it should study carefully the emergence of new elites and keep the door of partnership open to them, while ruthlessly treat the ageing ones as pariahs.

The second clear and present danger facing the EU in its survival is the strategy currently deployed by Donald Trump to effectively transform the EU member states from partners to vassals of the USA. The American disengagement from Europe is a process which has started from some time already, also under Barack Obama, and which is likely to continue even with a change of government. This is not necessarily a bad thing as such, as it could steadily push the Europeans to gather their capabilities into a proper European pillar of NATO (or of a broader alliance of the liberal democracies). But while Vladimir Putin should not be overestimated, Donald Trump should not be underestimated: his political acumen is real and it is not impossible that he gets re-elected in 2020. He has a rational strategy with regard to international affairs. His reasoning is that since the USA is from far the biggest military power in the world, it should make the most out of it and bully smaller countries into submission. Of course, such a view underestimates the fact that the USA are so powerful also because many other powers let them gather such power, as long as it was used to underwrite a rules-based international order. But his obsession with what NATO countries should pay should not be taken lightly, as it is sliding from the classical American demand that these countries spend more on their military to a comparison with their trade surplus with the USA. Beyond the absurdity of this comparison, this may look more and more like a protection racket or a form of feudalism, with the USA as the suzerain. In any case, Donald Trump and those supporting such a world view based on the raw balance of power have every rational interest to prevent the emergence of a proper European power, in order to divide and rule. This can already be seen with how disparagingly EU officials are treated, and with the shocking activism of the new American ambassador to Germany.

While the EU should continue to engage with countries throughout the world and with international organizations, in support of a rule-based international order, it should be realistic about its priorities and capacities. On the long run, China is a threat for the EU because its development model is a viable and contradictory alternative to the values that Europeans promote as universal and which are shaping their way of life. But in the short run, there seem to be some convergence of interests with China, and if their rivalry with the USA intensifies, Europe should not get embroiled in a conflict which could be disastrous for the whole of mankind. The partnership with emerging powers or groups of countries which are closer to our values should be intensified and be dealt with at the EU level, rather than through bilateral relationships. The greatest challenge of our time, the protection of the environment from restraining climate change to preserving biodiversity can only be dealt with at the global level.

As we have seen, Europe is a connected Eurasian peninsula. While the USA, or even China, can dream of isolationism, this is not an option for the Europeans. The realistic priority of the EU as a power should be to deal with its neighbourhood, this wide EuroMed space that we have defined at the beginning of this essay. The first reason is that this neighbourhood is currently in fire and we will keep suffering from the consequences if we don't force its stabilization, also by military means or the credible capability to do it that way as well. More often than not, this is war which has built political entities and bound their diverse populations through a common history of suffering and heroism. No one wishes to build Europe that way, but this is not unlikely that we will have no choice. If such a time comes, for the European Union to have the effective power to decide and fight war, may be the only way to avoid it.

After this call to realism and to acknowledge the seriousness of the geopolitical situation as it is currently evolving, let's insist that the biggest strength of the European Union is its openness, its respect for human rights, its commitment to international cooperation, and its refusal of imperialism. Talking of core Europe versus its periphery is a mistake: this is not a periphery, this is the interface to a space we belong to. Over the next decades, Africa has a huge potential, and it is steadily progressing, even if usually two steps forward and one step backward. Eurasia is getting more and more integrated, notably through massive Chinese investments. Let's not be naive, but let's not be afraid.



## ***Citizens as the elite***

If one takes the time to listen carefully to the populists' criticism of the European Union and to observe how it effectively resonates with the people, it boils down to a few themes: the fear of having one's identity dissolved into an entity one does not relate to; the feeling that remote bureaucratic elites have too much power; and that the economy is the sole guiding principle of the European integration. There is much hypocrisy and falsehood contained in such statements. Nation-states are by far the most powerful entities at the European level; the European institutions, and especially the European parliament are much more transparent and less corrupt than most national political systems; and the EU is dealing with other matters than the economy, while within this field it is far from being always on the side of powerful companies or lobbies (as can be seen more and more clearly with for example the end of roaming fees or the GDPR privacy directive).

However, dismissing such concerns out of hand is wrong in principle, and it is often underestimated how effectively this feeds these narratives in practice. First, federalism (even the half-baked variety we are dealing with) should be described as a decentralisation, which can dispatch powers back and forth between the European, national, regional and local levels. Even when it is well meant, "ever closer union" can easily be interpreted as contradictory with this principle of subsidiarity. If something doesn't work that well at a given level, why not acknowledge it, and move it to another one, possibly back to where it used to be?

More generally, nations should be more promoted and discussed as such, independently of the states they are bound to, in order to make clear that the European project is not a threat to them. Such discussions should lead to acknowledge that the concept of nation is irrational and therefore very personal: everyone can choose what she or he puts into what it means to be French, Polish, Basque, Scot, Silesian, or Rom. A nation is first and foremost a community of people sharing this feeling of belonging, and as such it is legitimate that it requires some form of statehood. But as we have seen during the Catalan crisis, or throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or possibly with the Hungarian speaking population of Romania in the future, etc. this positive feeling of community and solidarity can lead to conflict if the link to the related political entities is too rigid and exclusive. This is a difficult subject, which requires patience and understanding, but one way to build Europe is also to convince people that the European space is a fantastic opportunity of expression and development for the nations they belong to.

It is doubtful that the Euro is the right way to "build Europe". While it is a useful tool, and has proved successful and robust (even during the worst moments of the Euro crisis, its value stayed remarkably stable), the problem is that it has become too central for the European project. Having the same currency in the pocket certainly contributes to a feeling of belonging to a common entity, but does it compensate for the fact that a given set of economic policy has been set in stone? The main purpose of the Euro was to anchor other economies to the monetary stability that the Deutsche Mark had reached. It is extremely worthwhile, and many countries, when faced with the possibility of exiting the Euro did their utmost to stay within it. But, on principle, it should be a policy, rather than an article of faith and a core principle of the European integration. Finally, the bureaucratic hypertrophy of the Brussels bubble is a real issue. The problem is not so much the size (the European Commission has less civil servants than the city of Paris) than the aloofness and self-righteousness. The answer to the critics on the recent nomination of a new Secretary General, was typical: pages of legal argumentation, and a steady refusal to even acknowledge that it was legitimate for eyebrows to be raised in this particular case, just at a time when populists are rising all over Europe.

Democracy is not primarily about voting systems and the balance of power between various levels of government. More deeply, this is about the ability to listen to the opinions of others while assuming that something useful can come out of it. This is what we have tried to do with the previous paragraphs, and there should be more mechanisms to bypass mechanical consensus and create working feedback loops between citizens and the European level of government. Europe v2.2<sup>9</sup>, a correction rather than a rewriting of the EU

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<sup>9</sup>One may ask: why v2.2, and not v2.1? A common versioning scheme (notably used by Apache httpd, the most widely used web server) is to consider even minor numbers (v2.0, v2.2, etc.) as stable versions, and uneven minor numbers (v2.1, v2.3, etc.) as development/unstable versions. So, we could say that we are now in Europe v2.1, an unstable development cycle, where trial and error is inefficient and frustrating, but steady progress is being made. The analogy cannot be pushed too far though: in software engineering, such developments are performed on a separate

that was put in place in the early 1990's, should give more power to networks and less to hierarchies. Rather than ad-hoc citizens consultations with no real power and organized at the national level, how can we give regional and local elected officials more access to the EU institutions? How can we help them to connect with other even more across national borders, or via shared thematics? How can we foster more civil-society, workers, and educational networks as was successfully achieved in the economic, academic, and cultural realms? Maybe there is more to be done with the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions, by giving them more powers and representativeness?

Beyond networks and nations, the European project is about the people. Democracy is as much about giving to the people the rights to exercise power, as it is about giving them the intellectual means as well as the consciousness of the opportunity and responsibility to exercise them. Neither the world nor the Europeans want a European empire; what they want is prosperity, peace, and dignity. We won't unite Europeans, in their diversity, with mythical narratives as nations have sometimes done. What could unite them is a European citizenship they would be proud of. A European citizenship that would be acknowledged and respected throughout the world, a European citizenship that would be clear and honest enough to be understood by all, and a European citizenship they would have regular opportunities to contribute to.

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