



# A NEW DIRECTION FOR THE EU: COMPARING ITS DEFICITS TO CONCRETE PROGRESSIVE PROPOSALS

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## **Abstract**

The very creation of the European project was forced from 'above' to the people. The vast majority of Europeans remains indifferent and oblivious about the function of the Union. If we are to confront populist arguments advocating its disintegration, we need to engage emotionally the citizens of the continent to the unifying process which defines its fate. We need to create a new identity encapsulating the essence of what it means to be European. Its holders could thus hopefully become proud enough as to embark more actively on European affairs. In addition, to achieve this, people have to be convinced that European politics can address their socio-economic problems and improve their everyday life. I will be suggesting certain ideological, institutional and methodological paths for the EU to address its relevant political, functional, epistemological and philosophical deficits. Such deficits will be described as major obstacles which, if not addressed, will continue to undermine a 'bottom up' approach to European politics; an approach which seems inevitable if we aim to reconcile Europeans with Europeanisation.

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## Introduction

Despite its shortcomings, during its long history the EU has managed to achieve several important feats. Among them, the most impressive ones were to attain for its member-states the longest peaceful period in an otherwise belligerent continent and give the freedom and opportunity to millions of people to live, work and study in different countries than their own. In other words, it gave the chance to many people to realise through valuable and tangible experience that people of other nationalities are similar to them, i.e. fellow human beings with which they share many more things than they previously thought. Removing borders between states did not only mean removing the obstacles for free movement of people, goods and services. It eventually signified the will to take an important step towards abolishing the dividing predispositions and prejudice which deterred people from coming closer and understanding each other (Fligstein, 2008). Despite the fact that it came as a result of the Second World War, the initiative of the European project by giving precedence to common interest over division was in some ways the most important and brave political experiment in human history which was meant to shape the future of global power transition (Yesilada and Wood, 2016). Yet, *if we are seriously contemplating to essentially unify the people of our continent as Europeans, we need to do much more than what we are currently doing.* There are still many dividing lines and obstacles in the way of this ambitious goal. Various national, economic, political and social divisions stand against the vision of a unified Europe. The completion of the Project is undermined by serious existing deficiencies in its very structure, course and conception (Gauron and Torjoc, 2000).

*We therefore need to pave the way for a new reform of the EU which could address certain deficits undermining the trust and confidence to its role.* A new European Treaty should set concrete measurable targets in order to assist member-states and EU Institutions to overcome the existing gaps. More concretely, *if the Union's people are to ever actively and proudly embrace it as their real home*, then we need to contrive the following:

- A real European identity (see section 1);
- A new political strategy which accommodates people's needs and addresses the current ideological deficit in Europe (see section 2);

- A significant devolution of EU institutional power towards European cities (see section 3);
- A new methodology used to measure the performance of EU institutions as well as of member states allocating accordingly European funds (see section 4);
- A more philosophical approach allowing us to grasp the long-term role and significance of the EU (see section 5).

## 1. Identity Deficit and Lack of Emotional Attachment

There is a striking lack of basic elements in the European idiosyncrasy which could inspire its citizens to be identified with. As opposed to the creation of national identities, the European initiative has not been concerned at all to emphasise the necessary - fictitious or not - features which could make Europeans proud of their common origin. More concretely, *there is no emotional attachment with Europe and its institutions*, an attachment which its aspiring citizens can be enthusiastic about. We lack the adequate vision and spirit which could create strong bonds between people across borders in our continent. National entities still dominate the emotional part of the European psyche (Smith, 1992).

In essence, what is here underlined is **the need to build a new EU Identity based on common European history, common myths and an agreed crux of what comprises a European culture and political identity**. If necessary, as it is the case with the formation of several 'in-groups', a fictitious or contrived enemy could serve as the 'out-group', in opposition to which the members of the in-group are unified. There are objective elements which could be used to *forge the new supranational European myth* (Van der Leeuw-Roord, 2007): Classical Tradition, Enlightenment, Renaissance, the famous European Social State, a tradition of respecting and promoting individual rights and liberties, Environmental sensibilities, etc. A lot of work has to be done at all the educational levels to form working groups which could gradually advance the project of setting some criteria which need to be respected by both member-states and EU institutions. The criteria will be set in order to come up with some consensus on history books, on an educational and political profile which could at least roughly be in the future recognized as European; we are talking about the gradual *creation of a new identity* with which EU citizens can be proud of and emotionally attached to. The 'sober' cognitive process which defines the current European project should be complemented when we decide the elements comprising the core of our civilization and our identity. **A more colorful 'myth' which**

would inspire powerful emotional attachments between the Union and its people is a precondition for its evolution. We need to cultivate stronger *sentimental ties to our new European identity* if we are to strengthen our attachment to it and deepen our cooperation (Breakwell and Lyons, 1996).

## 2. Political-Ideological Deficit

There is a deeply ideological and political problem not only in the EU and the member states but globally. Particularly after the ostensible ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama, 1992) which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, *politics has been discriminating against the lower and middle classes*. This is not a vague and theoretical impression. It is proved by hard data and reliable statistics. A social and economic polarisation is clearly observed in the USA during the last three to four decades. Wealth inequality is exacerbated in most liberal democracies and the distribution of resources is in favour of a small minority and against the vast majority of the people (Pew Research Center, 2015). A similar phenomenon is unfolding in most of the European democracies, something which is clearly aggravated during the last decade (Eurofound, 2017). The political paradox is that there are obvious and severe problems of distribution in times of increasing prosperity, not only in Southern Europe but also at its centre, i.e. Germany (“Human dignity is a human right”, Report by Paritätische Gesamtverband, 2015, Germany). **One would expect the social-democratic political tradition and parties to address this significant problem threatening social cohesion.** Unfortunately, the evolution of the Union refuted such hopes (Ladrech, 2000). *European social-democracy has essentially moved towards the right-wing of the ideological spectrum, creating an ideological deficit which several populist and nationalist movements have tried to fill with counter-productive results. Until social-democracy redefines itself and adopts a more constructive approach addressing these pressing issues, the European ideal runs the risk to be undermined by regressive nationalist and populist voices.* If the EU wants to avoid a clash between its people it has to address the worries of those who have suffered mostly from an intensified market competition, the lower and middle classes (Fligstein, 2008).

Currently, the EU’s influence on national policy development is low. This could change, following the model of the Maastricht criteria, by *setting criteria of social cohesion* that each member state has to respect if it wants to access certain EU funds. This should not be reduced to a simple matter of political debate. It should be seen as a *priority for the cohesion of the continent* since the increasing popularity of anti-European parties and movements which attempt to fill the political gap

can have detrimental effects in the future. In addition, **what we generally need is more open EU politics, something which could definitely facilitate people to understand policy options and take sides in policy debates.** In other words, it is necessary to give to the European public the chance to participate in an open, real, vigorous and palpable debate during which it can have the chance to defend its interests (Hix, 2008).

### 3. Institutional Deficit: Need to enhance the Implication of Cities in the European Project

The general public is not acquainted with the European Institutions, their role, their objective and the jargon they use. It is of the outmost importance to proceed to the needed devolution of the European power to more familiar to the people local actors. In other words, *we need a road map according to which we will gradually proceed to a delegation of authority from the centralised European institutions to local units*. To be more precise, we do not need the creation of new local entities but the closer cooperation of the European political apparatus with the local administration of each member-state. The public can be much better and easier familiarised with the objectives and purpose of the European institutions if their ideas are to be disseminated by local entities. In addition, **the very implementation of the European policies has to be connected to the local level of governance if it is to gain a wider democratic legitimacy.** After all, the core of European integration lies with a heavily interlinked network of cities in Central and Northern Europe (Tilly, 1990). In addition, the commercial and political activity of medium sized European cities comprises the rudiments of the continent's society (Le Gales, 2002). If we want to *democratize the way Europe is governed* and if we want people to participate in European affairs, it is much easier to convince them to get involved close to their residence and in issues that affect them daily. In our continent, most of the people live already in urban or metropolitan areas (UN, 2015). This fact entails that cities should have more power to manage EU funds than rely on national or regional authorities. The gradual transformation of the *city to the locus and nucleus of European democracy* would constitute a radical change. But it would be a positive one because institutions should adjust to people's needs, the actual and future ones, not the ones of the past. The truth is that while supra-national and local institutions can provide future solutions for people's problems, national ones seem to be regressive in the way they try to tackle them. In addition, the EU can foment a pan-European city-competition

which by nature and experience we already know that is more benign than the national one (Barber, 2013).

*City-level governance can become the front-desk of EU policy: it can manage social funds and create economic growth and jobs matching better the local needs while respecting the local environment.* The whole process can be monitored by the Commission which can transform the existing ‘Committee of the Regions’ to a ‘Committee of Cities’. At the same time it could elevate its current advisory role to a more determinant one. For the whole process, the EU should take into account the proposals of ‘The initiative of the European Metropolitan Authorities’ (EMA), a forum promoting an agenda of common goals and challenges for large urban areas. Several big cities of our continent are already extraordinary hubs of European mobility and integration with their distinct international profile and appeal (Favell, 2008). The efforts to link EU cohesion policy and its management to cities can serve the economic, social and environmental goals of the Union while complying with its principle of subsidiarity (Treaty on the EU, 2012).

#### 4. Methodological or Epistemological Deficit

**It is about time to replace certain tools traditionally used by the EU to manage its funds and motivate its member states to adjust to the European directives.** The economic indicator GDP per capita needs to be replaced or its scope of use to be reduced if we are to take decisive steps towards a more cohesive, harmonious and peaceful Union. We can not be using as the basic criterion for the allocation of important European funds since it is too simplistic. *We need to enrich our methodological kit with other indicators which should be taken into account when we measure the progress of the member-states or the EU as a whole.* The exacerbated inequalities and the signs of social disintegration exploited by populist movements across our continent suggest that indexes of social cohesion and development should also be used.

It is important to stress that we need to enrich the methodological tools used by European institutions, particularly the ones which are linked to the planning of important European strategies and the allocation of EU funds. *Individual and social fulfillment indexes should be more inclusive and elaborate.* Examples of tools which could be used are the Human Development Index (particularly in its version which takes into account the variable of wealth inequality), the Gini Coefficient which when combined with other wealth inequality indicators (e.g. comparing the richest percentages -

usually 10% or 20%- of the population to the poorest ones) can give us a more accurate picture of how well is a society faring. Crime and social peace indexes could also be used along with statistics taking into account educational and health parameters in order to complement our insight about the state of the Union and its members. The general idea is to *follow a more holistic approach in the way we estimate the living conditions and the progress of our people*, deepen considerably our knowledge of the actual problems they are facing and adjust the EU strategy accordingly in order to tackle them.

## 5. Philosophical Deficit

Several of the current problems the EU is facing would have been better dealt if we were to adopt a more ‘philosophical’ approach to them. Contrary to what many believe, what we mostly lack in order to contrive our strategy and implement our policies is not ‘technocrats’ but ‘philosophers’. The entirety of knowledge and the interrelatedness of its different compartments entail that in order to become competent specialists or policy experts we need to be able to comprehend the broad picture. In the case of the EU, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. *We need personalities and politicians that are able to transcend the short-sighted political cost they have to assume in order to advance the European project.* In order to do that, they need to be competent enough to conceive its long-term importance not only for the continent but for the entire world.

We are currently in the most intensified phase of globalization. **The challenges humanity is facing are of global nature and scale: Concentration of economic power, frequent cyclical and contagious economic crises, overpopulation and lack of resources, global warming and environmental deterioration, massive immigration, etc. Such problems cannot be tackled by individual countries.** Despite the conspicuous need to confront them in a different and more coordinated manner, the reaction to the above-mentioned threats has been fragmented (Lundestad, 2004). A combined *lack of intellectual competence and in-depth analysis of the nature of the global challenges* along with the absence of political will seem to account for the insufficient response. Universal threats will inevitably become more menacing in the future. We are therefore approaching an era when creating a global village -or a ‘cosmopolis’ as Garton Ash (2016) prefers to call it - will be the only option in order to survive. Summoning all the necessary knowledge and epistemological insight to assist the European experiment to succeed is essential. ***The Union can thus become an expedient paradigm for people in other continents to imitate. It can become the only reliable guide showing the way people should follow if they wish to live peacefully together.***

There is a compelling *need to summon political philosophers*, enrich their knowledge with practical political skills and invite them to combine theory and practice in order to promote the European Project. We lack convening artists and idealists, mingling a pool of experts in every member state with common people in order to enrich our knowledge of who we are and where we want to aim at as Europeans. The common goal should be to elaborate more on innovative ideas coming from research on common people's views about the whole European project, how they understand it and how they could be inspired by it. Blend a 'bottom-up' and a 'top-down' approach into a constructive binary process which could reap the best of each world. In practice, we should be able to compose various working groups weighted in relation to different important variables like their age, profession, sex, special needs, etc and organise competitions of European ideas within and between member states. Thus, we could foment a benign competition of schools and academic institutions across the continent. After all, Europe belongs to its people and its future has to be shaped by them. With the necessary philosophical impulse and motives, average citizens can become intellectual prodigies nurturing our still fragile ingenuity for a unified continent.

## Conclusions

The aforementioned deficits detected in the structure and functioning of the EU could become 'measurable targets' or 'criteria' that each member state has to meet following the precedence of the Maastricht Treaty. While the latter one was a treaty of a completely different type and the issues mentioned here are of a more qualitative nature, the suggestion laid here is that we could find a way to monitor the new 'criteria' at a national level as it was the case with the Maastricht criteria. Additionally, we could also assess the progress of the Union as a whole in addressing these striking deficits. Specific and ideologically progressive recommendations have been made to correct certain strategic, political, methodological and philosophical shortcomings of the Union in its current form. It is assumingly far-fetched to name the proposed new Treaty aiming to overcome these important deficits 'Treaty of Athens'. But it is also a fact that Greece has undoubtedly suffered the most abrupt and steep economic and social collapse in the European Union since its creation. The name of the New Treaty could signify the new direction the EU should take. And this new path is indispensable in order to solidify its social cohesion as well as restore the trust and confidence of its people into the European Project.

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