

# *Europe's destiny is at stake*

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Throughout its shared history, Europe has always developed as a dynamic entity with many faces, multiple identities and various forms of co-operation. Today, however, its diversified social model is in crisis.

'Europe' has never been so necessary and yet Europe has never been in such danger. In this rapidly changing world, political courage, inspiration and a citizen-centred perspective are needed to shape a new European Renaissance.

Europe is at a crossroads. The challenges facing the project of European integration are both internal and external. They comprise rising global exposure, threats to economic and social cohesion, growing cultural diversity, increasing complexity, a widening political agenda, the climate crisis and - last but not least - imperiled legitimacy and trust.

The prolonged 'Brexit' negotiations have created more uncertainty. Our democracy is in crisis and EU citizens are losing faith in it, because political leaders cannot deliver their promises on a national level. The state is no longer the exclusive actor and, meanwhile, power has been globalised, defying attempts to return to national solutions, as the 'migration crisis' illustrates.

The French sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin recently spoke of a 'planetary crisis' and the need 'to change civilisation' to address the complexity of today's world. And the various crises Europe faces are indeed symptoms of a broader, systemic crisis.

Europe's capacity to respond depends on its ability to adopt an open-ended vision and a forward-looking narrative. To consolidate and develop the EU's peace role on a global scale and at the same time strengthen its democratic dimension, the European elections in late May offer a historic opportunity to European citizens to regain full sovereignty, defend their interests and contribute to building a fairer and more just international society.

## **International context**

Europe today is in the midst of complex and interconnected transformations at all levels. The international system is more complex, more interdependent and more fragmented, with diverse actors involved. The EU plays a global role, mainly in trade, development, environment and social issues, more recently in security strategy. With the Lisbon treaty, it made an important step towards strengthening its global aspirations.

Yet, although the EU is still the world's leading exporter of goods, the largest trader of services and the biggest provider of development and humanitarian aid, the second largest foreign investor and a main destination for migrants, chaos, fear and uncertainty reign. Some speak of a European malaise, a decline of its economic and political power.

This weakening is related to various factors: external, such as increasing competition at the global level and the management of complexity; internal, such as demographic developments, migration issues, climate crisis, secularisation, democratic deficits and populist movements. Still the EU is slowly taking measures for better and more efficient governance, amid many doubts and differences.

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Two essential and distinctive dimensions of the EU's contribution to global issues can be distinguished: its influence as a model of national and supranational democracy and its impact on international democratisation. Since its creation in the 1950s, the European Community (now the EU) has played a key role in strengthening democratic processes step-by-step throughout its several enlargements, from the Mediterranean to central and eastern Europe. It is also applying slowly democratic practices at regional level through its own institutions and policies.

We should not forget that for centuries the global implications of the European contribution towards peacebuilding have been addressed by political thinkers, from Immanuel Kant to Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman. European studies have become a specialisation in international studies and the EU is perceived as a unique, *sui generis* model of integration—a work in progress used as reference for other regional organisations in the world.

### **Rethinking 'Europe'**

In a rapidly changing world, political courage, leadership, inspiration and human-centric practices are needed to shape and strengthen the values connected with 'Europe' as a never-ending story. As Václav Havel put it, 'Without commonly entrenched moral values and obligations, neither the law, nor democratic government, nor even the market economy will function properly.'

One can think of two (interrelated) tracks which could further strengthen Europe's position in the multipolar world of tomorrow: first, differentiated and deepening integration and, secondly, acting as a change-agent within the multilateral system.

As size matters, both for economic and political power, Europe's fragmentation into a multiplicity of small actors does not help. Increased European integration in specific policy areas (such as trade, competition, development co-operation, economic, monetary and financial issues, environment and 'human' security) seems the only way forward. Only then will the perceived national interests of member states become part of the overall European interest, representing unity in diversity within a well-defined international and legal order—we need a multi-level and multi-actor approach.

States, international and regional organisations, transnational policy networks and non-governmental actors are the building blocks of the multilateral system—individual states are merely players among others. Furthermore, the interactions among all these actors are not organised in a hierarchical way but as a network. This implies no single centre of power and blurs the centre-periphery perspective.

Instead, there is a fluid web of relations, alliances and partnerships among different actors at different levels of governance, from the neighbourhood, city and region, to the state, Europe and international level. The global strategy, [\*Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe\*](#), advanced by the high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Federica Mogherini, in 2016, is certainly a step forward.

Europe has an appointment with destiny: its model of society, based on fundamental rights, culture as vehicle of emancipation, sustainable development and socio-economic cohesion, and a multilateral vision of the world, is under pressure. We are experiencing a confrontation between the actual confusing European reality (political, economic, cultural and institutional) and the responsibility of Europe as a global actor in a context of ever-increasing globalisation.

The radical transformation of European societies has globalising, Europeanising, regionalising and localising dynamics. Questions about identity, citizenship, governance, borders, democracy and dialogue require proper answers. On March 1st 2017, the European Commission presented a [\*White Paper on the Future of Europe\*](#), as a contribution to the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome. It set out five possible future paths, allied to different degrees of integration.

The European Union cannot be summed up in one sentence. It is a peculiar political structure and presents a unique process of integration. It is still in the making and today it urgently needs a new, inspiring and mobilising story, in which the quality of immaterial wellbeing should not to be subordinated to the quantity of material welfare.

Europe has a mission and responsibility to find a new equilibrium between diversity and unity in a globalising world. It is confronted with the moral responsibility to maintain its model of integration and diversity within a radically changing world system. We must ask whether Europe, within a further unifying European economic space, can guarantee both internal solidarity—while allowing states, regions, communities and persons to live their diversity—as well as external solidarity, as expressed in its international relations and activities.

This requires the participation and involvement of all stakeholders in society-building. Despite all the dramatic changes, Europe remains a civilisation project, characterised by a rich intellectual and cultural heritage. This is clearly demonstrated in the reactions to the catastrophic fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral of Paris. This iconic testimony of Gothic architecture, apart from its religious character is foremost a symbol and identity bearer of French and European cultural heritage.

### **Europe as community**

A vision for Europe relies on the concept of [community](#), in several dimensions.

As a community of destiny, Europe is a unique peace project. It has the strength, experience and resources to play an active, strong and constructive role in world affairs, also in environmental issues. But the concrete realities of everyday life, amid today's 'migration crisis' and politically motivated violence, manifest growing tension, division and frustration about the role of Europe in the world.

Europe is also a *community of values*. This refers to human dignity, rule of law, tolerance, humanity, dialogue, fraternity and hospitality. But in today's Europe these values seem to be questioned by nationalist and populist reactions.

Europe is a *community of citizens*. To that end, citizens should enjoy the opportunity to participate more fully in the European process through various dialogues and encounters. More democratic structures are needed to develop a real European public sphere. The 2017 European Commission report [Reaching out to EU Citizens: A New Opportunity](#) focused on youth, intergenerational solidarity and education.

Europe is an *economic and social community*. Although from its very beginning in 1957 European integration has been very much economically driven, the current crisis has made it clear that economic integration is an insufficient basis for further developments. Only a socio-economic community that is also culturally inspired may lead to sustainable and cohesive European societies.

Europe is a *community of purpose and responsibility*. The European continent has close economic, political and cultural ties with many regions of the world, often formalised in co-operation agreements. Only through co-operation and internal and external solidarity can Europe effectively respond to the global and European challenges, including in neighbourhood and development policy—particularly in the politically sensitive area of migration.

Europe is a *community and meeting place of multiple identities*. Freedom, peace, human dignity, equality and social justice are Europe's greatest common goods. Yet most Europeans are still very much bound to the territorial dimension of their identity-building with their lived environment and so can become afraid of the 'other' and make Europe less hospitable. In this context, cities and multicultural learning spaces are very important for living convivially.

The role of education is fundamental in all this. The learning environment has drastically changed: it is more competitive, complex and fragmented and includes a wide diversity of learning sources. It should prepare people to live together by acting together to tackle complex issues and to deal with diversity. This requires a variety of life competences: values, attitudes, skills and behaviours. New forms of and places for dialogue, learning and study, as well as a variety of new and old actors, should be considered.

### **Four fundamental tasks**

This leads me to distinguish four fundamental tasks.

First, Europe has the moral responsibility to build best practice in terms of co-operation internally and externally. We need a radical change if European civilisation is to survive. Secondly, Europeans have the responsibility to show that people can live together in the world, despite differences of language, culture, religion, origin and so on. EU citizens still need to show that they can form an international public space of mutual respect, tolerance and dialogue. Thirdly, European countries and regions must work continuously toward making their social and economic systems more efficient so that the weaknesses of the one can be compensated by the strength of others. We must encourage individual initiative, aiming for a broad and just distribution of the benefits of economic welfare and a renewed sense of responsibility. Finally, Europeans should play a more courageous and dynamic role on the international political scene, defending our model of peace and transnational co-operation and strengthening our method of collaboration with other large regions. Europe should work for a transition away from the traditional management of geopolitical and global economic conflicts and toward a new transversal policy for the world political and economic landscape. This also implies to be a global leader on environment, much in line with the Paris climate agreement.

In the current era of globalisation, the EU needs a renewed political project embedded in a long-term vision. Only in this way can the increasing influence of national interests in European policy-making be blocked in favor of the 'European commons'. Otherwise, the danger is that, faced with the growing frustration, criticism and even indifference of its citizens, the EU will become a mere union of economic interests or disintegrate into national and sub-regional entities.

Undermining the foundations of the European-integration model would undermine Europe's economic, social and environmental achievements and ultimately lead to its marginalisation in the global system. The crisis of European solidarity - much illustrated by the absence of a European refugee policy - can only be overcome if initiatives and measures are taken which restore citizens' confidence in the European institutions within a framework of 'shared sovereignty'.

A mobilising vision that can create a new impetus and a reforged connection with the citizen is crucial. The pragmatic vision of the founding fathers of the EU is certainly relevant: they worked for a European project with a long-term vision but driven by a pragmatic approach. Economic arguments supported the political objective. European integration must remain the common destination to respond to the various challenges of a globalising world.

That is why Europe needs bridge-builders who can complete the rhetoric of the European story, underline the European ideals of peace, unity in diversity, freedom and solidarity and mobilise young people for the European model of society. Yet the rhetoric must be translated into a workable and future-oriented reality where citizens feel at home. Broad and committed participation in the European elections and beyond will be a crucial step.

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