

# WHITHER THE EUROPEAN UNION?

*The grand vision of a unified Europe is ridden with uncertainties as centrifugal tendencies and external pressures bear down on the unification process.*

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Outwardly the European Union appears as the most ambitious and successful political and economic project undertaken in the second half of the twentieth century. It has brought together practically all of western Europe and is expected to encompass the centre and the eastern part of the continent within ten years. The objective of the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne, of the medieval German Kaisers and of Charles V are about to become a modern reality, peacefully fulfilling the dreams of countless prophets and pioneers, monarchs, artists, poets, political leaders, warlords and religious thinkers representing all shades of the political spectrum.

However, behind this glowing façade lighted by power, affluence and hope lies a complex, confusing and paradoxical reality. Europe is indeed the most economically, culturally and socially developed region of the world, and probably the most privileged in terms of human resources, scientific infrastructure, physical geography and climate, and also artistic heritage. At one time or another the nations that make it up have ruled over nearly every other region

of the planet, including even China and Japan which fell under the influence of colonial powers in the course of the last two centuries.

The very wealth and diversity of the European confederacy are challenging, and they account at least partly, for the immense risks and frustrations generated by the undertaking it embodies. The major nations in the EU: Germany, France, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, Spain and Italy have inherited divergent interests and a tradition of bitter rivalry often manifested through violent conflicts in the not so distant past. Despite a great common legacy, many antagonistic features keep those states apart. Though mutual dislikes and suspicions have been muted in the common effort to build a cooperative structure, they often reappear, especially when conflicting views are voiced within the Union.

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At the root of the ideal of European unity lies the western Roman imperial state embodied, since the end of the Middle Ages and until the First World War, by the sprawling realm of the Habsburg dynasty. Unsurprisingly, the old "Habsburglands": Germany, "Mittel Europa" the Benelux nations and northern Italy remain naturally open to the prospect of rebuilding a decentralised but politically integrated continental state out of which their emergence as independent nations is rather recent. On the other hand, some other countries are destined by their history to greet with suspicion any proposal for a "grand unified Europe" which evokes memories of Teutonic domination. Those natural rebels are the UK, France and also Spain (which came within the European Empire only when she was preponderant and was always feared subsequently to fall under the sway of Vienna), Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland, all of which fought imperial encroachment for centuries, and are hence inclined to associate an overarching continental political authority with the reappearance of the "Reich" in a new guise.

## CONFLICTING PERSPECTIVES FOR EUROPE: ATLANTICISTS AND CONTINENTALISTS

**B**roadly speaking it can be said that two very different visions of Europe are in conflict. The first is Atlantic-centered and stems from the long colonial tradition of the western seaboard nations: Spain, Portugal, the British Isles, Scandinavia, Netherlands and also the Western part of France, an often forgotten fact which explains the indecisive “split personality” of the country in European affairs. These states have woven over five century-strong bonds with the Americas. Their ruling elites see the Atlantic as the new Mediterranean Sea of western civilisation, a link rather than a chasm between the old and the new world. The Anglo-Saxon powers are naturally at the core of the Atlantic sphere which they have materialised in the UK-USA intelligence and military alliance, the “federation of English speaking people” propounded by Winston Churchill that is the real heart of NATO and of several other economic, political and cultural pacts.

According to that perspective, Europe is at the oriental shore of the western perimeter and her destiny lies in deepening even further her symbiotic relation with her former colonies in the new world, led by the USA. The natural enemies are in the East: Russia, China and the rest of Asia are deemed to be potential or actual rivals in the struggle for global supremacy and for the control of natural resources. Thus the western alliance must push its borders to the east in order to widen the buffer zone with Russia and to weaken the latter wherever convenient. There is no room in that theory for Russia and China to be allies or partners as they can only exist as foes or vassals despite the diplomatic rhetoric.

The Anglo-Saxon vision is primarily economical in character. Europe is regarded as a mosaic of decentralised regions and towns that are to enjoy wide autonomy within the framework of a continental free-trade zone, more or less akin to NAFTA and over which the United States will continue to exercise her preponderance, often through the agency of Britain. The American-inspired strategy of “divide it impera” is coming into effect tangibly in France for one. US Ambassador Felix Rohatyn in Paris has coordinated and exposed his country’s policy to open trade missions in various provincial cities in order to largely bypass the national government mechanisms and to facilitate the gradual regionalisation of the continent.

The second doctrine may be described as “continental” because the axis of the confederation is seen as passing through the Rhine and Danube basin, connecting the North Sea with the Black Sea and thereby defining the precise historical and geographic physiognomy of real Europe. That theory carries the legacy of the geopoliticians of the early twentieth century such as General Haushoffer who drew inspiration from Harold Mackinder’s celebrated thesis about the secular conflict between land-power and sea-power. Germany and her traditional sphere of influence occupy the centre of gravity of that map but the country’s political leadership however does not unanimously embrace the continentalist theory, if only because of the heavy Anglo-Saxon influence which constrains Berlin’s policies.

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For instance, when De Gaulle and Adenauer heralded the EEC, they both proclaimed their continentalist conviction which made them suspect in the eyes of Washington, whereas Jean Monnet, the main architect of the project, was known as an Atlanticist and so was the German chancellor who succeeded Adenauer. It is not possible to establish a clear division between right and left in that respect although there is some truth to the observation that in modern Europe Liberals and Socialists tend to be Atlanticists while the Far Left and the Conservative Right (including most Christian Democratic currents and, in France, the Gaullista until recently) favour the continentalist approach.

The continentalist proposal for Europe is at once imperial and nationalistic, which is not the sole paradox in its doctrine. There are degrees in the integration desired, from the “Europe of Motherlands” to the “Eurasian Union” but Russia is generally regarded as a future member of the federation in the more or less long term. The military bond that NATO has woven with the USA is to be replaced by a Pan-European Defence Pact whose nucleus has been created in recent years, mostly between France and Germany although Britain has recently managed to take a leading role in that initiative, which in itself raises serious questions about the future structure and purpose of that incipient organisation.

Russia obviously has an essential interest vested in supporting the success of the continentalist project and conversely, in defeating the Atlanticist strategy. In the course of the year 2000, the emergence of a stronger regime in Moscow led by Vladimir Putin has resulted in the resumption of a dialogue between the Kremlin and the EU governments, especially Germany, which is meant to pave the way for a rapprochement. Even in the days of the Soviet Union, Russian leaders favoured the building of a “common European home” in the words of Mikhael Gorbachev but that vision is far more realistic nowadays, though it remains as distasteful as ever to the United States, always fearful of the formidable economic and military potential of an independent union stretching from the Açores to the Kuriles which would control the huge resources of Siberia and Central Asia. The proposals made by President Putin to Chancellor Schröder for launching a process of Russo-German cooperation in the areas of trade, finance, intelligence and counter-terrorism have already had some practical applications and they are intended to build the core of that political alliance while trying to counter Anglo-Saxon influence.

What will Europe be? A loose commonwealth inspired on the British model or a neo-Roman empire drawn on the lines laid by Utopists and conquerors of the past? The final response to this question is anybody’s guess, but in the shorter term the ambiguities of the situation allow the various parties involved to paper over their disagreements rather than strive to resolve them, even when the latent conflicts become explosive.

#### INSIDE THE EU: POLITICS, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

**T**here is a revealing tendency among leaders of the Union to speak of “building Europe”, as if they forgot that Europe is an old continent and not just a project for the future. The language suggests that continental unity has become an end in itself in the minds of many of its planners, rather than a means to reap tangible benefits for all concerned. One sometimes wonders if the frequent praise heaped on the process of unification, as if it were a messianic undertaking, is not meant to hide the lack of a really popular ideal capable of catalysing widespread enthusiasm.

There is much indeed in the facts and figures that define the EU that is calculated to inspire boredom and cynicism rather than admiration. The administration is demonstrably plethoric, wasteful, too often inefficient or irrel-

evant, redundant and gangrened by corruption. There is no scope to review here the intricate and frequently puzzling ramifications of the sprawling bureaucracy, nor the record of misuse of funds, favouritism, nepotism, port-barrel financing and nest-feathering, some of whose most egregious instances aroused the belated ire of the European Parliament, not in itself a paragon of accountability and usefulness by any standard. It goes without saying that the diversity of cultures, languages, political traditions and ideologies does nothing to help the collective leadership find agreement, but the political issues, though generally not as vexing and fundamental as the economic ones, have shown in the year 2000 that they can become critical to the very survival of the Union.

We are referring here to the controversy aroused by the formation in Austria of a coalition between the Conservative Party and the Freedom Party (Fpöe). The advent of that democratically elected government through a strictly legal process triggered the condemnation of the other rulers of the Union, most of them from last left-wing parties. The disputable charges that the Fpöe, and its controversial and charismatic president Jorg Haider in particular, harbour nostalgia of the Nazi past were sufficient to convince the EU Council to breach its own rules of unanimity in order to impose sanctions on the entire country. As always these sanctions have proven to be ineffective or rather counter-productive, because they helped harden the will of the majority of Austrians to resist the arrogant "diktat" of Brussels, inspired by the socialists and the communists of an unelected collective administration, clumsily attempting to bully an independent state through clearly unlawful pressure tactics. The ensuing stand-off ridiculed the staunchest proponents of the sanctions, especially France and Belgium, which attempted rather unsuccessfully to invoke the shibboleth of anti-semitism and racism against Vienna thus opening themselves at the same time to accusations of anti-Austrian prejudice. Conversely Austria mustered strong support among the Italian and French Right wings, the German Christian Democrats, the British Conservatives and several other political forces irritated by the blatant attempt to control or disregard the democratic process of a national electorate. The rising tide of Euro-skepticism has gained additional strength as a result of the ill-advised decision of a few left-of-centre politicians.

Beyond the eventual outcome of that crisis, the question will remain whether the European Union is trying to define its collective identity within a "politically correct" leftist consensus, that shows very little tolerance for other ide-

ologies and that depends on the use of constraint or force to muzzle opposition and prevent change. In fact the socialist professions of faith of the leading EU governments at the dawn of the new century seem designed to assuage the feelings of the middle classes, confronted with a brutal liberalisation of the economy under the twin impulses of globalisation and rapid technological mutation. History teaches, however, that any national or international entity built around an ideology, even temporarily fashionable such as the USSR, remains fragile, for its cohesion does not stand for long the test of external and internal pressures when its components try to break out of an overly rigid system.

Noisy displays of unanimity in the EU leadership are unable to hide the lack of agreement among Europeans on too many substantial issues. Charting a common foreign policy is proving nearly impossible as soon as Europe tries not to simply second the USA, and the multiple differences are made even more visible in the European Parliament than in the secretive Commission.

Because of these divergences, the Union projects the image of an inefficient and irresolute unfinished giant, stumbling about on clay feet, and appearing united almost only when it avoids acting. Towards outside powers, the main states of Europe continue to pursue separate policies and diplomatic initiatives that are often mutually competitive or contradictory. Several examples of these disagreements could be found in the relations that major European powers maintain with Russia, China and Iraq, to cite only three specific and important cases.

#### THE EXPANSION OF THE UNION

One of the major issues that lies before the EU concerns the programmed inclusion of countries located in Europe or on the outskirts of the continent. How far should that expansion go? The liberal Atlanticists tend to envision a very wide Union that may include all the members of NATO as also the countries bordering the Mediterranean such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Israel and perhaps certain former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The continentalists who want a deeper, more politically organic union are concerned about the overly quick expansion of the EU which already has great trouble speaking with one voice with its current membership. They know that

the process of integration tends to exacerbate fissiparous tendencies within the nation-states involved. Calls for regional autonomy often lead to separatist processes particularly in affluent provinces or districts that adjoin international borders. The potential for disruption is greater in centralised countries such as France than in federal polities like Germany, but a number of ethno-cultural regions, among others Alsace, Brittany, Corsica, Savoy in France, Catalunya in Spain, Flanders in Belgium and Lombardy in Italy (as well as Scotland and Wales in Britain) are tempted by the prospect of independence which they may attain in the years to come, presumably with the blessings of the European supra-national institutions.

In a confederal European context, the disintegration of the old nations may seem a positive corollary of the administrative reorganisation of the continent but it is likely to have disruptive consequences on the harmony of societies traumatised by the loss of their age-old political and cultural unity.

The European leaders have not been able to spell out any pragmatic goals outside of the economic realm. As a consequence the EU is likely to end up as a trading block on the lines drawn primarily by the Anglo-Saxon powers. The Union has also become a magnet for the poorer populations of the world that see it as a social welfare haven in relative terms, just as it attracts less affluent or developed countries eager to enjoy the assistance and infusions of capital that EU membership is supposed to bring. Unsurprisingly, richer nations like Norway and Switzerland have shown a disinclination to enter the EU while its more prosperous members harbour growing numbers of Euro-skeptics, unenthusiastic about the large transfers of resources that are mandated by Brussels to the benefit of the less fortunate, newer adherents.

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## WHEREFORE AND WHERE TO?

We have broached earlier the subject of the EU's future shape and size and have pointed out that the borders of the virtual continent are a matter of convenience and also a bone of contention. Many among the conservative pro-Europeans would like to limit the Union to the narrow political confines of Western and Central Europe but even those are disputable. When De Gaulle called for an association extending "from the Atlantic to the Urals", he obviously included Russia, much to the dismay of the Americans and their allies, more comfortable with the concept of a Europe stretching "from Brest to Brest" (from French Brittany to the Polish-Byelorussian border). Another controversy is focused on Turkey which verges on Europe but extends mostly beyond the Bosphorus and is, at least since the Ottoman if not the Seljukid conquests, the locus of an Asian Islamic civilisation. The American-sponsored calls to bring Turkey into the EU, largely to reward and support her crucial position in NATO make short shrift of practical considerations regarding Turkey's religious, political and social identity and they are not dictated by concern for the real interests of Europe. It must be realised that embracing Turkey while keeping Russia out sends a clear signal that the EU is an economico-political alter ego of NATO which therefore stands with the Anglo-American alliance against Moscow and its confederates. Yet Russia has been a constant partner in the European concert since the beginning of the eighteenth century, has a much better claim to EU membership than the Turkish state, which entered the continent through armed conquest and has a long-standing tradition of conflict with the West, despite the mutual fascination that the Christian nations and the Osmanli Divan experienced towards each other.

The same strategy would include the smaller neighbours of Russia: incorporating Moldavia, the Ukraine, the Baltic States and perhaps some Caucasian Republics such as Georgia, Armenia or Azerbaijan (who can argue that they are as European as Turkey), into Europe while giving a cold shoulder to their big Russian brother. The policy-makers who advocate that course seem to forget that they hereby revive the long-held feeling of estrangement and encirclement that successive regimes in the Kremlin or in Saint Petersburg have nurtured and fought throughout history, and yet the last thing the EU needs on its eastern lines is a hostile and suspicious Russia.

The third prospect for the Community's growth is in North Africa, bound to Europe by geography and history within the millenary Mediterranean Commonwealth. Notwithstanding the proximity and the resulting economic interdependence, differences in religion, political culture, demography and wide disparities between the respective levels of economic development have dug a deeper trench between North and South than the Roman "Mare Nostrum" itself. The admission of the three Maghreb countries, which would lead sooner or later, according to the same logic, to the admission of the Near Eastern sea-shore states of Egypt, Libya, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, is also fraught with grave perils for all parties concerned. The tormented relationships those states maintain with one another make it difficult to foresee a harmonious co-existence under the EU umbrella in economic as in political terms.

The inevitable result of any attempt to federate too closely the North African region with Western Europe will be to recreate a colonial bond that would be painful and awkward for all parties, as it would sharply curtail the autonomy and thus interfere with the lifestyle of the Arab states concerned in a way that they would probably find unacceptable, while exposing Europe to an even higher tide of immigrants from poorer countries over which she could only be a distant and inefficient if resented suzerain.

In the early fifties, the writer's late father Jean Carpentier wrote two books to plead for a Eurafrikan economic community that could keep France's African empire together within the then newly born EEC. At the time, his proposal was greeted with scepticism but half a century later it seems that many political and financial leaders in Europe are rallying to that vision with the argument that it is vital not to leave a belt of underdeveloped, unstable nations on the southern flank of the Union as the two successive kings of Morocco have often argued. However, confederal structures that could have been gradually introduced within the French and British possessions in Africa in the aftermath of World War II, when there were no pressures due to immigration, are harder to build in long independent countries which are deeply divided internally on cultural, religious and political lines, and understandably jealous of their sovereignty. The prospect of bringing Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia into the EU therefore appears unrealistic, despite the theoretically sound reasons invoked by their proponents. They also ignore the

very real, age-old antagonism between the Christian West and the Islamic South and East which has made Europe a target of Muslim attacks since the days of the first Ummayyad Khalifs. Reinforced nowadays by the financial might of the oil-rich theocratic states of the Middle East and by an explosive population growth, Islam can pose a significant threat to Europe in the years

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to come, as is tangibly evinced by the large Islamic communities now settled in most Western nations, submitting to the ideological influences of a clergy largely supported by Saudi Arabian, Iranian and other Gulf powers.

From a higher vantage point an overview of European history shows that all parts of the world have had for centuries special relationships with one country or another in the "Old Continent". Thus if North Africa is gradually integrated into the EU, it will be difficult to keep out the rest of Africa

and in that light one would end up with a global community embracing the British Commonwealth and the USA, the *Union Française*, the Hispanic sphere, the Lusitanian association and the Dutch West Indies, not to mention the ancestral Russian realm. The trouble is that such an all-encompassing federation would needlessly duplicate the UNO if it is weak, or become the much feared global government if it is under a strong central authority. Furthermore, no club is worth adhering to if everybody is a member.

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#### COMMON EUROPEAN RULES AND COMMON POLICIES

**E**ven before July 2000 when France became the rotating chairman of the Union for six months the vexing issue of fiscal disparity between the

member states was brought to the fore. The large differences between the taxation levels combined with gradual erasure of economic and political borders triggered an intense competition to attract the capital of wealthy citizens and the activity of business firms from the EU neighbours. Predictably, that fierce contest works to the advantage of the more liberal, less fiscally demanding governments bound to be cashing in more and more funds in search of favourable environments. France, having probably the most heavily taxed economy, is among the worst afflicted but instead of seriously trying to moderate its budgetary excesses the country's socialist rulers would like to see the other states agree to a common fiscal level presumably much closer to its own. Paris is also keen to bring the "black sheep" tax shelters, that thrive on bank secrecy, in line with a pan-European regulation to be promulgated in Brussels. The long-standing call for fiscal harmonisation has always met with tremendous opposition from the beneficiaries of the present competitive environment who point out that abolishing "tax oases" in the Union would harm all its members as long as there remain fiscal paradises outside of Europe. As Prince Hans-Adam II of Liechtenstein, one of the targets of the French and German government's ire, has always said: "If you accuse us of being fiscal oasis, it means that you must have become fiscal deserts". The controversy rages, and gives every sign of being intractable as long as the global marketplace remains unregulated, outside a centralised authority that would have to be of socialist persuasion to adopt and enforce the sorts of constraints and guidelines that the French are calling for.

Aware that the process of tax harmonisation cannot be pursued with all the current and future members of the EU, many of which see with aversion and alarm what they describe as a French-inspired Jacobine policy fraught with Napoleonic authoritarianism, the governments of Paris and Berlin are endeavouring to build, in the face of British hostility, a "central core" of European states which could take the lead to implement that policy of fast integration. Many other EU members suspect that this course will lead the Union to break into a nucleus dominated by Germany and an increasingly marginalised periphery that will gradually drift apart, perhaps into more liberal, less controlled financial policies, thus eventually increasing the centrifugal stress on the "hardcore" states. As a matter of fact, it seems that Britain and other Northern European states, viz, Denmark and Sweden may stay away

from the Euro, thus preventing it from becoming the pan-European currency its founders wished it to be and exposing its weakness even further.

Lord Howell, chief opposition spokesman on foreign affairs to the House of Lords writes revealingly in the *International Herald Tribune* on July 11, 2000: "Britain ... needs ... to put forward the alternative of a more flexible and subtly articulated European network of interdependent states ... The Germans and French could then be left to do whatever pioneering they cared to undertake while other nations ... could take different ways forward." The author points out in the same article that "deeper and more elaborate integration is not always the way forward and that if some European countries choose that path ... far from being ahead they may get left behind—but that is their concern."

The choice laid before the Europeans appears stark indeed: if they succumb to the Anglo-American pressures they must continue to admit even larger numbers of non-European immigrants and geographically extra-European member-states to the point of losing any distinct collective personality and cohesiveness. The alternative is to try to regroup into the much reviled "Fortress Europe" and join hands with their Eastern neighbours in order to balance out the US-led opposition that this strategy will arouse. The world would then become a very different place, for the continent would regain the relative harmony it enjoyed between 1870 and 1914 and would presumably be less dependent on American leadership, especially if the risk of a new intra-European conflict between East and West is eliminated within a common confederal structure. Many in Russia and on the rest of the continent believe that a new alliance is essential to resist the expansionist pressure of the Islamic masses which the United States are often willing to utilise in order to divide and weaken the European nations while earning at little cost the gratitude of their oil-rich Muslim protégés.

In the short and medium terms, nevertheless, it is unlikely that the grand unified vision of Europe will materialise. Centrifugal tendencies and outside pressures are such that the general prospects for the EU seem rather dim, as it is likely to remain a half-built house for the next decade or two, and we can only hope that it is not built on the sand of purely economic thinking, despite the warning given in the Gospels, the textbook of the Christian civilisation shared by most of the continent.