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Between Rome and Sibiu: A Trajectory for the New European Narrative

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Many observers may easily reach the conclusion that the European Union (EU) has been in crisis for the last decade. Against this background, and especially since the outcome of the Brexit referendum, the EU has begun much soul searching to carve out a new path to its future. This Policy Brief addresses the current Future of Europe debate with the Bratislava Roadmap, the Rome Declaration, the Leaders' Agenda, and other valuable contributions. It raises the question what kind of narrative the European project will need to survive into the future. What kind of Europeans do we wish to be and what sort of Europe do we want to create? Despite growing mistrust of citizens in their own institutions and rising populism, this Policy Brief pleads for enduring support for the values on which the European project is built. These values should remain beacons for the way in which we legitimise, organise and communicate the work of the EU. Even if we cannot always agree on a common destination, Europeans should be able to agree at least on a shared trajectory based on common values. This is a narrative that should inspire Europe again.

Many EU citizens have been living under the impression that the European Union has been in crisis over the last decade. The outcome of the Brexit referendum in June 2016 triggered a debate on the future of Europe with 27 remaining Member States. This debate presents the Union with new opportunities to further complete its ongoing political project and to achieve its goals as codified in the Treaties.

Without a convincing narrative, the European project is threatened by extinction. It runs the risk of being misrepresented by populists and may no longer be embraced by its citizens. As this Policy Brief will explain, this narrative should not only focus on practical cooperation in areas where there is a will to work together and where this work can deliver tangible results, but also on the values that underpin the institutions on their trajectory to find new solutions to concrete concerns of EU citizens.

EUROPE IN POLY-CRISIS

The EU's recent worries all started with a banking crisis that in some Member States developed into a full-fledged sovereign debt crisis, and which brought down the economy to its worst level of recession since the creation of the bloc. It raised serious doubts about the

survival of its currency, the euro, and put question marks over the EU's prosperity.

In addition, the bloc has witnessed influxes of both regular and irregular migrants, escaping from political and economic turmoil due to crop failures, conflicts, persecution and violence, which find their cause in revolutions elsewhere, such as in Libya and Syria. The reception and integration of these new entrants provoke tense political discussions in the EU and its Member States, creating unease in traditional political parties pressurized by an anti-immigration discourse.

More to the East, Russia caused a stir by annexing the Crimea and freezing conflicts related to the EU's growing influence in Ukraine and other members of the Eastern Partnership. In response to this and in a spirit of solidarity the EU adopted economic sanctions, but the panic about Russia's behaviour is still palpable. This has become obvious from the way in which the EU takes steps to beef up its own security environment and to reorganize its gas supply.¹

In June 2016, the UK's 40 years old love-hate relationship with the process of further European integration took a dramatic turn. A narrow majority of UK citizens voted in a referendum to leave the EU, and in doing so, ousted David Cameron as Prime Minister. At their meeting of 28 June 2016, the European leaders discussed the outcome of the referendum and a new crisis mood got hold of Brussels. The new UK government led by Theresa May notified the European Council of the UK's intention to withdraw from the EU in March 2017, paving the way for Brexit negotiations. Whilst these negotiations have helped until now the consensus-building on the EU's own stance, much insecurity remains about the long-term implications for both parties.

A fifth and final crisis can be found in how some European governments, perhaps also in response to the aforementioned crises, are showing their resolve by undermining the Rule of Law in their democracies. They seem to deliberately overstep norms and values so as not to be perceived as weak and to cater to populist demands for strong and firm answers. Yet this is particularly challenging for the EU as an international organisation where sovereignty is shared on the basis of the rule of law. The questioning of these norms and values thus holds great danger for the entire European construction.

FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

With that many crises it is hard to imagine that no disruption would come from them. But with each funeral a mourning process starts and the question the Union rightly asked, was how to overcome its loss and how to manage it. The EU suffered serious injury, yet it suffices in those circumstances to show more resilience to turn things around.

Brexit was probably the trigger the EU needed to pick up the pieces. This does not mean that all will end well. The odds of a cliff edge scenario are still very high. There is still too much uncertainty about the kind of future relationship that London aspires to achieve and whether its aspiration will be reconcilable with the EU's own political and legal order. For the time being, the group of remaining 27 Member States is remarkably holding together. This show of firm unity became apparent at the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaty with the message that the EU had to take its destiny in its own hands.² With the ensuing adoption of its Leaders' Agenda, the European Council exactly did that.³

Also the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the USA served as a catalyst. Since

the 1950s Europe has tried to build its own defence community, but so far never succeeded. The absence of an unwavering commitment by the US to Europe's security at the NATO summit in Brussels of June 2017, has led to PESCO and EDIDP.⁴ Trump's economic nationalism even accelerated the political deal making between Japan and the EU on a wide-ranging economic partnership agreement announced in July 2017 and concluded the same year in December.⁵ The same argument counted for the speedy conclusion of a new EU-Mexico trade deal.⁶ These are just the most visible examples that Europe is willing and ready to turn the page.

ONE ENGINE WITH MULTIPLE GEARS

After having licked their wounds, the remaining 27 members quickly developed a more positive agenda about the future.⁷ The questions this future raises are *what* the 27 still would like to do together, *how* they could accomplish their common objectives, and *with whom* they still could further integrate. Since several decades the European integration process has been developed at different speeds and with variable partners. The most obvious example is the Eurozone which currently counts 19 out of 28 Member States. The principle of a multispeed Europe was also inscribed in the Rome Declaration where it says: "act together, at different paces and intensity where necessary, while moving in the same direction".⁸

Whether we like it or not, the concept of multispeed integration has evolved into a cornerstone of the European construction, and it explains very well what the EU is not. It is not a (federal) state. Though it can be argued that the European Central Bank and the European Banking Authority have received wide-ranging competences like federal agencies, they remain exceptions to the rule. In principle, Union law

must be implemented by Member States, not by agencies.

We must therefore be very careful not to misrepresent the EU as a (federal) state, because it creates an enormous capabilities-expectations gap. Whilst for some politicians the gap is an important argument to plead for a federal European state, other political groups will be quick to use the misrepresentation to pinpoint the inefficiency of the EU institutions. By way of example, both groups will probably argue that the so-called European Border and Coast Guard (FRONTEX) is highly inefficient. Whereas the former will probably explain that Europe's borders cannot be protected by 1.500 people alone, the latter will carefully omit that it is currently the Member States, and not FRONTEX, that are competent and thus responsible for border protection.⁹ It is always important to carefully examine the instruments in the EU's toolbox before blaming it unfairly of running itself in an inefficient way.

If the EU should not be presented as a federal state or empire, what is it then? It is an international organisation of Member States codified by several treaties. The Member States of this organisation voluntarily sacrificed part of their sovereignty by conferring competences into a Union and its institutions in order to pursue common objectives. In order to achieve these objectives, the Union created a new supranational legal order legitimised by both national and European democratic processes. The whole construction is based on the rule of law, of which the European philosophical and political origins go back centuries. It cannot be more difficult to explain the EU than Belgian federalism. Both represent unfinished political projects, and just like any other car, they have one engine and multiple gears. If one does not use these gears safely, the entire engine will blow up.

DIFFICULT TO FALL IN LOVE WITH

If we accept that the EU is a political construction and less of an emotional home, the question remains whether and how future generations of Europeans can stay attached to it. The internal market, although fundamental for the prosperity of European citizens, is something many people have difficulty identifying with. Besides, it is often crushed by its critics for being a cold, neoliberal place. It may therefore not come as a surprise that some groups plead for a social dimension to give the EU a more human face. It is still too soon to tell whether the social pillar will be able to bear fruit.¹⁰ At the same time, we must remain cautious that this fruit will not become too heavy, causing another branch of the European tree to break off.

What is undoubtedly true, however, is that the European construction needs a convincing narrative to survive. The degree of sentimentalism can of course vary. We must show understanding for the evolving degrees of someone's affection for Europe. After all we are dealing here with an ongoing political project of international cooperation. But Europe needs to be in our minds at least, if not in our hearts. Some intelligence of the heart is crucial, or else the project will die. Without such a narrative, there is a serious risk that people will no longer embrace the project.

IN SEARCH OF A NARRATIVE

Until the Union was struck by its poly-crisis, the most important inspirational source of the European project had been the bloc's reputation as a guarantor of peace and prosperity in the decades after World War II. After some success stories, such as the integration of a reunified Germany and some countries of the fragmented Balkan region, this image has come under pressure as a result of some frivolous military adventures, e.g. in Libya, and the failed attempt

to integrate Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic rules-based order. The deep economic recession in the past decade also brought about a feeling of insecurity, which inevitably led to the fear of further decline and even fear of change. It profoundly questioned the foundations of trade liberalisation and the effects of globalisation. Consequently, the narrative of future prosperity and security for the European project has been tarnished. The EU is patching this up with new initiatives, but it will need more time to restore citizens' trust in domains of physical and economic security.¹¹

It was no coincidence that the informal European Council in Gothenburg also considered culture and youth as possible avenues to renew Member States' vows to the European project.¹² Our common European heritage can serve as a reference point to find the narrative we may need for the future. Europe has a rich repertoire of cultures, ideas and principles. The Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment are good examples thereof in our history. However, it should be stressed that these philosophical and artistic currents were not the result of one single European culture. They were the fruit of many exchanges between several European cultures. Unity in diversity is rightly the Union's motto.¹³ From cultural interchange – even when it does not always happen in a frictionless way – can sprout interwovenness and connectedness between the peoples of Europe. Programmes such as Erasmus+ convey this important message.

EUROPE AS A TRAJECTORY

By selecting a new narrative, we should not proclaim Europe as a religious faith, not even by harking back to its Judean-Christian origins, nor should we impose some high-brow intellectual culture on its populations. Those are not the kinds of Europe we should strive for, because they can never grow into an inclusive project for

all EU citizens. Neither should we focus on all sorts of ideologies which constantly look for great narratives to attract followers to defend their own political cause. The narrative for Europe could, however, come from a more neutral and recognisable symbol. Why not simply present Europe as a trajectory?¹⁴

If many of us can agree that Europe is a political trajectory from one point in history to another, then the narrative should focus on a way of better legitimising, organising, and communicating the work of the EU. It should inspire practical cooperation in areas where there is a will to work together and where this work can deliver tangible results. Even if we cannot always agree on a common destination, we should at least agree on sharing the same road.

The trajectory we have all shared, is that of a liberal democracy. This brings us to the legitimate question whether the EU is a club of liberal democracies. Differences between Emmanuel Macron and Jaroslaw Kaczynski are perhaps immense, but they are smaller than they were between France and Poland before 1989. Poland and Hungary are now examples of nationalist conservative rule, which is still very different from what they were behind the Iron Curtain.

The problem is that nativism and negativism have gotten hold of part of the European electorate. For a politician to change his political ideology in the pursuit of power is a story as old as democracy itself. The danger coming from this populism becomes imminent when its political spectacle finds a victim or enemy to blame. Faceless immigrants and nameless European bureaucrats are among such easy targets.

Until now Poland has become the only Art. 7 TEU battleground against liberal democratic

backsliding.¹⁵ But as other general elections have shown recently, the problem is not geographically limited to one part of the EU. If the remaining 27 Member States decide to stay on the EU trajectory together, they should better also choose a set of beacons to demarcate their pathway. These beacons can be identified as shared values.

VALUES, VALUES, VALUES

Generally, actions eroding judicial independence and helping loyalists turning media into propaganda are undermining common European values. And more than on rules and laws, democracy is based on values, which include liberties such as freedom of expression, religion, tolerance, social morals etc. These values are – albeit somewhat succinctly and hastily – listed in Art. 2 TEU and are the true guardians of the European construction.

It is not because these values have been unable to solve all our societal challenges that we should no longer trust them. It is even understandable that EU citizens from time to time lose trust in the institutions that govern them because their voices are not always heard in Europe. More fundamentally, however, they should continue to believe that the concrete responses to their concerns should always respect these values. Let us forever be reminded of their importance for humankind.

The strongest European narrative should come from these values. As our European ancestors shifted their values from tribal, racial or religious glory toward more universal human flourishing, we cannot satisfy ourselves with fatalism, leading to populism and ultimately extremism. When we replace religious fanaticism, traditionalism and totalitarianism with reason, debate and institutions of truth-seeking, we also must believe that they can bring progress to humanity. What else could be more heroic and glorious for

Europe than to believe in the principles of Enlightenment to find solutions to new problems?¹⁶

LEADING THE WAY AHEAD

The *Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap*, the *Rome Declaration* and the *Leaders' Agenda* have been mentioned already as main contributions to the Future of Europe debate.¹⁷ All three documents outline policy priorities for the EU trajectory. Whereas the *Rome Declaration* provides a long-term vision, the two other documents focus on the short to medium term (6 and 21 months respectively) and stay within the time horizon of Brexit negotiations and its transitional phase. They are also more operational and include less strategic elements than the *Rome Declaration*.

As far as the Future of Europe is concerned, some competition or rivalry could be expected from Commission President Juncker's 2017 *State of the Union* and the Commission's *White Paper on the Future of Europe* published before the *Rome Declaration* and later accompanied by a series of reflection papers published between April-June 2017.¹⁸ Since the adoption of the *Leaders' Agenda* in September 2017, the Commission has been contributing enthusiastically to the *Leaders' Meetings* as the meetings according to in the *Leaders' Agenda* are called. As a result, the fate of the five scenarios the Commission depicted in this white paper and its reflection papers remains unclear. The European Council so far has not yet taken a position.

We should not forget the contributions coming from Member States either. President Macron's speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017 was one of the most comprehensive and widely referenced national contribution to the Future of Europe debate.¹⁹ Another noteworthy individual contribution was a speech by the Portuguese Prime Minister at the College of Europe in Bruges on 15 September 2017.²⁰ In a speech on 26 September 2017 the Polish

President also laid out a vision radically different from that of Macron's at the College of Europe in Natolin, Warsaw.²¹

In October 2017, the European Parliament also contributed to the Future of Europe debate by publishing its vision, mainly building on its resolutions from earlier that year.²² The same month its President, Antonio Tajani, relayed an invitation from the European Parliament to the Heads of State or Government to present their views on the issue in its plenary chamber. Numerous leaders accepted this invitation with the Irish Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, delivering the first such address in Strasbourg in January 2018. With this initiative, the European Parliament is also providing a democratic and open forum for debate.

According to the *Leaders' Agenda*, EU leaders will gather in Sibiu for a summit on 9 May 2019 that should be more than ceremonial. It has the potential to become another milestone to the likings of Rome (1957) and Maastricht (1991) setting a *Strategic Agenda 2019-2024*. The Sibiu summit will be held less than two weeks before the 2019 European Parliament elections, of which the results will be decisive for the legacy of the *Leaders' Agenda* and any strategy set out for the Future of Europe after Brexit. The most important challenge for the Future of Europe remains the defence of the values by which its trajectory is demarcated.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis in this Policy Brief is presented approximately at the mid-point between the *Rome Declaration* and the Sibiu summit. A time where the EU is trying to turn the page of multiple crises and the Brexit referendum triggered a debate about the Future of Europe. A debate which lays bare all the doubts and insecurities of the Union, its institutions and its citizens. Whereas it is true that we should always remain operational and focused on the concrete

problems deserving concrete solutions, we must at all times respect the values demarcating the EU trajectory as an ongoing political project and which underpin the institutions looking for these solutions. Values should be more than just rhetoric. They should be the source of inspiration for our practical cooperation. And so it is still useful in this day and age to reread the preambles of the European treaties, because: “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”²³ That is why narratives can make such a big difference. Europe should inspire again.

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positions as Advisor, Deputy Chief of Staff and Chief of Staff in several ministerial private offices. He studied German and English language and literature at the KU Leuven and the Ruprecht-Karls Universität Heidelberg. He also read law at the KU Leuven, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Hong Kong. As post-graduate research fellow in international financial and economic law he obtained a PhD from the University of London (Queen Mary & Westfield College). Between 2008-2016 he taught capita selecta of international economic and financial law as Adjunct Professor of Law at the Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, and as Visiting Professor to the China University of Political Science and Law, Beijing. All views expressed herein are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect any official positions of the Kingdom of Belgium.

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- ² European Council (2017, March 25): *Declaration of the leaders of 27 member states and of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission*. Text available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/03/25/rome-declaration/> (last consulted on February 21, 2018). Hereafter referred to as the *Rome Declaration*.
- ³ European Council (Art. 50 TEU)(2017, October 20) : *Leaders’ Agenda – Building our future together*, and also : *The Bratislava Roadmap – One Year On*. Hereafter referred to as the *Leaders’ Agenda*. As part of the *Leaders’ Agenda*, the Heads of State or Government agreed to hold at least 13 meetings between October 2017 and June 2019, to discuss topics central to the Future of Europe, either in formal or informal European Councils, as the EU-27 or EU-28, in Euro Summits, or in other formats, such as the Social Summit in Gothenburg on 17 November 2017.
- ⁴ Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315 of 11 December 2017 establishing a permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and determining the list of participating Member States. See also European Commission (2017, June 7): *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL establishing the European Defence Industrial Development Programme aiming at supporting the competitiveness and innovative capacity of the EU defence industry*, COM(2017) 294 final.
- ⁵ European Commission (2017, December 8): *EU and Japan finalise Economic Partnership Agreement*, available at <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=1767> (last consulted on February 21, 2018).
- ⁶ European Commission (2018, April 21): *EU and Mexico reach new agreement on trade*, available at <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=1830> (last consulted on May 20, 2018).
- ⁷ Council of the European Union (2016, September 16): *Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap*, available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-future-reflection/bratislava-declaration-and-roadmap> (last consulted on February 21, 2018). Hereafter referred to as the *Bratislava Roadmap*.
- ⁸ See o.c. *supra* note 2. In the text of the *Rome Declaration* it reads: “We will act together, at different paces and intensity where necessary, while moving in the same direction, as we have done in the past, in line with the Treaties and keeping the door open to those who want to join later.”
- ⁹ According to <http://frontex.europa.eu/> FRONTEX will employ 1.015 staff by 2020 including field operatives and a minimum of 1.500 staff from Member States as a standby reaction force. It should be noted, however, that since its Communication of 14 February 2018, the European Commission has tabled different scenarios on how to support better the management of the EU’s

external borders. One such scenario implies the establishment of a full-fledged federal agency similar to those in Canada and the USA. These scenarios will be further discussed under the new Multiannual Financial Framework. See European Commission (2018, February 14): *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL* for a new, modern Multiannual Financial Framework for a European Union that delivers efficiently on its priorities post-2020, COM(2018) 98 final, p.6.

¹⁰ European Parliament, Council of the European Union and European Commission (2017, November 17): *European Pillar of Social Rights*, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en.pdf (last consulted on February 21,2018). Hereafter referred to as Social Pillar.

¹¹ In addition to above cited proposals on PESCO and EDIDP, a few other initiatives could be added here as possible instruments to instill further trust and give concrete responses to the concerns of EU citizens, such as the *European Social Fund* (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=325&langId=en> , last consulted on February 22,2018); the *European Globalisation Adjustment Fund* (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=326> , last consulted on February 21,2018); the *Investment Plan for Europe – The Juncker Plan* (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/jobs-growth-and-investment/investment-plan-europe-juncker-plan_en , last consulted on February 22,2018); the *EMU-policy package of the 6 December 2017* (https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/economy-finance/completing-europes-economic-and-monetary-union-policy-package_en , last consulted on February 22,2018); and European Commission (2017, September 13), Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL establishing a framework for screening of foreign direct investments into the European Union COM(2017) 487 final.

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¹³ This EU motto first came in use in 2000. For further reference, see https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/motto_en (last consulted on February 22,2018).

¹⁴ See for further reference, "Le XXI^e siècle sera-t-il « deleuzien » ?", *Le Monde*, 28 April 2012.

¹⁵ European Commission (2017, December 20): *Rule of Law: European Commission acts to defend judicial independence in Poland*. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-5367_en.htm (last consulted on February 21,2018).

¹⁶ See for further reference on this question, PINKER, S., *Enlightenment Now : The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, Viking, New York, 2017.

¹⁷ See endnotes 2, 3 and 7, as well as accompanying text.

¹⁸ See President Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union Address, 2017, available at [file:///bru3fil11/AppDataRedirect\\$%2Fhoogmj/Downloads/EN-FR-DE-Speech.pdf](file:///bru3fil11/AppDataRedirect$%2Fhoogmj/Downloads/EN-FR-DE-Speech.pdf), updated version following delivery, replacing the authorised version on 20 September 2017 (last consulted 21 May 2018); and European Commission, *White Paper on the Future of Europe – Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf (last consulted on May 20, 2018), this *white paper* was the Commission's contribution to the 25 March Rome Summit where the EU leaders discussed the achievements of the past 60 years and the future of the remaining 27.

¹⁹ President Emmanuel Macron, « Initiative pour l'Europe – Une Europe souveraine, unie et démocratique », Paris, 26 September 2017, available at <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique/> (last consulted on 21 May 2018).

²⁰ Prime Minister Antonio Costa, « Reprendre le chemin de la convergence, renforcer l'Europe », on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the academic year 2017-2018 at the College of Europe, Bruges campus, 15 September 2017, available at [file:///bru3fil11/AppDataRedirect\\$%2Fhoogmj/Downloads/20170915_discours_bruges_fr_pmportugal.pdf](file:///bru3fil11/AppDataRedirect$%2Fhoogmj/Downloads/20170915_discours_bruges_fr_pmportugal.pdf) (last consulted on 21 May 2018).

²¹ "Polish President sees Europe as 'Community of free nations'", *Euractiv*, 3 October 2017, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/polish-president-sees-future-eu-as-community-of-free-nations/> (last consulted on 21 May 2018).

²² See *Future of Europe: European Parliament sets out its vision*, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20171023RES86651/20171023RES86651.pdf> (last consulted on 21 May 2018).

²³ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, « The Wisdom of the Sands », French writer (1900-1944).



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