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The European Union: A Past, A Present... What Future?

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Exiting his function as President of the European Commission, José Manuel Durão Barroso launched the “New Narrative for Europe” initiative. In late October 2014, he stressed that the European Union (EU) has to defend its values and to fight its past demons of nationalism and populism.¹ This initiative resumes an appeal to involve European citizens in the debate about the evolution of the integration process, departing from a manifesto entitled “The Body and the Mind of Europe”, proposed by intellectuals.² The text and the various activities organized under the “New Narrative” flagship reflect the existence of a deep crisis experienced by the Union, not only for financial and economic reasons, but also as related to identity and legitimacy deficiencies. As common citizens would express, “citizens feel less and less European” or “Europe is not a culture, but a junction of cultures”.³ In this article, we aim at tackling the challenge of thinking about the EU’s uncertain future taking into consideration what is the Union. We shall explore the fact that the EU has a past and a present and what does this mean for its possible future path. We raise the assumption that the EU’s history has reached a point of non-return: unless citizens are given a core *locus* in the integration process, the Union is

deemed to stagnate and transform itself in a less satisfactory way with respect to European cooperation.

The European Union’s past has been featured by the parallel dynamics of enlargement and deepening. While the club of member states has been growing—providing the EU with a greater geographic scope on the continent—the levels of integration have also deepened to encompass more policy areas and more transference of national prerogatives to Brussels. Beginning with a common policy in the areas of trade and agriculture with the 1957 Rome Treaty, the Union has developed its actions much further, tackling for instance internal security or macroeconomic policies.

The evolution of the integration process is also deeply rooted in an historic novelty. In fact, the Union is committed to the idea of creating peace among its member states that include powers such as Germany, France and Great Britain which have fought wars for hegemony on the continent. Additionally, the kind of peace that is aimed at is also novel as compared to the traditional and realist perspectives on peace. The Union project is based on the idea of “positive peace” that includes human rights and needs. That commitment towards a positive peace contributes to explain the level of exigency of the citizens within the EU area towards what the Union delivers. This expectation and delusion about its materialization are at the core of today’s EU political legitimacy crisis.

In fact, peace is not anymore just about the absence of war (negative peace), but it now also includes human rights in the sense that security is “human security”. Along this line, be-

1 Rui Pedro Antunes, “Durão diz que Europa passou “teste de stress” e rejeita Belém” (*Diário de Notícias*, 29 October 2014).

2 Website with information on the project: http://ec.europa.eu/culture/policy/new-narrative/index_en.htm

3 Retrieved from a debate organized with BA students of the University of Minho on 24 March 2014.



sides rights such as, for instance, access to food and education, EU citizens perceive that the EU has a role in assuring their political, economic and social rights.⁴ This is particularly sensitive in the aftermath of the financial crisis that began in 2008 and which brought bailouts in Ireland, Portugal and Greece and social unrest in several EU countries due to the degradation of living conditions. In particular, growing unemployment has impacted directly on the notion of human dignity. In late 2014 the average unemployment rate of the EU was 9.8%. Germany had an unemployment rate of 4.8% as compared to Greece with 26%.⁵ Portugal presented a rate of 14.1%. The impact of these data on the perceptions of EU citizens is to a certain extent reflected in the 2014 special Eurobarometer. “Only 22% of respondents regard the employment situation in their country as generally good, though this is up from 20% in autumn 2013. Germany (62%) has the most people who rate it as good, while Greece, Portugal and Spain (all 2%) have the fewest”. Correspondingly, the survey indicates that “trust in the EU remains low (32%) but has increased slightly (+1)”.⁶

The issue of trust towards the role of the EU—and the recurring, and perhaps, growing gap between the citizens and EU policies and institutions⁷—poses a paradox to the European integration process. If positive peace places the individual at the core of the project, its evolution has produced distance between citizens and the EU’s actions, both internally and externally. This is visible in the poor knowledge that the citizens have about the Union’s external role. Who in Europe has heard, for instance, about the Union is fighting piracy in the Horn of Africa with its mission EUNAVFOR? Although not affecting directly the daily life of its citizens, the operation has been instrumental in assuring the fluxes of trade and, thus, the functioning of EU economy. What the EU is today, and the challenges it faces, needs to be

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put in the perspective of its above-mentioned past. The Union presents itself as the carrier of values of its own that are simultaneously European and universal. This peculiarity has brought perspectives on the EU as a “normative” actor.⁸ Externally, it means that Brussels acts neither as a military nor as a civilian power. Assuming itself as a change promoter, the EU seeks to alter norms in the international system according to its own values and principles. The later are particularly visible in its relations with neighboring countries and in its enlargement policy, which are: the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights, including minority rights, the promotion of good neighborly relations, the principles of market economy and sustainable development.⁹ Internally, this set of normative standards is particularly sensitive for the security perceptions of citizens when it comes to social and economic rights, as above-mentioned.

Currently the EU is also marked by the adoption of several strategies to cope with financial, economic and social challenges. The gap between discourse and practice has led to disenchantment, and improvement is needed, but the agendas to cope with issues nevertheless exist. Regarding the euro crisis debt, the austerity method and the bailouts for Ireland, Greece and Portugal have not yet delivered enough harmonization at the EU level, but particularly in the aftermath of Greece’s failure to implement the external rescue program (known as “troika” program), the management of the Eurozone is under serious revision. The fact that the EU is an “unidentified political object”—referring to its complex and unique political system—doesn’t mean that it has no legitimacy. The Lisbon Treaty that entered into force in 2009 has been able to reinforce the role of the European Parliament and to rebalance the weight of member states.¹⁰ Taking into consideration that the EU has a past and a present, thinking about what it ought to achieve in the future may

4 On the impact of austerity measures on economic and social rights in the EU, see Cláudia Viana Barbosa, “(In)Segurança Humana Económica na União Europeia: o Impacto da Austeridade nos Direitos Económicos e Sociais” (Repositorium Universidade do Minho, 2014).

5 “Unemployment rates, seasonally adjusted” (Eurostat, February 2015).

6 “Europeans in 2014” (European Commission, Special Eurobarometer No. 415, July 2014).

7 In this article, we do not tackle the issue of national citizenship versus EU citizenship and the issues of political legitimacy posed at the national level.

8 Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe: The International Role of the EU” (*European Community Studies Association Biennial Conference*, 31 May 2002).

9 “Communication from the Commission - European Neighborhood Policy - Strategy Paper” (European Commission, 12 May 2004).

10 On the Lisbon Treaty, see Sebastian Kurpas et al., “The Treaty of Lisbon: Implementing the Institutional Innovations” (CEPS, Special Reports, 15 November 2007); Juan Mayoral, “Democratic improvements in the European Union under the Lisbon Treaty Institutional changes regarding democratic government in the EU” (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2011).



require a creative act as compared to its foundation. The founding fathers of the Union made a political creation that resulted in the “Schumann Plan”, published on 9 May 1950. One can read that, “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity”.¹¹ Solidarity and compromise constitute the two bedrocks of the integration process where member states have been agreeing progressively on common interests and have been compromising to achieve decisions. That is the reason why one might consider that the EU has attained an historic point of non-return: the citizens must be placed at the core of the integration process. In fact, austerity policies and the difficulties to manage the euro crisis zone have shown a growing distance from the solidarity dynamics and from the search for compromise. When EU citizens feel threatened internally, as by unemployment for instance, the EU itself is threatened because solidarity and compromising fail to be put in practice.

¹¹ “The Schuman Declaration”, 9 May 1950.

In October 2013, the Union received the Nobel Prize for Peace. The supporters of the integration process—the so-called “euro-optimists”—received the news with great applause. It meant that the EU has a past, a present and a future, i.e. the Union has brought historical peace in Europe and it has created political, economic and social convergence. The process is still ongoing and the tools to continue this path need both serious refreshing and to include a better involvement of its citizens. All Europeans are protagonists of the ongoing EU crisis and are part of the challenge of retrieving the founding spirit of solidarity that is hampered by the resurgence of national egoism. If Europeans fail to agree that the problems ahead are common, the prospects to find converging and long-lasting solutions will be narrow. The perception of belonging to a same public European sphere is what the “New Narrative for Europe” is trying to bring back in the EU dynamics. The future of European integration depends on the creative capacity to move from words to deeds.

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