

## Chapter 9

# **From European unity to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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## 9.1. Introduction

The European project is marked by decades of achievements and successes, in a path that has seen advances and setbacks regarding the debate between institutional deepening and the enlargement of the EU to new Member States. This is a debate that has been fueled by different political options and changes in the institutional framework of the European Union, namely at the level of «informal decision-making directories» that condition and write the history of the European project.

The path of success adopted by European leaders is undeniable, in a project started with 6 founding countries and which today brings together 27 Member States, with several countries following the path of accession. This path is fueled by the sharing of a common identity and the pursuit of improving living conditions, in a message that has been disseminated over decades and implemented by a spirit of solidarity between peoples.

However, each historical period is marked by a succession of barriers and challenges to European unity, with the 21<sup>st</sup> century being marked by a set of events that have put political leaders and European society under pressure. After a beginning of the century marked by several terrorist attacks and a strong economic crisis, we saw the European project being shaken by strong discrepancies in the policy to be adopted in the face of the refugee crisis (2015) and the departure of the United Kingdom. The current context (2022) brings new challenges to the European project, given the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the exponential increase in inflation.

In the face of these advances and setbacks, what is the scope for redefining the European project? What paths should be adopted to ensure «unity in diversity» and guarantee the attractiveness of the European project?

This chapter aims to present a reflection on these challenges and outline paths for the institutional reformulation of the European Union, considering the need to review the EU's operating rules and the dissemination of European values within European society.

## 9.2. Key concepts

- **European Values** – set of European values aimed at ensuring a society based on pluralism, tolerance, justice, the principle of non-discrimination and equality. Values promoted and that must be shared by all citizens of the European Union. The following are embodied in article 2 of the Treaty on European Union: *i*) respect for human dignity; *ii*) freedom; *iii*) democracy; *iv*) equality; *v*) rule of law; *vi*) respect for human rights, including those of minorities<sup>1</sup>
- **European Identity** – political and social concept aimed at building a unity project around the European Union. The construction of the concept is not alien to a desire to unite the European peoples in common policies and objectives, outlined as the principles of political, economic and social life in community.
- **European Solidarity** – principle and representative mechanism of the functioning of the European Union, based on the perspective of support and construction of the common well-being. European solidarity must be embodied in policies that promote the economic and social development of all territories. The principle of solidarity reflects a concern to ensure an equitable construction of the European project and to ensure unity around the values of the community.
- **Enlargement** – The European Union started with a six-country project, currently having 27 member states. Enlargement represents one of the EU's most successful foreign policies and is a sign of the attractiveness of the project. The last enlargement process culminated in the accession of Croatia (2013), and there are currently eight countries with candidate status (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, with ongoing negotiations and Ukraine and Moldova, as a result of the application for membership in 2022) and two potential candidate countries (Kosovo and Georgia, with the application made in 2022).

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<sup>(1)</sup> Available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012M002>. Consulted on August 20, 2022.

### 9.3. EU – a unique project and organization

The debate around the structure, objectives and future of the European Union (EU) has «fueled» a succession of significant academic works, with the EU being a priority object of study if we consider the area of social sciences. This academic debate has been extended to the world of politics, with the future of the European Union being a «throwing weapon» in the game of conquest and the exercise of power.

The success of the European project is based on more than seven decades of effective cooperation, as well as on the evolution of the number of Member States. Throughout history, we have witnessed periods of great evolution and commitment to the European project, interspersed with periods in which political, economic and social crises represented effective barriers to European integration.

One of the central aspects of this debate is the lack of consensus on the nature and path taken by the EU (Zimmermann & Dur, 2012), although it is possible to discover common points of understanding, namely at the level of the EU's contribution to the democratization process of States, a determining factor for the consolidation of European values and for the dissemination of economic and social development throughout the European Union.

The European project continues to present itself as a unique political solution, bringing together more than 440 million people around a solution that emerged with the aim of healing the wounds of World War II and ensuring a set of freedoms in the European space (free movement of goods, capital, services and labor). One of the fundamental pillars for the evaluation of the project is related to the realization of the motto «Unity in Diversity» and the creation of a long period of peace between European nations, turning the European space into a territory of progress and defense of human rights.

The success of the project in economic terms, an element that continues to be central in the ability to attract new candidacies, was accompanied by a more hesitant political path, namely in view of the dichotomy between the defense of an intergovernmental project or a path more based on the bases of a future federal project. Equally, less

evident was the progress in terms of defense, with the rejection of a European Defense Community (EDC) and doubts about the creation of a common European army. When faced with the scenario of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is important to remember that military issues represent one of the most complex matters in European policies, and it has not been possible, until today, to reach and establish a consensus on which steps should be taken. to guarantee a deeper collaboration in the military area and create a common army!<sup>1</sup>

In the last 20 years, several challenges have been posed to European unity, including the proliferation of terrorist attacks on European soil, the economic and social crisis that tested the principle of «European solidarity» to the limit, the refugee crisis that began in 2015 and which turned the Mediterranean Sea into a real cemetery due to the number of shipwrecks recorded, the pandemic caused by the new Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, with the return of a war scenario to the European continent.

Alongside these challenges, there is still a debate on the way of institutional strengthening and reform of the functioning of the European institutions, with paths that can favor economic cooperation, based on a progressive enlargement of the Union to new States and the maintenance of the current institutional and organizational beacons, or the adoption of a path, even if including a more restricted group of countries, of a federal path, requiring a reformulation of the European Union treaties and a deep review of the institutional archetype of the organization.

The debate around the European Union also focuses on the identification of values shared by a wide spectrum of the population, with the aim of creating a perceived European identity among the European peoples, as well as ensuring the pursuit of the political objectives outlined at the time of the foundation of the European project. This objective is directly associated with the identification of a unifying feeling of wills, namely the defense of the European project and the

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<sup>(1)</sup> The Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) «enables the Union to take a leading role in peace-keeping operations, conflict prevention and in the strengthening of the international security. In [https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/common-security-and-defence-policy-csdp\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/common-security-and-defence-policy-csdp_en). Consulted on September 15, 2022.

assumption of European citizenship, resulting from the Maastricht Treaty.

For this purpose, it is important to bear in mind the organizational structure of the European Union, the relationship between citizens and European institutions and the role of national political actors, who are decisive agents for the negative or positive evaluation of citizens of the European Union. It is important to mention, in this field, that only one of the EU bodies is directly elected by the citizens (European Parliament), and elections have been marked by high levels of abstention and electoral alienation over the last decades (Schäfer & Debus, 2018).

The challenge of «deconstructing» the European project in the eyes of the common citizen has been identified as one of the EU's priority political objectives (Hoyland & Hix, 2011), and the pursuit of this objective requires the coexistence of a set of factors, namely: political stability; economic growth; social pacification and concerted action between political agents; the training process; and the action of the media.

### 9.3.1. European challenges – the EU in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The analysis of the main challenges of the European Union can be based on two levels, one referring to the «immediate», that is, to concrete and objective responses to the difficulties felt by European citizens, and one addressing the outline of the European project in the medium/long term, materializing a model of political project that is accepted by all Member States.

In the context of immediate responses, we can list a set of challenges, the most relevant being social and economic cohesion between Member States; the response to the climate crisis and energy dependence on non-renewable energy sources; the sustainability of the European social model (welfare state); the high rates of abstentionism in several electoral processes in the countries of the European Union; the challenges associated with migratory flows and the demographic crisis in almost the entire European continent, with a «demographic winter»

that has posed serious challenges in the labor market and in the principle of intergenerational solidarity between peoples.

In terms of responses to medium/long term challenges, emphasis should be placed on the need to identify the beacons and structures that should cement the future of the European Union, at a time when the latter is grappling with the consequences of the United Kingdom's departure and with setbacks in terms of democracy in Eastern European countries. But this debate requires a deep reflection on the path that the project should adopt, namely whether the economic and commercial aspect of the project should be promoted, in a process that values the enlargement processes or whether a profound restructuring of the operating rules of the project should be carried out.

Alongside these short and medium/long term challenges, it is important to retain the importance of bringing citizens closer to the European project, on a path that promotes greater knowledge about the EU, the impact of European policies and European citizenship, alongside national citizenships.

This is the moment to redefine the European project. This goal is evidenced or driven by the existence of new European leaders, new types of coalitions in the different governments across Europe, by the growth of popular support for Eurosceptic political parties, but also by a growing division between Member States and a new central pole of European leadership, replacing the Franco-German axis with a new force from Eastern European countries, as a direct consequence of the European position in the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Throughout European history, we have witnessed several «alliances» and the construction of blocks within the European bloc, which has conditioned the evolution of the European Union and changed the pace of growth and consolidation of the project. However, this situation results from the absence of a «running thread» that is transversal and that makes it possible to answer citizens' doubts about the essence of the EU.

The existence of these blocks demonstrates a significant aspect of the present EU: the lack of solidarity among Member States and the pression of national voters to force their governments to address in a different way the negotiation processes in Brussels. Equating the fu-

ture of the European Union in the 21<sup>st</sup> century implies bearing in mind these different approaches, but also the new paradigm of the world: the existence of a multiple political, economic and military power, with the affirmation of a system of multiple decision centers. The main question is if the European Union can be a key global actor in this new international environment or if the EU will be a side player, outdated in the political, economic and military dimension.

Are the achievements of the last 70 years enough to envision a successful future for the European Union? Is the legacy of peace enough to face the economic difficulties felt by European citizens? Could the «demographic winter» influence the construction of the European project? Will it be possible to continue a process of transferring sovereignty from States to European institutions, in a path strongly contested by more nationalist/populist political forces (Mudde, 2004 and Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017)?

In the past two decades, the EU has been «shaken» by three determinant phenomena for the growth of nationalist and/or Eurosceptic political forces support: the wave of terrorist attacks that hit European soil after September 11, 2001; the economic crisis that started in 2008 and led to the intervention of the International Monetary Fund in several countries, and the wave of migrants and refugees throughout the European territory since 2015 (Costa, 2019). In the last two year two other events have influenced, in a significative way, the European way of life: the pandemic caused by Covid-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022).

If it is true that we are in the first quarter of 21<sup>st</sup> century, with a long path to follow, it is also possible to consider the future of the European Union, based on the lessons of history and the different options in the hands of European decision-makers. The integration and the enlargement process are not inexhaustible processes, that is, the path can be built through periods or times of regression of acquired rights. No acquired right is unlimited or eternal. What is clearly observed is the importance given to dialogue and the improvement of the quality of democracy, rather than the regular and systemic use of force, in a considerable change compared to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Union should be built must be built with the citizens and not beyond the European citizens.

With this perspective, it is important to note that the enlargement process, perhaps the most successful project of the European Union, has always been accompanied by several doubts about the «ideal» dimension of the European Union and about the criteria that should underlie the acceptance of new member states. The establishment of the Copenhagen Criteria was not enough to draw a line, as can be seen from the current processes of accession, with the political dimension being the most relevant in the context of defining the structure and dimension of the EU.

However, something is clear in the internal functioning of the Union. The maintenance of the criterion of «unanimity» for decision-making on the most relevant EU issues, along with the continuous growth in the number of member states, makes a paralysis in the integration process and makes the «dreamt» federalist path more plausible. At the same time, the reinforcement of the European project will have to go through a reinforcement of participative democracy and a deeper involvement of citizens, allowing for the consolidation of «European citizenship», foreseen and prescribed in the Maastricht Treaty<sup>1</sup>.

This is the moment to promote the creation and assimilation of a European identity, adopting a discourse that allows to present the possible consequences of further deepening, as well as the consequences of a deconstruction of the community project. At a time when ties of solidarity are being called into question and replaced by a strong dependence on economic results, the path must make it possible to ensure that the common citizen is fully identified with Europe's freedoms.

Between the ideology of enlargement or the pragmatism of the *status quo*, there are more questions than answers about the reconfiguration of the European space, challenged by Russia's action and startled by the inauguration of more Eurosceptic governments.

The history of the EU is full of supranational and intergovernmental elements, in a unique European structure, composed by three foundations: the geographic aspect; the European institutions powers; and the Community responsibility. In a simple analysis, it's possible to defend that the supranational effect can move the Union towards a

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<sup>(1)</sup> Approved in 1992 and in force since 1993.

Federation (a Super State), and the intergovernmental effect can move the Union towards a fully international intergovernmental organization. Nevertheless, citizens should have the last word about this path.

## 9.4. Conclusions

The path of consolidation of the European project must be based on an historical review of its history, of the motivations that were at the basis of the creation of the European Community, in order to reach a global commitment on the need for the continuation of its conquests. Without this global and broader commitment, we will face successive periods during which the European project will be dependent on economic cycles or electoral struggles. Although European values and achievements are assumed by Europeans, the expectations generated by the development associated with being a part to the EU constitute a very high burden on the relationship of citizens with European institutions.

The current debate continues to focus on the matrix of the European project: between a federal path and another that prioritizes the economy and relations between States, leaving space for the defense of the Europe of nations. This debate, although central, has been fueled by political elites, being less relevant to the common European citizen, more focused on economic issues and living conditions.

The European Union of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must look at the historical course, at the different crises, but, above all, at the unity created between peoples formerly used to war scenarios. Peace and the defense of human rights must represent the foundation of the European project. Nevertheless, political representatives must focus their action on three fundamental pillars: the quality of democracy and greater proximity between elected and voters; harmonious economic and social development in all the territories of the European Union; the ability to respond to climate change issues; the «demographic Winter» on the European continent; and the «welfare state», matrix of European solidarity.

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## Reading suggestions

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## Exercise

After reading this chapter, select one of the challenges of the European Union and present a critical reflection on it.