A work-in-progress: The challenges ahead for Europe

We draw on the expertise of an art director, a doctor in political science, an immigration-focused art centre, a journalist, a philosopher as well as a festival curator and put one simple question to them: what are the challenges lying ahead for Europe and how can we solve them?

Interview CHARLINE STOELZAED
Photographer THOMAS OST

Olivier Costa
on piecing back Europe's social fragments

In the early days of my career as an EU academic, times were different. I'm talking early 90s here: the Berlin Wall fell, the Maastricht Treaty negotiations were in full swing and on a social level – amongst both academics and citizens – there was this general sense of positivism and enthusiasm towards the EU as the model of the future. I would even go as far as to say that there was a general consensus that nation-states were relics of the past. What is striking however, is that this exact moment equally marked rising public concern on the actual extent of the EU institutions' powers and whether it was actually reasonable to organise political decision-making on a supranational level. Whereas EU affairs had been a matter for specialists and experts since the 60s, the general public was beginning to discover the challenges that came along with the further integration of the EU for themselves, engaging in structured and thorough discussions themselves.

How did this social revelation evolve from the early 90s till today?
I would say that the precarious balance between positivism and concern has shifted towards the latter. Whereas people used to believe in the EU as a means towards a brighter future and ideas of intercultural exchange and free movement of people held a positive connotation, I'm unable to see a single positive emotion linked to European integration today.

What are the causes that lead to this pessimism?
I identify three factors. The further expansion of the EU towards central and eastern European countries was managed to the best of their ability, but in terms of decision-making, coherence of objectives and agreeing on "European values," a EU with 27 members rather than 12 is an entirely different ballgame. Mind, I'm not saying it was entirely a mistake, since these countries didn't have a plan B. Their democracies were very fragile, there were issues with social fragmentation and nationalist movements and the Yugoslav Wars reminded everyone of the EU's peace-keeping purposes. And from an economical point of view, Western Europe actually benefitted from the expansion since, in turn, they got access to a new substantial market.

Secondly, the 2008 financial crisis put an end to the convergence of Western and Eastern economies, leading to a one to ten ratio between the lowest and highest wages. Not a single economic entity can endure such a gap as it creates too many distortions, and because of this we're currently dealing with the precarious relationship between European corporations and an increasingly dissatisfied citizenry, suspicious of the EU's free movement of labour. As a result, no further efforts have been made to welcome new member states into the Eurozone, in contradiction to its foundational idea. We're dealing with a system here where everyone was expected to play the same game and abide the same rules, but somewhere along the road we got stuck. We're in a very hybrid situation with a single market, a half-way integrated currency and extremely differentiated social policies, leaving no room for more ambitious goals in terms of education, research or environmental policies.

There's also the recent rise of populism: like all democracies, the EU has been taking a heap of blows from populist movements for the past few years. But unlike nation-states which always have politicians, critical thinkers or journalists to counterweigh whatever it is the far-right of -left is claiming, the EU can't rely on these checks and balances. Most citizens and national politicians have become unwilling to advocate for the EU. And since no one believes what the European Commission has to say about its own governance, the EU takes the beating without fighting back. Especially since it takes a mere 20 seconds for a populist to blame the Commission for all the waves of migration since the 50s, while it would take 10 minutes to explain that that isn't accurate.

And this leads us to a crucial aspect: EU affairs are highly intricate, while people have very limited knowledge of it and are generally not informed enough. Fighting against populist discourses on EU affairs is a highly asymmetrical battle. Populist rhetoric is easy: it plays on emotions and fears, like patriotic attachment and love for national traditions and history, paired with social fears on just about anything. Advocating for further European integration doesn't merely imply an emotional register, but a technical one too. GDP, import/export, sustainable development and the likes. Very depressing issues which don't help in paving a way into the hearts of people. You need a whole lot of time, information and resources to get your message out there, but I'm afraid that today's society doesn't offer a lot of room for these three elements. People are so concerned with being stressed out over the future that it's become hard to make them realise that life has never been better, barring the remaining (and very real) problems. The European institutions were founded upon rationality, European law, expertise and evidence-based policies, since they needed to substitute ideology to overcome cultural and political division. Unfortunately, it's precisely these core values which discredit the EU today in the minds of many.

What can be done then to "pave a way" into people's hearts?
It's hard for me to say; I just don't see a clear solution. I can only hope that we're experiencing a temporary peak of populism, fake news and the likes; that people will soon become aware of the limitations of these politics of simplicity. In the meantime, we really need to start thinking about how to reform the EU to make it more transparent and efficient: after 60 years of crises, deals, compromises, treaties and agreements, it's looking rather beastly now. Mind you, sophisticated issues require equally comprehensive structures – but progress is definitely possible here.

OLIVIER (1969) holds a PhD in political sciences and dedicates his academic career to all things EU affairs. He has been teaching at the College of Europe in Bruges since 2000, home to those who are looking to get a grasp on the EU's inner workings.
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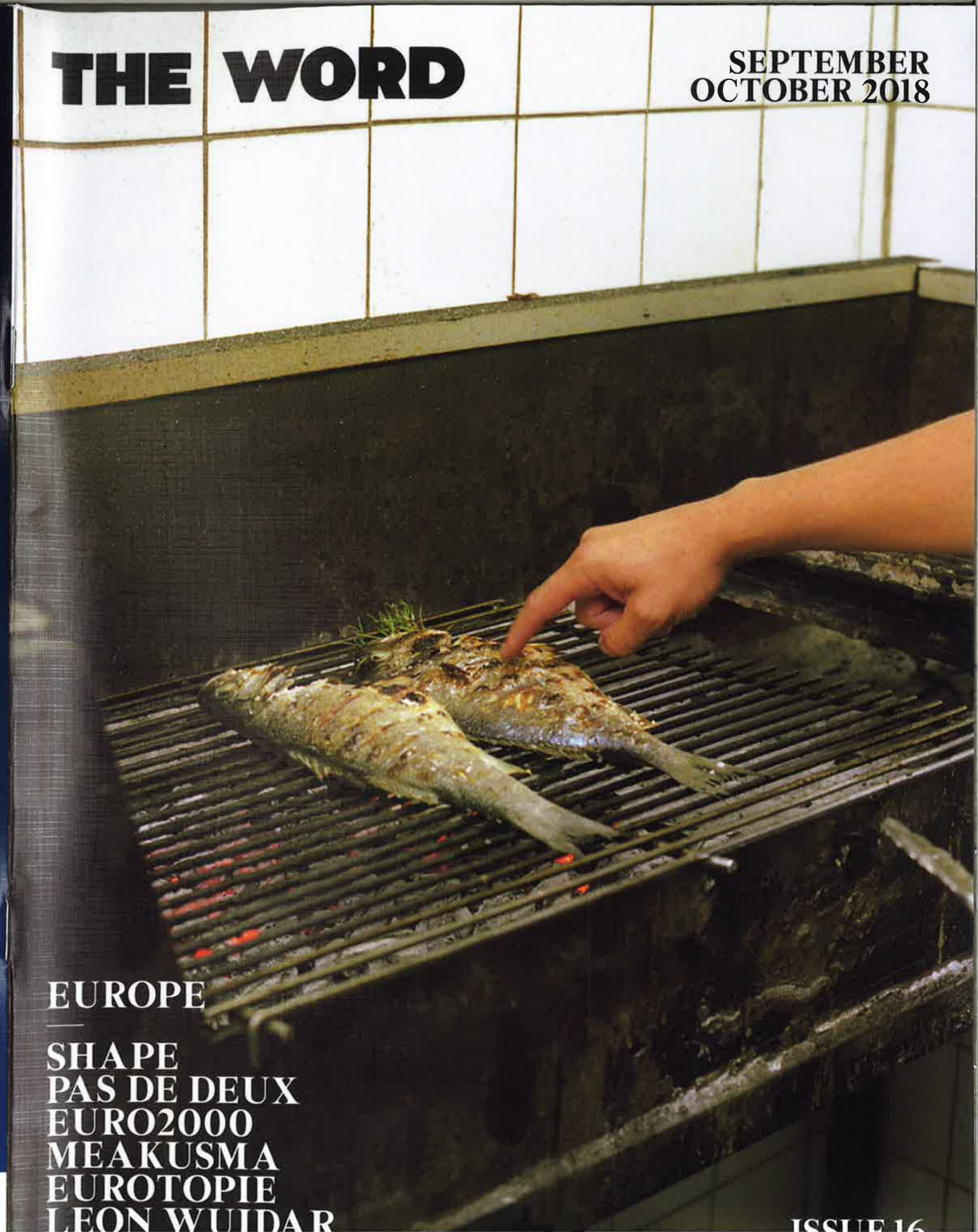
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