



Europe's Obsession With Its Future

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the 2000s, European Union institutions have launched several initiatives to reflect on and shape the future of the European project. Among them, we can mention the Convention on the Future of Europe in 2001; the Reflection Group on the Future of the EU 2030, created in 2007; the initiative of the European Commission concerning the future of Europe in September 2016; and more recently, the Conference on the Future of Europe, officially launched in May 2021. What I will argue in this article is the fact that all these initiatives on the future of Europe and the omnipresence of the future in EU rhetoric and on the European agenda these past two decades tell us more about the present state of the EU than of its future. These initiatives reveal the state of uncertainties in which the European project has entered since the 2000s, while the constant and explicit reference to the future of the EU in the public sphere also suggests a new articulation between the time-categories of the past, the present and the future in the European integration project.

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While some European nation-states are looking at their past with nostalgia for their glorious power and their sovereignty, real or fantasied,² or with the will to confront openly their tragic

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² See Robert Saunders, "Brexit and Empire: 'Global Britain' and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 6 (2020): 1140-1174; and Anne Deighton, "The Past is the Present: British Imperial

experiences,³ or even with amnesia for the darkest time of their history, the European Union (EU) seems mainly preoccupied, today, by its future. Indeed, the EU, and before it, the European Economic Community (EEC), has always been concerned by its future. However, the way the EEC/EU has considered its future has been changing. The reference to the future was even implicitly present in the foundation of the European Communities, without requiring to be acknowledged and expressed *per se*. On May 9, 1950, the declaration of the French foreign affairs minister, Robert Schuman, often defined as one of the founding speeches of European integration, laid the groundwork to how European pioneers conceived the future. He pronounced the now well-known words, “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,” prefiguring the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952, but also the fact that the European integration was a long-term project.

In 1957, the preamble of the Treaty of Rome, establishing the EEC, adopted a similar perspective. While the word “future” or other words directly associated with this semantic field were not explicitly mentioned, the goal of laying “the foundations of ‘an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe’” also suggested that the quest for a united Europe will require time. By framing European integration in terms of process and steps, the European pioneers identified immediately the “regime of historicity” of the European integration as turned towards the future. By “regime of historicity”, I refer here to the notion coined by the French historian, François Hartog⁴, who defined it as the experience of time lived by a society and the way a community perceives and articulates the past, the present and the future. European integration was, since the beginning of the European project, a phenomenon ontologically oriented towards its future. Each accomplishment was only seen as a step prefiguring another one and the *telos* of Europe⁵, if it exists, was associated with always more integration. Even though the political forms that European integration should take were not clear and predetermined, the project established a “horizon of expectation,” to use the expression of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck⁶, that made the future the engine of European integration.

Memories and the European Question”, in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Muller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100-120.

³ As is, for example, the case for some Eastern European countries confronted with the memory of communism since the 1990 but also, more recently, for a country like France vis-a-vis the colonial period in Algeria or even the genocide in Rwanda. See Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer (ed.), *L'Europe et ses passés douloureux* (Paris: La Découverte: 2007).

⁴ François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and Experiences of Time*, Translated by Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁵ On the notion of European *telos* (or rather the lack of European *telos*), the undetermined future political forms of the European Union and the “lack of explicit *political ends*”, see Kalypso Nicolaïdis, “Europe’s Ends”, in *The Meanings of Europe. Changes and Exchanges of a Contested Concept*, ed. Claudia Wiesner and Meike Schmidt-Gleim (London: Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2014).

⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Translated and with an Introduction by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

The institutional evolution of the EU offers a perfect example of the fact that, as the political scientist Kalypso Nicolaïdis describes it, the “European project is an open-ended process rather than a frozen structure”.⁷ The call for institutional transformations of the EEC/EU has always been a key issue in the history of the EU and a part of the European process. All the European treaties signed since the 1980s have brought some institutional changes and often initiated the next change by scheduling a new Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) in charge of reforming the current treaties. From Maastricht to Amsterdam, Nice and subsequent treaty reforms, the EU has always been engaged in a permanent transformational process, running after its future.

Paradoxically, from the 1950s to the 1990s, the reference to the past of European nations – their wars, their divisions, their confrontations – was never absent from European discourses and rhetoric. Indeed, the European past has served as a symbolic resource used by European pioneers to promote European integration. The European narrative that emerged after the 1950s and that predominated among the supporters of European integration was based on the idea that the future of the European states’ relationship should not resemble its contentious and violent past.⁸

In a way, if, implicitly, the future was the engine of European integration, the reference to the past was the fuel of this project. Since the 1950s, European institutions have tried to provide an historical background to European integration and to build a common narrative about the European past.⁹ For the historian Oriane Calligaro, the European politics of remembrance has led to the multiplication of references to European memory and heritage.¹⁰ If that illustrates how the past was mobilised in service of a political ambition, she also identified, in all those initiatives and strategies of remembrance, a shift in the time-category of European integration around the mid-1970s. For Calligaro, the European attempts to shape a common narrative about the European past have led to a new regime of historicity, called “presentism”, in reference to the notion coined by Francois Hartog to describe what happened when the future is no longer the time-horizon of societies and when present-time becomes its own horizon of time.

The past and the future have always been interlinked in the history of European integration, and these two time-categories have often been used to serve the present time of the European project, either to justify it or to legitimate it. However, it seems that these past two decades, the future of

⁷ Nicolaïdis, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

⁸ See Fabrice Larat, “Present-ing the Past: Political Narratives on European History and the Justification of European Integration”, *German Law Review* 6, no. 2 (2005): 263-278.

⁹ See Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, “The EU Politics of Commemoration. Can Europeans Remember Together?”, *West European Politics* 35, no. 5 (2012): 1182-1202.

¹⁰ Oriane Calligaro “Legitimation Through Remembrance? The Changing Regimes of Historicity of European Integration”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23, no. 3 (2015): 330-343. See also Oriane Calligaro, *Negotiating Europe. EU Promotion of Europeanness since the 1950s* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); Oriane Calligaro and François Foret, “La mémoire européenne en action. Acteurs, enjeux et modalités de la mobilisation du passé comme ressource politique pour l’Union européenne”, *Politique européenne* 37, no. 2 (2012): 18-43.

Europe became a direct issue for several European actors. It does not mean that the problematic of the past has disappeared from the European agenda – at the national level or the EU level –; nevertheless, the future became a constant object of reflection for the EU, to the point that EU institutions launched several initiatives to think and shape their future. While this editorial doesn't pretend to produce definitive research outcomes, what I formulate here is more a hypothesis or even a perspective to feed the debate over the future of Europe and over what this time-category tells us about European integration today.

What I will argue in this editorial is that the state of uncertainty which the EU has dived into since the beginning of 2000 and the resurgence of conflicts of memory among and within the EU nations after the end of the Cold War has led the EU institutions to mobilise, consciously or not, the time-category of the future to emphasise what was at stake with the future of European integration and to potentially re-energise, or even re-legitimate, the European project.

To do so, I will describe briefly, using official documents, the emergence, at the beginning of 2000, of the different official European initiatives launched to reflect on the future of Europe and I will identify the main trends around which scholars, pundits, activists of the European cause, think tanks, and experts have addressed the topic. In this editorial, I will not emphasise the strategy of actors to use the future as a political resource for political goals, and neither will I focus on the potential competition between European institutions to control Europe's future initiatives. Even though the EU should not be considered as a monolithic bloc, and the fact that these initiatives over the future of Europe are the product of all the major European institutions (European Council, European Commission and recently the European Parliament) illustrate it, what matters here it is the fact that in these past two decades the question of Europe's future has been mentioned constantly in the European Union arena, and numerous initiatives about the future of Europe have been conducted by EU institutions and other European organisations. As a result, the idea of the future of Europe became part of the European public sphere and a legitimate problem requiring to be addressed. I will consider here the future of Europe not as a problem requiring some solutions, but as an existing discourse produced by different institutional actors and political entrepreneurs, and incorporated in the European agenda.

1. The EU's New Obsession With Its Future

At the end of the Cold War, traumas of the past came back to haunt several European nations – among them the memory of communism, but also conflicting memories among European states for events that happened during World War II or after 1945.¹¹ However, for the EU itself, the situation was different. It is mainly at the beginning of the 2000s and around the time of the enlargement of

¹¹ See Mink and Neumayer, *op. cit.*; and Marie-Claude Maurel and Françoise Mayer, *L'Europe et ses représentations du passé – les tourments de la mémoire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

the EU to include several Central and Eastern European countries in 2004 that the way the EU articulated past and future had changed. Not only was the continent finally unified, but certain events such as the division concerning the military intervention in Iraq in 2003, and the French and Dutch rejection of the European constitution in 2005, propelled the European project into an era of uncertainties and of intense questioning. The implicit reference to the future contained in the European initiative ceased to be obvious, and so did the future of European integration. The idea of a mechanical progress of Europe towards more integration was challenged.¹² As a result, since the beginning of the 2000s, the EU changed how it envisioned its future, and nowadays the EU seems obsessed with its future. Since then, not only did European institutions, the member states, and the network of organisations promoting European integration, start to refer explicitly to the future of Europe, suggesting that the future was at stake, but also the issue became omnipresent in the EU's political initiatives, communication, and reflections.

Since 2000, the nature of the engine force of European integration has changed, as has the way the EU refers to the future. The "future" has become a political category explicitly mobilised by the EU and its member states in the public sphere, to address the crises the European project was facing.¹³ The multiple European initiatives that have been initiated since then to reflect and question the future of Europe attest to it.

These past 20 years, several European initiatives to reflect and act on the future of Europe have been launched. Among those initiatives, we can mention the Convention on the Future of Europe initiated by the declaration of Laeken (European Council) in December 2001, that ended in 2003 with the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. If the Philadelphia Convention that led to the United States Constitution in 1787 was clearly the reference for the European Convention, it did not end in the same way: the European Convention lasted a few years, instead of a few months, and the outcome of this process was different. The European Constitution was rejected by two founding states (France and the Netherlands) in May 2005.

In 2004, the European Commission, presided by Romano Prodi, launched a new initiative: The publication of the report "Building a political Europe. 50 proposals for tomorrow's Europe"¹⁴ followed the roundtable "A sustainable project for tomorrow's Europe," presided by the former French economic minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn. This report identified three crises that the EU was facing – institutions, project, territory – and some solutions to remedy them.

¹² See, for example, the debates that occurred after the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005 and that can be illustrated by publication referring to the end of Europe. See, in French, Renaud Dehousse, *La fin de l'Europe* (Paris: Flammarion, 2005); even though the title was more provocative than really affirming the end of the European project.

¹³ Andrew Moravcsik, "The Future of Europe: Coping with Crisis", *Great Decisions* (2017): 15-28.

¹⁴ European Commission, *Building a political Europe. 50 proposals for tomorrow's Europe. The Strauss-Kahn report. 2005.*

In 2007, on the initiative of the European Council this time, a Reflection Group on the Future of the EU 2030, presided by the former Spanish Prime Minister, Felipe González, was created. The group released its report, “Project Europe 2030. Challenges and opportunities”¹⁵, in May 2010. In 2012, eleven foreign affairs ministers of EU member states created an informal reflection group on the future of Europe – they released their report in September of the same year.

After the British referendum on Brexit, in June 2016, the European Council, started a reflection on the future of the EU, followed, in September 2016, by a new initiative of the European Commission concerning the future of Europe, that released a “White Paper on the Future of Europe”¹⁶ in March 2017. The triple crisis diagnosed in 2004 became a “polycrisis,” to use the expression of the European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker. The White Paper described the issues the EU was confronted with (euro crisis, Brexit, migration, Euroscepticism, etc.), but also the drivers of Europe’s future, and identified five scenarios on the horizon of 2025.

In 2019–2020 came a new initiative concerning a Conference on the Future of Europe. Such an initiative was evoked in 2019¹⁷, initiated in January 2020 by the European Parliament and the European Commission, and, after having been delayed because of the COVID-19 crisis, officially launched on Europe Day, 9 May 2021. On 10 March 2021, the European Parliament President David Sassoli, Prime Minister of Portugal António Costa, representing the Presidency of the Council, and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who compose the Joint Presidency of the Conference, signed the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe. The goal of the conference is to allow European citizens to express their ideas on what they want for Europe. The conference is a part of an already long list of EU initiatives adopted in the past to close the gap between the European institutions and its citizens, to re-legitimize a project that is presented as disconnected from European peoples. The Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, justified the project of the Conference on the Future of Europe by arguing that “People need to be at the very center of all our policies. My wish is therefore that all Europeans will actively contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe and play a leading role in setting the European Union’s priorities. It is only together that we can build our Union of tomorrow.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Reflection Group on the Future of the EU 2030 (presided by Felipe González), “Project Europe 2030. Challenges and opportunities”, A report to the European Council, May 2010.

¹⁶ European Commission, *White Paper on the Future of Europe*, March 2017.

¹⁷ The French President, Emmanuel Macron, mentioned, in March 2019, in an open letter to European citizens published in different European newspapers, the idea of a Conference for Europe. In July, Ursula von der Leyen, advanced the idea of a Conference on the Future of Europe in the political guidelines for her mandate as President of the European Commission. In November, a “Franco-German non-paper on key questions and guidelines” concerning the Conference on the Future of Europe was unofficially made public; and during the European Council of 12 December, the idea of the Conference was endorsed.

¹⁸ European Commission, “Conference on the Future of Europe”, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/conference-future-europe_en.

This democracy initiative, supposed to last for a year, takes the form of debates, panel discussions and online forums “that will enable people from every corner of Europe to share their ideas to help shape Europe’s future.”¹⁹ On April 19, 2021, a multilingual digital platform (available in 24 EU official languages) was launched, on which citizens would be able to post their comments, share ideas and interact with each other about the future they want for Europe. In a sense, the conference is also seen as a response to growing Euroscepticism, or at least a certain form of disinterest towards the EU.

2. The Future of Europe as a Research Object

Indeed, all the initiatives on the future of Europe and the omnipresence of the future in EU rhetoric and on the European agenda these past two decades tell us more about the present state of the EU than of its future. These reflections reveal the state of uncertainties in which the European project is. It is because Europe’s past has exhausted a large part of its power as a symbolic resource aimed to justify European integration after World War II, and its present is confused, that the future is so overwhelmingly present in the European mindset.

This situation has led to the publication of numerous types of work trying to address the problems that the EU is facing.²⁰ Some of them are descriptive, while others are deliberately normative. The exercise consisting of thinking of EU’s future has often taken the form of analysis arguing in favour of more integration and offering some ways to achieve those goals. Despite the variety of the actors producing these analyses about the future of Europe (academics, think tanks, national and European official institutions, non-profit organisations), we can identify some general trends concerning the treatment of the topic.

There are different ways to study the future of Europe. While philosophical perspectives about the meanings of Europe²¹ and the ends of the European integration are rare²², traditional academic research in political science, think tanks policy papers and institutional reports are more likely to embrace perspectives that will emphasise the role of the EU in the world or internal development issues. International comparative perspectives evaluate quantitatively, through the use of economic

¹⁹ European Parliament, “Conference on the Future of Europe: Engaging with citizens to build a more resilient Europe”, 10 March 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210304IPR99242/future-of-europe-engaging-with-citizens-to-build-a-more-resilient-europe>

²⁰ I should also mention the existence of publications arguing openly against European integration or predicting the end of the EU. They don’t represent the majority of publications and I will not focus on them in the next paragraphs.

²¹ See Claudia Wiesner and Mieke Schmidt-Gleim (ed.), *The Meanings of Europe. Changes and Exchanges of a Contested Concept* (London: Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2014).

²² See Nicolaidis, *op. cit.*

and demographic data, the global place of the EU in the future in comparison to other countries and continents. This description drives us generally to the conclusion that, in 2050, the EU will represent only a small part of the world population, while its share of the world economy – defined in terms of GDP – will decrease relatively to the rise of emerging economies such as China, India and Brazil.²³ This comparative approach can also be doubled with an evaluation of the future international role of the EU.²⁴ Traditionally, such an approach takes the form of the study of the conditions under which the EU can become a global player and offers some analysis about the potential role of the EU in specific foreign policy issues (Mediterranean region, Eastern Europe, etc.). Nevertheless, when it comes to the future of Europe, the internal evolutions of the EU often represent the main centre of interest of studies. In this case, the future of European integration focuses on the internal political and institutional evolutions of the EU by offering different scenarios over what the EU will look like in the mid- and long terms, following a spectrum going from a more federal to a more intergovernmental union, and including some variations over the notion of differentiation. This institutional and political focus is often associated with a more normative approach describing what the EU should become in the future and provides an institutional and political agenda of reforms on how to reach this goal. This approach often relies on public policy case studies to illustrate their ambition.

This issue of the journal begins from an institutional internal approach, with Alexander Kloth's assessment of the capacity of the 'Spitzenkandidaten' process to democratise the EU. However, the issue goes beyond a purely institution-focused approach. Various contributions address the future of Europe through political and policy lenses, often closing the gap between external and internal EU challenges. For instance, Marlies Humpelstetter's article analyses the connections between the EU's development and migration policies, while Lara Breitmoser connects the British departure from the EU to the internal issue of the development of European identity. Meanwhile, Brendan Rooney's contribution addresses the EU's external relations with the UK, all the while approaching the question through the possibilities offered by the EU's internal legal framework. Similarly, Adriano Rodari's article sheds light on how Russian disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic have been constituted, whilst pointing out that disinformation represents a challenge for the EU.

This issue also addresses global challenges that define our time, and so being, the future of Europe. While those global challenges affect the future of the EU, in return, the actions adopted by the EU to deal with them are expected to impact the world and make the EU a transformative player at the international level. In this vein, Fabian Lütz argues that regulatory action from the EU can combat the threat of algorithmic discrimination globally. Luis Galiano Bastarrica's discussion on environmental protection clauses in free trade agreements considers the EU's influence on the

²³ See Robert Chaouad, "Les fins possibles de l'Europe", *La revue internationale et stratégique* 80, no. 4 (2010): 127-137.

²⁴ As an example, see the contribution by the former German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, "Europe 2030: Global Power or Hamster on a Wheel?", in *Europe 2030*, ed. Daniel Benjamin (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2010).

environmental action taken by partner regions. Meanwhile, Kevin Le Merle's contribution approaches climate change from a philosophical viewpoint, addressing the normative question of what responsibility each actor, including the EU, has for responding to the climate emergency. Finally, the issue turns to the EU's neighbourhood, with Julia Vassileva's article about the EU's capacity to mediate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Overall, from democratic challenges to global issues such as migration and climate, the issue addresses questions facing not only the European continent, but the entire international community – demonstrating the French historian Lucien Febvre's idea that “the problem of Europe, it's the problem of the world”.²⁵

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²⁵ Course given at the Collège de France by Lucien Febvre in 1944-1945 and published in 1999. Lucien Febvre, *L'Europe. Genèse d'une civilisation. Cours professé au Collège de France en 1944-1945* (Paris: Librairie académique Perrin, 1999), 305.

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