

THE INDEPENDENTS' VOICE

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European? What about Union?

G1000 is a civil society initiative to consider alternative ways to make policy choices in a country (Belgium) that has lost any sense of direction and collective purpose. It published its final report on ideas to resolve the crisis of our democracy and get citizens to articulate their policy wishes. How to recreate social cohesion? Such initiatives are now taking place throughout Europe: We the Citizens (Ireland), Netwerk Democratie (Netherlands, Mehr Demokratie (Germany), Citizens for Europe.

In an interview in Belgium's newspaper De Standaard (December 2012) the Czech economist Tomas Sedlacek notes that the economy has led us into the crisis and that to resolve the crisis we ask for more economy... The economy is seen as a solution for all problems. Our society is constantly feeding the economic system it has created instead of the economy serving society. He concludes that the economy and society have no goals; the only goal being growth but growth to achieve what?

The economic divergences in Europe are exposing the weakness of the European project, as sociological convergence has not taken place as anticipated. No European identity, no European solidarity. The EU is built on economic interests and poor democratic participation. Fraternity does not come from free circulation of capital and goods!

This reminded me of the intervention of an EC high level bureaucrat in a debate on copyright, where the official stated that the European Commission was not in the business of social engineering. This statement showed that copyright rules are considered essentially as an economic tool, leaving aside their social and cultural function to promote diversity of cultural expressions and to reward creativity.

Have we learned anything? Above all the process of EU integration is social engineering. If this vision from the founding fathers is lost then the EU is not worth fighting for.

This reminded me also of the Danish Minister of Culture reporting on a conversation with the fellow Minister of Culture from China in which the latter stated that China is standing on a very strong economic leg but that it was missing a cultural leg for Chinese society to move forward in a sustainable way. Likewise the EU has a strong economic leg but fails to care about its cultural leg and patchwork of identities or the competitive advantage of gathering such unique cultural resources.

In his book "L'Âme des nations" (2012), French intellectual Alain Minc makes the point that each country has a specific DNA. The DNA for France in its relation to the outside world would be characterized by geography and its taste for power.

France's destiny would be conditioned by its geography and its constant desire to extend its power on the continent or to protect its territory. The territory would take primacy over people in France and the State would be the guarantee of this territorial integrity, expression of the nation. The DNA in Germany would be the contrary; people take precedence over territory which can move. The DNA of England would be characterized by the control of the sea (that serves to build an empire), the power of money and commerce, the cult of parliamentary democracy and the obsession of preventing the emergence of a continental superpower in Europe. The book goes on to describe the DNA of Italy, Spain, Russia and the USA.

What would the DNA of the European Union be? Alain Minc takes the view that the EU has no DNA. It is an institutional machinery helping to compromise between all the different European DNAs, a byzantine system that adapts to the will of the nations and which 50 years later still exists, miraculously. For Minc the EU cannot have its own DNA as it would make it more difficult for nation states to adhere to it. This would prevent the EU from developing into a federal organization.

I would like to venture in proposing a DNA for the EU.

The EU is a cultural space, a territory of exchanges, a place to live with strong memories, a laboratory of cultural, spiritual and linguistic exchanges, a place of formidable creativity where democracy was born but also architecture, cities, design, classical music and opera, contemporary art, internet, sculpture, cinema, cultural heritage preservation and book publishing. Its destiny is not conditioned by territorial conquest or the domination of a nation. At international level the DNA is characterized by promoting free trade and international rules on the environment or criminal justice.

It is a project, a space which values the opinion of its citizens and which fights all forms of extreme nationalism, vector of egoism and conflict. It questions physical frontiers and mental barriers forged by years of preconceptions and prejudices about other nationalities. It promotes open mindedness and takes the risk of articulating a collective purpose for the benefit of humanity. Europe is linked to excellence and quality of life. Europe is not the old continent or the civilization of museums. It is a vibrant and exceptionally creative continent; triggering the envy of emerging economies by its capacity in supporting the development of talents in the scientific and art fields, both sources of innovation. Europe remains attractive far beyond its rich historical and cultural past.

The European ambition is to become again a desire, a project of civilization which values mutual understanding



between nations and people with different cultures and which promotes sharing (material as well as spiritual).

This reminded me of an initiative we took on behalf of Rem Koolhaas and Luc Tuymans¹ to propose to the President of the European Commission Barroso, a fervent sympathizer of the Arts, to give personalities from the world of art and architecture the opportunity to reflect on Europe's DNA and invent a more stimulating narrative. This was 13 months ago... A simple and cheap idea has been swallowed by the different bureaucracies and official national bodies (such as Bozar) with a view to become a controllable and institutionalised happening. A mixture of sclerosis, fear and bureaucracy is stifling a great idea from people that care about Europe.

Was Mrs Thatcher right? The EU is merely an institutional project developed through a succession of Treaties. It is an institution rather than a project, a soulless body with poor communication skills and lack of ideas. The paradox is that national bureaucracies constantly undermine the power of EU institutions. They are still in the driving seat when it comes to implementing European projects.

Chinese professor Zhang Weiwei in his book "The China Wave" wonders whether the European Union would degenerate if it were to function on the basis of western democracy principles, popular election and a multi party system as it would lose the ability to promote Europe's collective interest and it would disintegrate. According to the author, China is successful because it is governed by talents (carefully selected on meritocracy according to the author) which run State affairs.

The EU institutions are full of talents running European affairs. This is not sufficient in particular when intrinsic motivation and collective ambitions are running thin. Slowly dispossessed of the capacity to decide on European criteria, how can you motivate your staff to work for the European cause? In parallel citizens are carefully kept at a distance (on the pretext of complexity) and national politics are

increasingly fought on local/regional issues whilst problems are global.

As a consequence the EU team (Commission, Parliament and the Council) is not attractive to watch; the supporters are deserting the terraces. What is the vision to establish solidarity? How do the mechanisms to promote a common vision perform? It seems that the EU is increasingly confined to function as a money redistribution machine. This leads to questions, for instance: why does the EU spend so much money on building motorways that do not connect Europeans together or why should Berlin enjoy billions of Euro from EU structural funds to brand itself "Creative Berlin"? What does the European project get out of these investments?

The priority of the EU should be to establish social links, empathy between Europeans, to develop a strategy of cooperation that emphasises solidarity rather or as well as competition and to promote talents in particular from smaller European nations with less marketing power to reach out. Its competition and trade policies, the main institutional tools must be amended to value social and cultural consequences (diversity, choice, social value) as much as the impact on consumer prices. The internal market policy should be an instrument of social engineering nurturing diversity and celebrating singularities.

A future EU Treaty should give priority to policies ensuring transnational cooperation on the basis of their significance for the European interest as a whole and solidarity. The set up should value the project and decentralized processes, empowering its supporters in civil society, rewarding States, regions, cities and businesses that play European solidarity and show team spirit. It is time to give the term "Union" its full meaning.

Philippe Kern – January 2012
Founder and Managing Director of KEA
Comments on www.keablog.com

1. <http://www.keablog.com/2012/01/rem-koolhaas-and-luc-tuymans-share-their-vision-of-europe-video-link-below.html>

Since 1991 KEA is a Brussels-based strategic consultancy and research centre providing advice, support and research in relation to creative industries, cultural, entertainment, media and sport sectors. KEA acts as a European hub to foster culture and creative industries and culture-based innovation. It believes in European integration as a visionary project.

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EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

Rue du Trône, 51 • B-1050 Brussels • T +32(0)2 289 26 00
F +32 (0)2 289 26 06 • www.keanet.eu • www.keablog.com