

Reshaping Europe in complex Covid-19 times Need for cultural sensitivity in the European reconstruction process¹

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Abstract

The main aim of the article is to argue for a values-driven and cultural sensitivity approach in responding to the current challenges for a true European integration process, made even more necessary with the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the paper proposes a number of reflections and policy suggestions on the need of reshaping Europe in the turbulent Covid-19 times. In doing so, a four-section approach is adopted. The first section puts the European future in perspective. It refers to the historical development of the integration process from a mainly economic project to a sui generis international organisation and briefly overviews the current challenges and opportunities faced by the European Union. The second section identifies two major fundamental guiding lines for the EU's future: the strengthening of a values-oriented European future, and development of a true European citizenship. The third section emphasises European solidarity as one of the crucial aspects of a sustainable and values-driven European future. This is especially evident in the necessarily cross-border approach to the Corona pandemic. The final section argues for cultural sensitivity in the EU reconstruction process in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis.

Key words: KEU's future, European integration, European citizenship, European cultural practice, Covid-19

JEL codes: N34 or N44

Europe in perspective

"Europe has long ceased to be an abstract concept, nor is it a purely geographic and difficult confinement area. It is a culture circle / environment, a community. Now it is on the way to becoming an orderly society, with citizens taking civil responsibility for the whole, although this is not yet clear to many. Transition times like ours are characterized by added chaos. The hope is aimed at a change in continuity. But a radical change."(H. Brugmans, first rector of the College of Europe, Bruges, 1962).

The international and European economic, political and social landscape has been significantly shaken by multiple crises in recent years. However, the past year 2020 was mainly dominated by the dramatic and

¹ This paper is based and draws further on the Author's previous work and publications on EU-focussed issues.

lasting consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The European societal system has endured major social, economic and financial consequences, with a serious impact on the European values perspective. However, times of turbulence and uncertainty are not limited to short-term crisis management of a pandemic. The new European Commission, led by Ursula Von der Leyen, seems to have understood this dramatic reality and is taking measures for a more efficient governance in its structure and functioning as well as for a policy of priorities in its initiatives. The Commission is trying to make its mark, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy, with the European "Green Deal" as one of the flagship initiatives. In July 2020, the European Council approved a new multi-annual budget for 2021-2027 and in December the Council and Parliament reached a provisional agreement on a major Recovery Plan to combat the Covid-19 crisis. The plan was finally approved in February 2021. At the end of December 2020, the Brexit deal was finally settled, the consequences of which are not yet fully clear. With the new US administration of President Joe Biden, a new, more hopeful era in international relations has also dawned, although the chaotic end of the Afghan crisis is questioning its real intentions.

European integration at a turning point

The European Union was established as a peace project by six Western European countries and has grown since its inception as a community of values. The history of European integration shows a development from an original (neo) functional and largely economic project to a more complex political endeavour. This unique integration process has brought peace for more than 70 years and had been extended into the current Union of 27 Member States. It is a sustainable process that implied major social changes throughout the Union and beyond. Today it is a diversified social model that is looking for its role and future in the complex world system in the midst of internal and external tensions.

Europe is at a turning point in its integration process which is historically anchored, but now bumping into diverging expectations for the future. Lately Europe has been experiencing several crises, ranging from the financial crisis to the migration crisis, up to the current pandemic. These are characterised by a number of underlying trends with a drastic, but divergent impact on societies, states, regions, peoples, communities and individuals. In an era of increasing globalisation, these developments entail risks, insecurity and uncertainties.

The European integration process is currently facing internal and external challenges which need prompt answers for the sake of its future. These challenges undermine the European model of socio-economic cohesion and cultural and regional diversity, as well as question its role in the world. In addition, insecurity touches on fundamental values, such as respect for human dignity, democratic pluralism, the rule of law, equality and human rights. The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated this situation and made a cross-border common European action even more needed.

The sense of community has weakened over time. The motto of the European Union is 'unity in diversity', but diversity is seen today more as a threat than an added value. A growing diversity within and between EU member states makes it more difficult to see what the common good is. We are apparently in a phase of global capitalism, with slower growth and increasing inequality, more exclusive and less inclusive.

The feasibility of democracy in the European multicultural society is also questioned. Citizen involvement decreases and the erosion of the social fabric increases. There is a great feeling of unease, uncertainty and fear in democratic societies. EU citizens are losing faith in democracy, especially because the prevailing democratic institutions are unable to respond to the fear of the average citizen and political leaders are failing to keep their promises at national level.

Moreover, the place and role of the state in the international system is changing drastically. This is mainly due to the globalisation process and the increasingly multicultural dimension of societies. The state is no longer the exclusive player in the globalising world system. Power is also being further globalised, despite the attempts to return to nationalist solutions to solve challenges everywhere, as the migration and refugee crisis have shown. As a result, multi-level governance and cross-border cooperation are increasingly important as policy tools in managing diversity and global challenges (Bekemans, 2015).

In a 2016 interview Edgar Morin, a French sociologist and philosopher, stated that *"the time has come to change civilisation."* In short, the complex and confusing world is subject to contradictory processes of integration and disintegration, of (in)tolerance and violence, of (in)difference and respect. These threats undermine the values and principles of our societies. Europe has therefore a clear task and responsibility to provide sustainable, values-based and forward-looking solutions to its citizens.

The Covid-19 crisis is pushing the European Union to take further economic, political and institutional steps in its integration process. There is a growing call for new, innovative, trustworthy and more people-oriented approaches. Answers and actions are sought that strive for integrated and inclusive communities. These should mainly focus on responsible citizenship, a multifaceted sense of identity, shared responsibilities, respect for diversity and the role of education and culture in energising the integration process (Bekemans, 2018a).

The further European integration process between scepticism, frustration and hope

The current reality offers an opportunity for collective considerations about the future of Europe. This certainly means rethinking and updating the European story in a new and radically changing context. Increasing complexity and interdependence between and within societies has become an intrinsic feature of European societies. Managing such a rapidly changing world requires political courage and inspiration, it is a task that includes internal and external aspects.

The ongoing and far-reaching process of transformation of European societies requires proper contextualisation of the global, European, regional and local framework. Questions about identity, citizenship, governance, borders, democracy and dialogue need quick answers. Moreover, the EU's role in the world is rooted in the emerging form of multi-level governance, respecting national and local diversity. What matters is the consolidation of a complex set of common institutions and mixed policy practices in a radically changing context.

The EU is in danger of falling apart due to political short-sightedness, inadequacy of its institutions, a lack of democracy, citizen participation and respectful dialogue. Walls and fences are built on the basis of national and regional selfishness, undermining Europe's common future and complicate internal and external solidarity. In this way, the common European house, articulated in the Ventotene Manifesto, fails (Castellina, 2016). The logic of fear seems to take the lead at the expense of the logic of hope.

The European elections in May 2019 were undoubtedly a struggle, not only between the traditional parties of the Right, Left and Centre, but also between those who believe in the benefits of continued cooperation and integration at EU level and those who want to cut back the results of the past 70 years in the name of sovereignty. The doubts concern not so much the project itself, but rather the trajectory in which Europe should develop further. Although the populists did not achieve the desired result, the European political landscape had been firmly shaken.

Nevertheless, there is hope to change this course and strengthen cross-border cooperation and diversified integration within the European project (Pirozzi and others, 2017). This can be done by increasing citizen's involvement in the Europe of tomorrow at local, regional, national and European level through educational and cultural practices. This requires inspiration, conviction and courage from policy makers and citizens alike.

On March 1, 2017, Jean-Claude Juncker, former President of the European Commission, presented the White Paper on the Future of Europe (European Commission, 2017). It referred to the most important challenges facing Europe: globalisation, the impact of new technologies on society and employment, security issues and the rise of populism. The White Paper contained five scenarios of how the Union can evolve by 2025, depending on the choices that will be made. It also provided the European Parliament with a roadmap for the May 2019 elections.

At the European Summit of 25 March 2017, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, a Declaration was signed by the 27 EU leaders expressing a shared vision for the coming years: *"We are lucky to be united. Europe is our common future"*. It also argued for a multi-speed Europe, but with the guarantee of unity: *"We will act together, at different paces and intensities where necessary, moving in the same*

direction, as we have done in the past, in line with the Treaties and keeping the door open for those who wish to join later"². The Rome Agenda was a plea for an indivisible Union: safe, prosperous and competitive, but also sustainable, social, inclusive and socially responsible. Its emphasis was therefore on the key role that Europe can play in driving globalisation and in offering new opportunities to its citizens. These general themes were worked out in specific and concrete proposals and policies even before the European Parliament elections.

Although the Eurobarometer findings still show broad public support for European integration (Almadi, 2018), in many countries growing minorities question the virtues of European integration, or at least would prefer other forms. Anti-European populist movements are growing everywhere, criticising its existence and operation. In addition, political and media debates about the EU often raise critical or negative perceptions about aspects of the EU, its structure and functioning.

It is obvious that the European Union cannot be summed up in one sentence. It presents a unique and peculiar process of integration with both intergovernmental and supranational characteristics. Still, the debate about the nature of the European partnership appears to be strongly determined by the competition between a state (federalists) and a union of states (intergovernmentalists). However, it remains a project in the making that urgently needs a new inspiring and mobilising story. This requires a constant search for a dynamic vision for the European future, which captures a sense of belonging and even passion and offers real added value for EU citizens, even in times of transformation and confusion. This means that the relationship between the institutional fabric of the EU and its citizens, in short, a Union of states and citizens evolving towards a European democracy, must be worked on (Hoeksma, 2018). Member States, regional authorities and cities as well as civil society organisations have an important role to play in such a participatory development.

A strengthened European position within the multipolar world included both a deepening of integration in some cross-border issues as well as a strengthening of Europe's role in the international system. This also means greater European influence on the non-state international political system. In this sense, the EU can be seen as an alliance of sustainable states, with a dual responsibility, i.e., an internal responsibility to guide Member States in the process of adjustment and an external responsibility to be a civilian player in global governance. This governance model of transnational relations is based both on a shared exercise of sovereignty and on Community supervision of EU values within the existing legal framework of the Lisbon Treaty.

The constitutive elements of such a European 'statehood' (Bekemans, 2013a) focus on the primacy of international law over national law, on the principles of the rule of law with regard to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and on different forms of functional and territorial autonomy. However, they also refer to the principles of pluralism, active membership in the international system of collective security and of protection and appreciation of the natural environment and cultural assets. It is hopeful that, despite the individualistic spirit of the times, new counter-movements arise. Citizens, including young people, are joining forces in all sorts of unseen forms of citizen participation to forge concrete plans, ranging from ecologically responsible mobility to political-institutional reforms (Bekemans, 2018b). Based on these concerns, it is therefore important to identify and clarify some major guiding lines for the further European integration process.

Fundamental building blocks of Europe's future

Strengthening a values-oriented European future³

In his last State of the Union's speech on September 12, 2018, Jean-Claude Juncker called for a Europe that must embrace its destiny. Only "*by pooling sovereignty where necessary will we strengthen all our participating countries and regions*," (Juncker, 2018) he added. The most recent developments clearly show the urgent need for a renewed and convincing European discourse, which remains attractive and inspiring to European citizens. After all, a committed European society is a caring European society.

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/03/25/rome-declaration>

³ See: (Bekemans & Martin de la Torre, 2018a)

This requires a balanced vision of the future that supports the strength of the European integration process, embodies a sense of belonging and offers concrete added value to EU citizens. That is why it is important to (re)affirm Europe as a community of values, but at the same time to take into account the negative reactions and criticism of the (non-)application and (non-)implementation of the existing legal framework. After all, Europe is a community with multiple objectives, which require adapting the tasks of peace and social order into a system of global relations.

Such a system should be based on the principles of social market economy, environmental commitment and distributive justice. This requires a paradigm shift, with a direct impact on the relationship between the institutional fabric on the EU and its citizens and on the role and responsibility of education and culture (Bekemans, 2018b). It mainly implies recognition of internal and external challenges in the pursuit of a European model of society, extending it beyond the European territory.

The tradition of personalism, as explained by Hendrik Brugmans in his book 'The European Idea 1920-1970', may help to respond to these challenges. It emphasises the importance, uniqueness and inviolability of the human person as well as its social dimension. Such a personalistic framework may offer a critical potential for many current social problems of society.

This complex reality certainly entails rethinking and updating the European story within a radically changing context. Without commonly shared and widespread moral values and obligations neither the legal framework nor democratic governance or the market economy can function properly. The Founding Fathers' original vision can give a new impetus to integration. After all, they fought for a European project, embedded in a long-term vision, but driven by a pragmatic approach. This view can be summed up in Robert Schuman's definition of "community" (Bekemans & Martin de la Torre, 2018b). Europe must therefore not only be seen as a socio-economic community, but also as a community with a vision, mission and responsibility. What are the characteristics of such a European community?

- Europe as a community of destiny: European integration remains the common destination for responding to diverse challenges in a globalising world. In a number of areas, this requires a common policy in dialogue, with respect for internal and external solidarity. However, the concrete reality of everyday life, certainly in the current Covid-19 crisis, illustrates a growing tension, diversity and frustration between the Member States about Europe's role, responsibility and purpose in the world. Also EU citizens have diverging opinions about the EU's future.
- Europe as a community of values: The aim of European integration is to create, develop and protect a community of shared values. These are rooted in common principles of law that recognise the freedom and social responsibility of individuals. The fundamental European values in the European Treaties refer to human dignity, tolerance, legal system and democracy. In today's Europe, these values seem to be called into question by nationalist and populist reactions. A framework of practice-oriented and accessible dialogue can reinforce the sense of a common purpose and common feelings and, consequently, strengthen the European dimension of identity-building.
- Europe as a living community of citizens: the EU has a mission to develop further into a tangible and living community of citizens, with citizens, and for citizens. To that end, citizens should enjoy the opportunity to participate more fully in the process of European integration, through various dialogues and encounters. Moreover, in order to build a real European public space, the Union's democratic structures must be strengthened and European policy-making be made more transparent (Bekemans & Morganti, 2012).
- Europe as an economic and social community: The first impetus for an economic community was given in 1952 when six countries established the European Coal and Steel Community. This neo-functional approach led to the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957 and eventually evolved into the European Union with the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. While the driving force behind European integration is still very economically oriented, the current crisis clearly illustrates that the socio-cultural dimension of the further integration process should have a more identifiable reach for the EU citizen. Only a socio-economic community can lead to sustainable and cohesive European societies. Strong Euro-

pean governance in a number of specific policy areas, with a focus on the socio-economic and socio-cultural dimension of the citizens' needs, must therefore be central.

- Europe as a community of purpose and responsibility: In today's globalising and individualising world, the European Union has an internal responsibility to protect its citizens, and an external responsibility to safeguard its socio-economic model of integration. Only through cooperation and (internal and external) solidarity can Europe effectively respond to the global and European challenges. The European continent has close economic, political and cultural links with many regions of the world, usually formalised in cooperation agreements. Global responsibility means responsible cooperation on economic, political and social issues. The EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy by Federica Mogherini, the former EU High Representative (Mogherini, 2016), translated this vision into common action, with resilient and principled pragmatism. The emphasis is on the collective responsibility of Europe's role in the world. This requires a shared vision and common action in the framework of foreign and security policy, neighbourhood and development policy. This also implies more Europe at the borders, but also beyond, justifying a shared exercise of sovereignty.
- Europe as the meeting place of multiple identities and cultures: freedom, peace, human dignity, equality and social justice are the main European values. To protect and further develop these goals, Europe needs morally acceptable political structures and policies that reinforce the sense of a common, long-term vision. Creation of meeting places and further development of (educational and cultural) exchange programs can further valorise the richness and added value of the European multicultural reality. However, reality shows how people are still very much bound by the territorial dimension of their sense of identity. Security considerations and current socio-economic developments have made the citizens afraid of others and Europe less hospitable. In this context cities have become important places for learning and cultural exchange, teaching their inhabitants to live together in multicultural societies (Bekemans, 2013b).
- Europe as a community of multicultural learning: a common European identity, as an added value for flexible identity-building, requires information and knowledge of Europe's historical background and future prospects in different areas. Although a legal framework exists for the European (added) contribution to the improvement of education and culture, there is still the problem of inadequate information and visible application of principles in practice. This means taking into account the specific layered and diversified institutional context of education and culture in the Member States. It is the task of the European Education Framework to critically stimulate the benefits of integration, connectedness and human integrated development within a multicultural learning environment. Culture should have a central place in this European identity-building, certainly in reaction to the current nationalist impulses.

In short, this means a positive and forward-looking vision that is embedded in a community of shared values, supports the strength of the European integration process – also in a differentiated form – and recognises the positive cultural heritage of a multifaceted Europe. However, Europe must earn confidence through its activities and make citizens the reference for its future developments. Moreover, sufficient space should be given to the quality of immaterial welfare, above the quantity of material welfare. That is why European ideals should be more clearly translated into concrete policies, actions and practices.

However, the special challenge of giving meaning to the EU future and reformulating the European story requires that citizens learn to deal with the tensions that arise in their perception of identity. This sense of purpose can only be the result of recognition of the tension between the particular and the universal, being the cosmopolitan moment (Sandel, 1997). Such an affirmation assumes that the EU should find an acceptable way to combine the multifaceted and complex European experiences of identity-building. A spirit of community, common purpose and feelings can only be imparted by involving all citizens in Europe's future.

The substantive interpretation of European citizenship⁴

European integration began after World War II, with the aim of promoting peace in Europe by pushing back the excesses of nationalism. Excessive nationalism had proven to be an obstacle to civil and peaceful dialogue between citizens and governments. Peace and solidarity were thus the original motives. They should also be the forces driving European integration further.

A more citizen-driven process is therefore urgently needed. The indifference of the citizen to give a concrete interpretation to his status is a rather contemporary phenomenon. It is closely linked to the withering away of the great systems of meaning and the narrowing of contemporary moral virtues. The gap between citizens and politics is widening at both the national and European level.

Citizenship and identity are particularly topical issues in the current debate on the future of European integration (Bekemans, 2014). Since the Maastricht Treaty, anyone who has the nationality of one of the EU Member States is automatically an EU citizen. Citizenship of the European Union is meant to be an addition to national citizenship, not a substitute. The rights have been further elaborated in the subsequent Treaties of Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon. The relationship between the EU and its citizens should be clearly understood in the context of the relationship between the EU citizenship and democracy, referring to its legal basis, practice and critical assessment. Citizenship of the Union, as introduced by the Maastricht Treaty, was intended to be the fundamental legal basis for nationals of the Member States.

The basic legal status of the EU citizen can be applied to three interconnected levels. It is therefore first of all important to underline that European citizenship encompasses multiple nationalities and identities, and therefore does not suppress one's own nationality or identity. At the international level, the EU citizens benefit from the protection of EU law. Indeed, EU citizenship aims to reinforce the sense of belonging to a community of values that protects its citizens when they cross the EU's external borders. At a Member State level, the EU citizens can be part of the society of the host Member State through free movement and move freely without any form of discrimination. This implies political participation and representation. At the EU level, EU citizens are seen as political actors. This reflects the idea that the process of European integration should be in the hands of not only the Member States, but also those of the peoples and citizens of Europe.

As political actors, EU citizens are even called upon to play an important role in the democratic functioning of the EU. This stems from the Treaty provisions on democratic principles introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. In particular, Article 10 (3) TEU states that *"every citizen has the right to participate in democratic life in the Union"*. In addition, in accordance with Article 11 TEU, the EU institutions should provide citizens and representative organisations with the opportunity to make their views known and to exchange publicly in all areas of EU activities. They also have a duty to make decisions openly and as close as possible to the citizens. In particular, the transparency principle enables EU citizens to participate in the EU decision-making process. However, this 'holistic' spirit of the Lisbon Treaty does not seem to be wholly applied in practice.

After all, the Treaty provisions on citizenship are more or less limited to a catalogue of rights. Current European citizenship has little to do with adequate political participation. There is clearly a lack of a common identity, of solidarity and of a connection with a common ethos. Inclusive European citizenship based on shared values should be the political guideline. This implies the development of a common European citizenship as an ethic, referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and not merely a legal status. In time, if Europe is to play a permanent role in the world, it will have to evolve into a community where European awareness is strong enough to support the economic and political integration process. This also means that the EU citizenship can be cultivated without undermining loyalty at national level or local level.

How can that be achieved? Education, training on different levels, adapted curricula, in which the European dimension is an integral part of the curriculum, and citizen education are crucial points of attention for both a better interpretation of EU citizenship and for the European dimension of identity experience. If progress is to be made in the political integration process, more focus on education and culture in Europe is required

⁴ See: (Van Steenberghe, 1994).

(Bekemans, 2017). Democratic participation in direct European elections remains an important part of civic education. Easy access to objective information is a precondition for this.

The EU Program 'Europe for Citizens' (2014-2020) is a relatively small, but symbolically important and successful European subsidy program that supports activities that promote European citizenship, especially by financing collaborative projects with partners from one or more participating countries (i.e., town twinning, networking of cities, projects with civil society organizations). The program will be continued in the new multiannual financial framework (2021-2027) as part of the new EU 'Rights and Values' Program, but with a larger budget. The funding serves to protect the rights and values of the EU Treaties and to maintain open, democratic and inclusive societies. Because of the ever-growing extremism, radicalism and divisions in our societies, the Program pays greater attention to the protection and promotion of European values with a budget of no less than € 689.5 million. The program therefore aims to provide stronger support for civil society and other local, regional, national and transnational stakeholders, while further encouraging citizen participation in the democratic system.

The European Union and Solidarity in Covid-19 times

The COVID-19 waves have spread across Europe since early 2020 with dramatic consequences. The great health risk has forced national policymakers to largely shut down social, economic and cultural life. The differentiated lockdowns are forcing organizations, companies and institutions to cancel activities, public events and travel, as well as switch to working from home and online activities. Rapid and coherent policy responses at all levels of government are therefore required to address serious health, economic and social challenges. This can only happen in the context of a common cross-border approach and shared sovereignty. A European approach to the current health crisis may contribute positively to this.

The EU response to the coronavirus crisis largely determines its future credibility. Steps are being taken, but joint European crisis management remains difficult. Internal and external solidarity are therefore key words for an efficient and sustainable European approach. The common EU approach to the vaccination process is therefore a promising sign of enhanced European action.

The European institutions have taken various measures to combat the pandemic crisis. In the course of 2020 concrete means and instruments have been put in place both to provide objective information on the spread of the virus as well as to coordinate national responses in the fight against the virus (i.e., the Corona Response Team and the Corona Response Investment Initiative). The existing European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the permanent financial emergency fund set up during the euro crisis, can also be used as a source of support for euro area countries in financial difficulties.

A very important step in the EU corona approach was taken with the EU Council's agreement of 21 July 2020 on the extraordinary recovery effort of EUR 750 billion "Next Generation EU". In addition to the recovery package, EU leaders have also reached an agreement on the EU long-term budget of € 1074.3 billion for 2021-2027. This multiannual budget, together with the temporary recovery tool NextGenerationEU, constitutes the largest EU-funded stimulus package ever. It also lays the foundation for a modern and more sustainable Europe.

On December 18, 2020, the Council and Parliament reached a provisional agreement on the "Recovery and Resilience Facility". This Facility for Recovery and Resilience will receive a budget of € 672.5 billion, intended for loans and grants to support reforms and investments of EU countries. It must help cushion the economic and social damage from the corona pandemic, make European economies and societies more sustainable and resilient, and ultimately better prepare them for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transition. The European Parliament finally approved the text at its plenary session on 10 February 2021. This is followed by formal approval by the Board. To be eligible for support from the Facility for Recovery and Resilience, Member States must submit national plans by the end of April 2021, setting out their reform and investment agendas up to 2026.

There is hardly a more apparent common challenge than the current pandemic. Decision-making at the EU level can therefore strengthen a values-based community. In the current dramatic crisis conditions, the necessary and massive economic support is crucial to give confidence to the European project. EU citizens expect decisive action to make the European dream of shared solidarity and civic responsibility a reality. After all, the alternative is that the Europe of solidarity dries up through passivity, no longer connects its European citizens, disintegrates into separate national/regional entities and ultimately does not survive the crisis. The comprehensive and unprecedented challenge requires a comprehensive and unprecedented strategy from the EU.

If there is one thing that this Covid-19 crisis makes clear, it is that solidarity between Member States does not arise spontaneously, but must be supported by confidence-building measures. Yet this crisis also offers a great opportunity. Responsibility and solidarity are important values in seeking and rediscovering a shared "authentic" quality of life, respecting everything and everyone, while recognising human vulnerability. Cultural sensibility can therefore provide a vehicle for a sustainable European future.

Proactive reflections and actions on possible future perspectives are now more urgent than ever. However, drastic changes require inspiring and innovative leadership. In her Political Agenda for Europe (2019), Ursula von der Leyen advocates a leading and active role for citizens in the future of the EU: *"I want Europeans to build the future of our Union. They should play a leading and active part in setting our priorities and our level of ambition. I want citizens to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe"*. It is hoped that, in spite of the heavy bureaucratic context, the ongoing process of the Future of Europe Conference, to be finalised in the Conference Plenary in April 2022, will be a catalyst for EU change and can give a new impetus to the European integration⁵.

Cultural sensibility as a sustainable vehicle for Europe's future

General and European conceptual culture setting⁶

Culture should be considered as that mixture of values, norms and traditions which affects as much the moral dimension of life as the taste and vision of things. Reference is made to the anthropological definition of culture, as embodied in UNESCO's 1982 Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies⁷. It defined culture as the *"whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group"* including 'not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs. In this perspective very useful distinction is made between culture as heritage (being the accumulated manifestations of intellectual and artistic creativity, past and present), as creativity (being the processes of artistic, intellectual and scientific creation) and as a way of life being a source of values, social energy, inspiration and ways of living together).

In today's globalising world, most human societies no longer live in isolated territories, so their cultures are no longer the specificity of a given society limited by closed boundaries. We live in contact with each other, more or less intensively, and therefore other cultures are part of our daily life. This is the result not only of increased migration flows, but also of modern technologies which transform communication systems and rebuild relationships. Various cultural interactions have become a way of living in today's world. Indeed, it becomes important in order to avoid conflict and even war to understand that others do not see their world as we see our own, do not follow the same values when judging similar situations, nor do they use the same criteria as our own to identify themselves as different.

⁵ See <https://futureu.europa.eu>

⁶ See: (Bekemans, 2013c).

⁷ http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/12762/11295421661mexico_en.pdf/mexico_en.pdf

Only very recently this cultural and paradigmatic divide between economy, society and culture is being questioned in relation to the underlying assumptions as well as to policy relevance. Certainly, in present day the Atlantic (Western) tradition seems increasingly criticized for its a-historical and purely analytical and monetized focus. However, our value systems are increasingly confronted with specific cultural expressions of society that escape rational and quantifiable analysis. Culture again becomes a shaping factor and an added value in the societal process of creativity, institution building and market exchange. We sense a change from culture as mere material artefacts to culture as a process of shaping values, patterns and expressions of the human spirit.

In policy-driven terms, three aspects of culture can be distinguished in the globalising context: i) conservation: culture as an asset, tangible or intangible and a carrier of local identity; ii) production: culture as a commodity which needs to be re-produced not only to reconstitute cultural capital but also as a source of economic development insofar as it is embedded in production processes; and iii) valorisation: culture as a set of norms and capacities which enrich communities, used as a bridge builder and carrier of good relations for social and economic exchange. A dynamic and interactive process between these three aspects of culture implies not only peaceful co-existence of different cultures within society but also a mutually influencing and open dialogue between cultures. Moreover, such a conceptual shift from a multicultural co-existence to an intercultural dialogue may avoid the trap of cultural relativism and provide a base for living together.

This general setting also applies to European culture, which is not a mythical, untouchable concept, but rather an ongoing interaction of distinctive historical, spiritual, intellectual, material and emotional features and attitudes. These features are expressed in language, images, sounds, symbols, life styles, etc. illustrating the plurality and richness of European societies. These diversified but shared cultural expressions finally make up Europe's social, cultural and human capital. Therefore, the embeddedness of culture in society implies introducing historical, social and ethical considerations into Europe's future (Bekemans, 1994).

Within the European context culture has been permanently torn between the increasing market integration and a maintenance of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity is also applied to the external dimension of common European action. This is seen as a contribution to a world order based on sustainable development, peaceful co-existence and dialogue between cultures. Culture is both an element of identity, self-expression and economic activity. As a policy area it covers cultural heritage, artistic creations, as well as cultural and creative sectors including music, film, video games, publishing, TV and design, to name the most prominent. It plays an economic role accounting to around 4% of jobs in a dynamic sector, but also impacts social cohesion. As concerns economic aspects, the cultural and creative sectors face challenges such as: strong global competition of search engines, digital shift impacting on creators' revenues, creation, distribution, promotion of and access to content, fragmented market along linguistic and national lines, poor transnational circulation of European audio-visual productions and market concentration.

European cultural practice (Bekemans, 2013c)

Legal context

At the time of its foundation, the European Community was not competent in the field of culture. Economic (and eventually political) integration was to be achieved without standardisation or homogenisation of cultures. Cultural policy is a Member State competence. Articles 6 and 167 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) define the EU's role as being obliged to support (even financially), supplement and coordinate Member States' efforts in this field in order to preserve the EU's cultural diversity and its cultural heritage. The uniqueness of the European model implied economic and political integration with maintenance of cultural diversity.

In 1993, the entry into force of the Treaty of Maastricht illustrated the Member States' desire to "*mark a new stage in the process of European integration*". Such "*an ever-closer union between the peoples of Europe*", found its main expression in the creation of a European citizenship and in granting new powers to

the Community, including those in the field of culture. With the Treaty of Maastricht culture has been, for the first time, integrated in the formal competencies of the Community. Articles 128 (art. 151 in the Treaty of Amsterdam) and 92 (art. 87) provide the legal basis for EU support in the cultural sector. Cultural cooperation thus became a recognised aim of Community action, with an appropriate legal basis (Article 128). This article was included in its entirety in the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) (article 151), apart from paragraph 4 which was amended to read as follows: "*the Community shall take cultural aspects into account in its actions under other provisions of this Treaty, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures*". This paragraph calls for culture to be taken into account and for cultural diversity to be respected in all Community policies, in compliance with Community law. This is a legal obligation, and the Community institutions must take the cultural implications of all Community policies on board.

Programmes

In the nineties the European cultural action was organised in ad-hoc cultural programmes. In July 1990, the Commission published the selection criteria and conditions for participation in the *Platform Europe*, which in 1991 became the first *Kaleidoscope* programme for supporting artistic and cultural events involving at least three Member States. The programme was reorganised in 1994 in order to support cultural events more effectively, encourage artistic creation and cooperation in the form of a network, to promote better public access to European heritage and to improve artistic and cultural cooperation between professionals. Between 1990 and 1995 more than 500 cultural projects received Community support. Between 1996 and 1999 the EU launched three cultural programmes: – *Kaleidoscope* (1996-1999), which aimed to encourage artistic and cultural creation and cooperation with a European dimension; – *Ariane* (1997-1999), which supported the field of books and reading, including translation; and – *Raphaël* (1997-1999), the aim of which was to complement Member States' policies in the area of cultural heritage of European significance.

Culture 2000 (2000-2006) was the first framework programme in support of culture. Its objective was to promote a common cultural area characterised by its cultural diversity and shared cultural heritage. It combined the old *Kaleidoscope*, *Ariane* and *Raphaël* programmes. The programme identified the broad scope of the European project by extending it to the entirety of European society and its citizens. In particular, it integrated the cultural dimension into other Community policies and recognised the role of culture both as an economic factor and as a factor in social integration and citizenship. Still, the modest budget clearly illustrated a discrepancy between the plurality of policy objectives and the means available on Community level and, subsequently, the rather symbolic value of Community action in the cultural field. In short, the *Culture 2000* programme presented a first structured, integrated and outward-looking approach to Community cultural action by clarifying the role and place of culture and anticipating a potentially more powerful role of Europe in meeting the great challenges facing the European Union.

The objective of the Culture Programme *Crossing borders connecting cultures* (2007-2013) was the enhancement of a European cultural area through development of cultural cooperation between creators, cultural players and cultural institutions with a view to encouraging the emergence of European citizenship. The specific objectives of the programme were: to promote transnational mobility of people working in the cultural sector; to encourage transnational circulation of cultural and artistic products; and to encourage intercultural dialogue.

Creative Europe was the European Commission's framework programme for support to the culture and audio-visual sectors in the period of 2014-2020. Carrying on from the previous Culture Programme and MEDIA programme, *Creative Europe*, with a budget of € 1.46 billion (9% higher than its predecessors), has supported Europe's cultural and creative sectors. *Creative Europe* consisted of (i) the Culture sub-programme (i.e. European Platforms, Literary Translation, European Networks and European Cooperation Projects), (ii) the Media sub-programme (i.e. European Film Forum, Audience Development, Television Programmes of Audio-visual European Works, Distribution Support, Online Distribution, Access to Markets-Framework, Development of Single Projects and Slate Funding, Film festivals, Training, Made in Europe, Video Game Development, International Co-production Funds, Reaching the Audience- Cinema Networks)

and (iii) the Cross-sectoral Strand (i.e. the Creative Europe Guarantee Facility, Transnational policy development and Creative Europe Desks).

As a result of the popularity of the Creative Europe 2014-2020 programme, the European Commission had decided to continue to support *Creative Europe 2021-2027* as a stand-alone programme, increasing its budget by 17%. The New European Agenda for Culture of May 2018⁸ anticipated three strategic objectives of the Programme: (i) social: access to a wide range of activities, active participation in culture, mobility of the sector's professionals, awareness of Europe's shared cultural heritage, history and values to promote a sense of belonging together; (ii) economic: promote arts, culture and creative thinking, favourable conditions for creative and cultural industries, access to finance, fair revenues, necessary skills and their combination; and (iii) international: cooperation on cultural heritage, culture and intercultural dialogue for peace, culture triggering sustainable social and economic development. In the new programme, the economic dimension is only one axis alongside the social dimension, and culture's contribution to international relations. The new framework for cultural policy therefore highlights not only the economic dimension of the cultural and creative sectors, but also the role of culture in social cohesion and its relation to creative and artistic freedom and diversity, and freedom and plurality of media. In concrete terms, also the new Creative Europe programme 2021-2027 consists of 3 sub-programmes:

- (1) The culture sub-programme (31% of programme funding) will promote cultural heritage cultural and linguistic diversity, focusing on cultural and creative operator training activities (adaptation to digital technologies and innovative strategies), reinforcing European cultural and creative sector organisations, and improving access to culture; it also includes a new ambition of enhancing European values and identity through arts education, cultural awareness and creativity in education, international outreach for the sector and cultural diplomacy.
- (2) the MEDIA sub-programme (56% of programme funding) aims to strengthen the audio-visual sector's competitiveness, and focuses on training, new skills and competences for audio-visual professionals, knowledge-sharing and networking initiatives, also in digital technologies, and European audio-visual projects, such as films and television programmes (fiction, children's and animated films, documentaries and short films), interactive works (video games), and European and international co-productions. It also supports the distribution of non-national European films in cinemas, via distribution platforms and subtitling, dubbing and audio-description, facilitating the worldwide circulation of European films, and film literacy.
- (3) A cross-sectoral strand (13% of programme funding) covers, among other things, a guarantee facility ensuring access to financing for SMEs in the sector.

On 14 December 2020, the European Parliament and EU Member States came to a final political agreement on the Creative Europe budget for 2021-2027. The funding strand for culture will have a total budget of € 2.4 billion. The EU's long-term budget, coupled with the NextGenerationEU initiative, the temporary instrument designed to drive the recovery of Europe, has been finally adopted in Feb 2021.

Assessment

A certain development in the form of European cultural practice can be discerned (Bekemans, 2013c). The early years of European integration were dominated by a mainly political-rhetoric discourse. The preamble of the Rome Treaty refers to a closer union between the European peoples, the quality of life and a guarantee of freedom and peace. From the end of the sixties the plea to go beyond the mere economic dimension was made explicit in many solemn declarations of European Summits (The Hague 1969, Paris 1972, Copenhagen 1973 and Stuttgart, 1983). This finally led to the concept of a truly European Union, which contained not only an economic, but also a political, social and cultural dimension and found its legal context in the Treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice. Terms such as European identity and consciousness, Community cultural heritage, Europe of the citizen and culture entered into Community language.

⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0267&from=EN>

In reality, between the rather utopian political-rhetoric discourse and the very limitative formalistic discourse, EU interventions in the cultural sector did follow a more pragmatic and fragmented ad hoc policy, applying a subtle mixture of cultural, economic and legal arguments (e.g., the Year of Music or Film, conservation of architectural heritage, cultural action programmes such as Kaleidoscope, Ariane and Raphaël, the European cultural cities, etc.). Although a more strategic framework for the EU's cultural policy has emerged with the recent multi-annual cultural programmes, the actual result has been meagre: the adoption of a rather minimalist and pragmatic approach with modest Community action in the cultural sector and a rather small budget.

Also, a content shift in the cultural programmes of the EU can be distinguished. The predominant objective of the cultural programme of the EC has been focused on the elimination of (national) obstacles against a free flow of cultural goods and services and on the stimulation of the free movement of cultural operators within the Community's territory. Formal interaction of culture was set within an economic framework and the emphasis was on the economic dimension of the creation of a European cultural space, i.e., a common market for cultural goods, activities and persons. Within this perspective national and regional cultural policies were governed by market integration rules. Possible conflicts between the open border's economic objectives and cultural policy priorities were understood in view of the impact of integration policies on the cultural sector.

From this originally negative integration intervention of the EU a move was made to more positive integration activities, referring to the economic benefits of the cultural sector through harmonisation of legislation or the launching of Community action programmes. The expansion of the legal competence of the EU in the cultural sector was also favoured by Community integralism of the Court of Justice, by adjudging exceptions on the basis of cultural considerations such as common interest, language, and cultural identity. In fact, the actual European cultural practice had always been confronted with the ambiguous task of combining economic competence with cultural ambitions in a strict legal framework.

The EU also changed the discourse on legitimisation of its cultural activities, focusing less on European cultural identity and unity and more on cultural diversity. Cultural diversity was set in an institutional and legal context, stressing subsidiarity and autonomy of cultural policy as well as integration with Community policies.

In other words, the cultural objective has been formally recognised as a community preoccupation, although with strong legal procedures, a weak legal instrument and a modest budget. In short, a new synthesis between economic and political integration on the one hand, and preservation of cultural diversity on the other hand is being developed whereby the EU attempts to preserve the specificity of the European model with a formal and legal anchorage of Community action in the cultural field. The actual challenge is therefore the creation of a more genuine link between culture and integration in a broad and open context.

Conclusion

In the current era of uncertainty and complexity at various governmental and societal levels, exacerbated by the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis, the EU needs a renewed political project that remains embedded in an inspiring long-term vision. Only in this way can the increasing influence of national interests in European policy-making be blocked in favour of the "European commons" (Baier and others, 2020). Indeed, today there is a danger that, faced with the growing frustration, criticism and indifference of its citizens, the Union will become a mere union of economic interests or disintegrate into national and regional entities.

Undermining the foundations of the European integration model can weaken Europe's economic, social and environmental prosperity and ultimately lead to marginalisation in the global system. The crisis of European solidarity, especially poignant in the absence of a true European policy in certain areas, can only be overcome if initiatives and measures are taken in a framework of shared sovereignty and common actions that restore citizens' confidence in the European institutions. A European Cultural Recovery Plan (G. da Empoli, 2020), in addition to the recently accepted Financial Recovery Plan, could provide a solid base for the European future.

The need for a mobilising vision that can create new impetus and restore connection with the citizen is crucial. Therefore, the applied notion of cultural sensitivity should be taken into account as a sustainable vehicle to gain support for Europe's future. The reference to the committed enthusiasm of the Founding Fathers in the European project is certainly appropriate. They wanted to guarantee a lasting peace within the European borders and to combine a long-term vision with a pragmatic policy approach. Economic arguments supported the political objective. That is why Europe needs bridge builders who can concretely complete the rhetoric of the European narrative, underline the European ideals of peace, unity in diversity, freedom and solidarity and mobilise young people for the European model of society. Yet the rhetoric must be translated into a workable and future-oriented reality where citizens feel at home.

Responsibility, citizenship and solidarity are important values in re-sourcing towards an authentic quality of life and finding a qualitative living space within a future-oriented European values perspective. It remains a major challenge to strengthen responsibility, citizenship and solidarity at the European level with a necessary cross-border approach to the Corona pandemic, especially when it comes to individual and collective health.

The roles of education and culture are crucial in this perspective. Only through integral human development in teaching and learning processes as well as through sensitivity in cultural practices can a genuine citizens' support be established and European citizenship be linked to a European demos, characterised by common values and feelings. However, transnational decision-making requires identification, loyalty and a sense of belonging. Education for inclusive European citizenship and cultural sensitivity for living together in a European space are intrinsic elements of the integral social development that Europe should promote. Also new forms and places of learning, dialogue, active citizenship and cultural cooperation do have a place in this European reconstruction process.

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