Hubert Védrine

Save Europe!

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*Translated from French
by Leslie de Quillacq*

I

A manifest disengagement of Europe's peoples

More than seventy years after the end of the Second World War, fifty-nine years after the Treaty of Rome, thirty years after the Schengen Agreements, twenty-four years after the Maastricht Treaty, seventeen years after the introduction of the Euro, Europe — or more precisely, the European Union — is in a grave state of dereliction, or at least of torpor. Despite its day-to-day operations and perpetual summits, and notwithstanding a few remarkable decisions (for example, against Apple in spite of opposition from Ireland), a state of emergency has been declared. We have reached a "critical" moment, say the EU's member states.

The real world was bound to overtake this admirably idealistic, but also peremptory and partly artificial construction. The crisis was already perceptible before the Brexit and has become even clearer since. Or in any case, it should be. *Nous y voilà.* Here we are.

Weaknesses of the European Union

The European Union is deeply fragile. Its weakness is more internal than external, even if outside threats and challenges are what make headlines. Desired by most elites on the right and the left, driven "in the interest of the people" but without their involvement (apart from occasional consultations and *a posteriori* ratifications), European construction has met with growing resistance, both passive and active, for over twenty years. The disengagement of the European public is increasingly visible, from the referendums that barely passed (Maastricht in 1992)

to the referendums lost (Constitutional Treaty in 2005, Brexit in 2016), not to mention the sixty percent abstention rate for European Parliament elections.

Still, in spite of this evidence, the "*Européists*" maintain their paternalistic and authoritarian creed: Europe can only move forward, we always need "more Europe", we should have the "courage to make the federal leap" and to overcome "national egoism," etc. It's a sin to look inward (hence the continual, confident expansion of the Schengen zone but without sufficient control of its borders). We have forced parliaments to adopt texts that were rejected by referendum (the Constitution via the Treaty of Lisbon) and made people re-vote until they gave the "right" answer (Ireland, Denmark). All of this without stopping to consider the trauma our actions might inflict on the democratic psyche.

Even worse, all those who object to certain aspects of European construction or are still attached to their national

identities, who are skeptical or disappointed, are thrown into the same category as the rabid anti-Europeans and denounced as egoists, nationalists, sovereignists (quite a feat to have transformed legitimate attachment to a sovereign state, an immense democratic triumph, into a sin!), or even *Lepenists*. The elite's aggressive contempt towards the will of the people has strengthened the Front National and its counterparts elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, the rift between the elite *Européists* and the people has grown wider over the years. It has become the most important challenge we face. And the most dangerous.

The second source of the Union's weakness is its naiveté. Europe claims it is the "mother of peace" when, chronologically, it is the daughter. Even if Europe's leaders deserve tremendous credit for transforming the Cold Peace imposed by the USSR at Stalingrad and the United States in 1945, into a common project, the narrative they put forward was extremely

naïve: "Europe is Peace." The Union would supposedly be constructed by eclipsing national identities. It would influence the world through its values, norms, conditionalities and assistance, and through the strength of its civil society. The free movement of its peoples would inspire others. Without having to transform itself into a real European power or create a common defense system, the EU would show the world that power struggles were obsolete. It would be a model for other peoples with a long history of conflict. It would civilize globalization. These are moving aspirations adapted to an a-historical, post-tragic world — except that world doesn't exist.

Alas, this self-righteous European entity, full of good intentions and confident of its irreversibility, is waking up to a painful reality. In addition to unbridled economic competition (a result of excessive deregulation of the global market economy, which we never asked for but which forces us to be competitive), to the

financial crises caused by the American financial casino, the eurozone crises and the Greek debt psychodrama, we now have to contend with an immense influx of immigrants and a flood of asylum requests from people fleeing violent conflict. All of this in the context of: our (belated) discovery of the global, deadly battle within Islam (a small minority of fanatics against a majority of "impious" or "renegade" Muslims, as well as against Christians and Jews); the Sunni/Shiite conflict in the Middle East; the specter of terrorism; and the awakening of nationalist movements in Russia, China, Israel, India, the Arab world and elsewhere. And let's not forget the demographic crisis unfolding in Europe or the impending environmental doom. And last but not least, President Trump. It is hardly surprising that the world imagined by the European Union would crumble under these kinds of pressures, and that the latent contradictions among Europeans that had previously been more or less

managed (that is to say, swept under the rug) would be fully exposed.