Belonging to Europe

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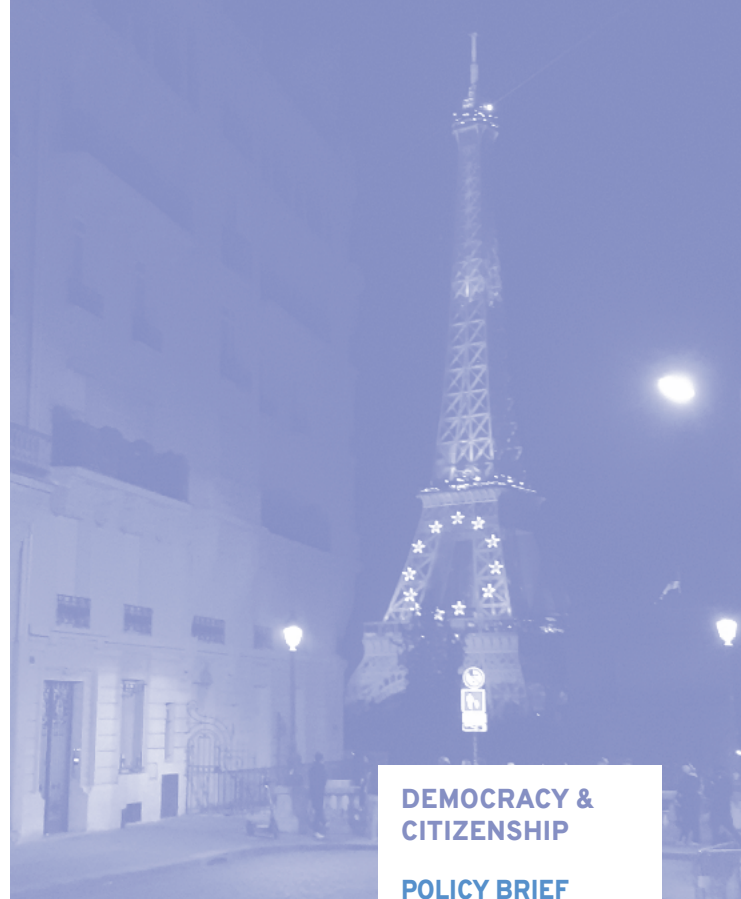*This paper is the English translation of an article published in the French jesuit review Etudes in Octobre 2021.*

While membership of the EU is no longer called into question, including in France, we can still consider the full meaning of this sense of belonging. This requires holding together its cultural, institutional and political dimensions which are all too often fragmented, to give the European Union all the strength it needs in these demanding times.

The on-going French presidency of the Council of the European Union highlights European "belonging" in its motto. What kind of belonging is this? To what kind of Europe? Successive crises have challenged the complex links that connect us to the European Union (EU). The 2014-2015 migration crisis whose spectre has once again been raised, reminded Europeans that, in the eyes of the world, the EU represents a haven of peace, prosperity and freedom. It also betrayed European cultural insecurity in welcoming difference and an inability, still striking today, to work together as twenty-seven Member States on this politically thorny issue. Conversely, following an initial chaotic reaction, the recent health crisis showed the added value of cooperation and solidarity between countries, both for the vaccination campaign and for the ongoing economic recovery. Yet it was the Brexit crisis that posed the most direct and emotional challenge to the very meaning of the European Union, subjected to the voluntary and non-compelling departure of one of its very own members. The United Kingdom's full withdrawal shattered the taboo of the irreversibility of European construction, while demonstrating preposterously its solidity through EU-27 cohesion that London never managed to undermine. Since then, Brexit has not heralded any other departures. Today, with very few exceptions, even the far right on the continent no longer calls into question the Euro, the Schengen Area and, more broadly, membership of the European Union.

The term "membership" is not restricted to the legal meaning of a Member State of the Union, enacted through an Accession Treaty. This treaty requires ratification that is often obtained by referendum, in which public acceptance, or rejection, of their country's membership in the EU is expressed. The most recent referendum was conducted in 2012, when more than 66% of Croats voted in favour of membership in the European Union. Conversely, we remember the

rejection by the people of Norway in 1972, repeated in another referendum in 1994. The most spectacular remains Brexit, pushed forward by a slim majority of British voters in 2016, putting an end to a membership which had been confirmed forty years earlier by the first referendum in the country's history, in 1975, which experienceda higher turnout and where more than 67% voted in favour.

Belonging to Europe is never as clear-cut and binary as a referendum implies, however. It goes beyond the simple yet fundamental question of membership in the EU. Belonging is both individual and collective and, under all circumstances, subject to change. It draws, to varying degrees, from feelings, reason and conscience. Feelings govern the emotional attachment, reason assesses the benefits, while conscience brings together feelings and reason to grow a deep conviction.

This threefold approach to belonging meets a triple definition of Europe. The same word can refer to the continent and its civilisation, to the European Union as it functions today, and to a grand design, the plan for a united Europe, or in other words "making Europe". Europe is addressed in different ways depending on its cultural, institutional and irenic aspects. To call oneself "European" may mean a cultural affiliation, acting, working, studying and consuming as an EU citizen or aspiring to the plan for a united Europe as a "committed" European.

I . Cultural unity

Let's consider each aspect to evaluate the type of European belonging it promotes and what its impediments are. The continental and civilisational approach is the broadest, in both time and space, but is also the most tangible. It is addressed through cultural heritage, collective memory and first and foremost a shared geography. The Alps, the Mediterranean, the Baltic, the Rhineland or the Balkans have been shaping their own communities of belonging over the ages. The new European anthropology university chairs, supported by Pascal Lamy, identify the deep-rooted aspects that connect and set Europeans apart.

On the scale of the entire continent, the connection emerges from the emphasis on common historical developments. Ancient times, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Baroque era, classicism, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution and its Art nouveau have left successive identifiable layers in the urban landscape, which give European cities a "family" resemblance in addition to their extraordinary uniqueness. From Seville Cathedral to the more stripped-back Turku Cathedral in Finland, from the English cathedral cities to the powerful edifices in Cologne and Prague, travellers are struck by the diversity within the Gothic style. Writers such as Stefan Zweig, George Steiner and others have described how cafés, train stations, universities, opera houses and town squares acted as landmarks for cosmopolitan Europeans wanting to feel at home. Even though the Americanisation of culture seems to be diminishing this, European belonging stems from this feeling, sparked when travelling —that of never feeling completely *an alien* in Rome, Lisbon or Vienna—, wherever you come from on the continent. Paul Valéry put this well in his Zurich conference in 1922: "Wherever the names of Caesar, Gaius, Trajan and Virgil, wherever the names of Moses and Saint Paul, wherever the names of Aristotle, Plato, and Euclid have had a simultaneous significance and authority, that is where Europe is."

What acts as a barrier to this shared feeling is under no circumstances each person's rightful attachment to their nation, the ultimate community of belonging, but rather nationalism. It revisits history, historical figures and the arts and draws from them, sometimes anachron-istically, the specific origins of its glorification. Charlemagne could be considered German, Belgian, French or Italian. Christopher Columbus did not owe his fortune to Genoa, neither did his contemporary Leonardo da Vinci owe his to the Italian city states. The definition of Mozart as only an Austrian composer does not take into account the breadth of his musical genius performed throughout Europe, from which he drew inspiration.

Conversely, these examples and many others may be excessively Europeanised, running the risk of other anachronisms and misappropriations. History as taught in schools

must meet scientific and educational requirements which should not overlook the European dimension inherent in the histories of France, Spain, Poland, Italy, etc. The rightful and comprehensive understanding of this dimension will underpin a shared feeling of belonging between young Europeans, beyond their different languages and nationalities. Beyond general education per se, linguistic studies and exchanges, an initial mobility experience, including for apprenticeships, sporting competitions and cultural events will reinforce the feeling that a nation does not grow alone, but rather within a wider community, which for our continent is Europe.[1]

II • Institutional unity

The term "Europe" is also commonly used today to designate the European Union, the institutional aspect, when addressing Europe. The term "Brussels" is intended here not only as the headquarters of the main EU institutions, but, by extension, as a fully-fledged system with its own decision-making process, functioning, jargon, laws and achievements. The Euro, the single market, the Schengen Area, the directives and regulations, the subsidies and other funds are all tangible realities of this Europe, most often invisible or such an intrinsic part of our daily lives that we do not even notice them. The European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council and the Court of Justice are players in a performance that very often appears to be long and boring, for which summits between heads of State or government punctuate the acts, attracting media attention. The circles of elected representatives, diplomats, civil servants, journalists, lobbyists and think tank experts operate behind closed doors in what is known as the "Brussels bubble", with their own jargon, acronyms and agendas, reflected in specialist media outlets.

It is this "Brusselisation" of Europe that puts belonging to the hardest test. Belonging is also a less appropriate word in this regard than appropriation, which is necessary for this Europe not to appear disconnected, operating in isolation, like a parallel closed circuit, the organisation and decisions of which elude most Europeans. **The major obstacle of this appropriation is to convince citizens that this Europe run from Brussels is democratic**, both in its decision-making process and in the very constitution of its institutions. European elections are key moments in a discreet but steady democratic process. This process is transparent and its attributes reflect the essence of what underpins a national liberal parliamentary democracy. **A European Commissioner is no less legitimate than a French minister.** The difference is that he or she is not acknowledged in the same way and remains less-known.

In this respect, there is no legally speaking a democratic deficit in the European Union but rather a lack of embodiment in which citizens can identify this Europe run from Brussels. While the European flag and anthem are welcome features, they do not suffice. The signs of full belonging would be that the President of the European Commission and the other major players in the EU's political arena are easily recognisable, that the parliamentary debates and compromises between the EU-27 make the news headlines, that they are topics of discussion during dinners out and family gatherings. American political life, despite being much further away and foreign by definition, is a more natural candidate for this. It is in a bid to overcome this lack of embodiment that the upcoming French Presidency of the Council of the EU has grounded in Strasbourg most of European democratic life, at least for the general public in France broadly ignorant of what goes on there. The Conference on the Future of Europe, launched on 9 May 2021, strives to empower citizens to participate directly in European debate "outside Brussels", via a multilingual on-line platform and various meetings.

Other structural differences add to the gap with "Brussels". The first is linguistic in nature. A vocabulary specific to the European Union's unique situation requires constant translation to become easily understood (a Commissioner is like a minister, a directive is like a law). Secondly, the widespread use of

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1 Chopin T. (ed.), Divet G. (collab.), Beaune C. (foreword). 2020. *Enseigner l'Europe en France. Ancrer la dimension européenne dans l'enseignement secondaire français*, *Report*, Paris: Jacques Delors Institute, October 2020.

English in this "Brussels-run Europe", including in its external communication, limits access beyond those who are well versed in it. **Belonging cannot be achieved through the use of a common language, in the same way as empires.**

The second difference concerns time. **European and national democratic processes follow distinct agendas.** It can occur that the European Commission proposes a "package" of key directives and regulations for climate protection when there is a public holiday in a major EU Member State, as was the case on 14 July 2021, and attention is naturally focused elsewhere. A directive is endorsed or contested in a country prior to its entry into force, which normally occurs two years after its adoption by "Brussels", by which time the institutions have moved onto other issues.

Thirdly, the gap with "Brussels" is spatial. **Widespread ignorance of European democratic life is compounded by an invisibility of its political action on the ground, on a local level.** This would require mapping the railways, cycle paths, historical buildings and agricultural fields co-financed by subsidies from the European budget or loans from the European Investment Bank and adding the European logo. The recovery plan and the Covid-19 vaccination campaign are, however, shining examples and an unprecedented opportunity to promote the added value of the EU. **European solidarity which is clearly perceived could well lead to a feeling of belonging.** Conversely, its refusal, for example by "frugal" leaders who skimp on their support for economies hit by the pandemic, betrays the lack of belonging to a collective body and is detrimental to positive public opinion.

This is why the "Europe of Brussels" needs well-known political figures who work to make their European action comprehensible, particularly in their own countries. Over the years, examples for France include Simone Veil, Jacques Delors, later on Daniel Cohn-Bendit and more recently Michel Barnier, who maintained European cohesion during the Brexit negotiations. **Our sense of belonging hangs in the balance and depends on leading figures' ability to embody the European Union.** A feeling of proximity to

institutions requires this human intervention.

In addition to the elected representatives themselves, **mass media outlets have a specific responsibility for intermediation** in this respect. Particularly in France, where European news is deemed to be the least widespread out of the EU-27, according to the Eurobarometer. Information on the EU in the news programmes of the two leading national channels in France represents a tiny fraction of air time over a year. Understanding European challenges and highlighting democratic debate between identifiable figures are key elements for the endorsement of a Europe which, henceforth, will no longer be simply of "Brussels". The French reform of the public broadcasting system was an opportunity to overhaul the specifications in this respect. In the current situation, the French Presidency of the Council may, once again, be used as a hook for this type of underdeveloped information.

III • Unity of fate

There is another aspect of belonging that must be explored in addition to the European dimension to be given to current times and the European depth to be found in history: that of the actual European project. **A collective venture towards a new horizon is key in forging belonging and providing impetus.** The expressions "European construction" or "making Europe" support the idea of a Europe that does not yet exist and of a unity, the quest for which pushes along ambitions.

The Europe of the "founding fathers" in the 1950s was completely focused on the two-fold promise of peace and prosperity, which met post-war expectations. For a long time, this narrative stimulated an identification with the plan for a united Europe. The photo of François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl hand in hand in 1984 in front of the ossuary in Douaumont (Meuse, France) has become the stock image used in school textbooks. It grew beyond the institutional framework through grassroots initiatives such as town twinnings, driven by an activist spirit. The Eurovision song contest and the "Jeux sans frontières" game show captured this zeitgeist of a Europe wanting to move beyond its divisions, also through entertainment. The Nobel

Peace Prize awarded to the European Union in 2012 came much too late for Europeans to take pride in this recognition.

The erosion of this peace narrative, which has become obvious for new generations, increases the deficit of belonging. The European project then seems to be purposeless. It seems to go on without any other justification than that of self-perpetuation. The impression of Europe being at a remove, which is so often expressed in opinion polls, is not so much an institutional issue but rather a problem of dissipated purpose. The decade of serious crises which have shaken the European Union to its foundations (2008 financial crisis, euro area crisis, migration crisis, Brexit and most recently the pandemic) have fed into the sense that the EU, each time found to be lacking, had no other goal than its own survival. Upon becoming President of the European Commission in 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker summed up this mindset by describing the EU in an "existential crisis" and the institution he headed as the "last-chance" Commission. In these extreme and tense circumstances, **the European project has lost its role of a vehicle for higher collective aspirations, which the idea of peace crystallised in the post-war period.**

This ideal was further diluted as the decade of crises was preceded by a decade that took a break from pursuing "an ever-closer Union". The French rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 slammed on the brakes, following a phase of stepping up the project through in particular the conversion to the Euro in 2002 and the major enlargement to the East in 2004. This led to a "fatigue" in Brussels. The missionary spirit which drove this first generation of civil servants "of the Communities" had dwindled. **A preference for the status quo, supported by a dominant Germany which stood to benefit from this, made the plan for a united Europe a symbol of boredom and inertia.** Like a building site stoppage.

A feeling of belonging to Europe cannot do without a shared vision of the future. This is what Emmanuel Macron tried to outline, in his own way, in his address at the Sorbonne in 2017. He may choose to renew these ideas during the French Presidency of the Council. **A new European narrative is currently being defined and is no longer focused on the idea of peace, but that of power.** The reconciliation between nations, which has increased the exchanges between them, served as a backdrop to the achievement of the single market, the single currency and the Schengen Area. It is now giving way to a new narrative in which these very achievements are levers to assert Europe's position in the world. The rise of authoritarianism in China, Russia and Turkey, the brutality of the Trump years and the spectre of their possible return have made **Europeans realise their political uniqueness.** In the field of economics, the abuses of the Anglo-Saxon financial capitalism and the ambitions of China's State capitalism have shed light on the specific features of a "responsible" European capitalism. The major global challenges of climate change and pandemics make action much clearer, at least on a European level. The terrorist threat, cyber-attacks, the regional insecurity around the EU's external borders, from the Sahel to Belarus, from Libya to the Middle East and from the Caucasus to Eastern Ukraine, entrust Europeans with a new geopolitical mission. **Faced with the prevailing global unrest, Europeans must start to formulate a "we"**, which sketches out a new type of belonging. Belonging not to a Europe that would once again become a predator, conqueror or domineering bloc, but rather a Europe which protects itself and which sees itself as a wise, generous and respected power, allied with the United States on a level playing field, but sometimes acting without them. As Václav Havel prophesied, "Europe's mission is to be exemplary, while commanding respect".

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To sum up, there are several ways of feeling European: either by recognising in the streets of Bruges or Sienna the features of one's own culture, or by seeing in the laws and decisions of "Brussels" the characteristics of one's own democracy, or by acknowledging the European way of being in the world in comparison to the actions of other powers. These three types of belonging are more often than not considered separately and can even be pitted against each other. The opponents of "Brussels" often include those who believe that the EU has been severed from its original civilisation —which perpetuates the recurring

debate on the omission of "Christian roots" in the preamble of European treaties. The visionaries of a European superpower berate a "naive Europe" represented by European market that is excessively open due to dogmatic technocrats in Brussels.

A deep feeling of belonging to Europe would require on the contrary an articulation of the three aforementioned types, and to pick up and put together the pieces. **An achievement from "Brussels" must be understood from its cultural bedrock right through to its geopolitical reach.** For example, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) must be viewed not only as a democratically decided European law but as rooted in the European understanding of privacy; its purpose being to assert the EU's global normative power in this field. A carbon border tax expresses European citizens' environmental concerns, requires legal compliance with the EU's multilateral trade commitments and conveys its preferences to the rest of the world. To take another example, the enlargement of the EU to the Balkans follows the shape of the continent, must meet the EU's democratic requirements and is conducted with a geopolitical ambition. **Demonstrating an overall coherence between Europe as a civilisation, an institutional reality and as a great design is the key to a staunch sense of belonging.**

This cannot be fostered for an achievement taken in isolation; "You cannot fall in love with the single market", Jacques Delors correctly stated. Conversely, the single market will not be eliminated as if it were foreign to or contradicted any attachment to Europe. The functioning and regulation of the market are to be assessed on the basis of Europe's history and merchant and social traditions, and of the future, as a core asset against new trade rivals. **Belonging stems from a cross-disciplinary approach to Europe, that is legal, economic, social, historical, geopolitical and anthropological.** It is up to the European Commission to present

this interlinking of approaches in its initiatives to pursue the plan for a united Europe. Its cultural project for a "new European Bauhaus",[2] together with its Green Deal, is a foray in this direction.

European belonging, therefore, cannot be decreed, but rather reveals itself through the interlinking process described above. It cannot be bought with subsidies. It cannot be grown through a clever public communication campaign, the mere use of starred blue banners or the intervention of a European media outlet. It requires first of all a step back, an education and a political embodiment. Failing this, it peters out and can give way to misconceptions, indifference and even a rejection of belonging to the EU. Brexit can be explained by the exhaustion in the UK of all forms of European belonging in its three dimensions: hard Brexiters make a distinction between the UK and the European continent, do not see any democratic virtues in "Brussels", the contrary is even true, and do not foresee any destiny in the EU related to that pursued by their "Global Britain".

How then can the still fragile feeling of belonging be nurtured in France? The question has a different answer for each country according to its size, history of unity, level of regional plurality and the year in which it joined the EU. For France, we are looking at a "founding nation" of European construction alongside Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries, but one which legitimately views itself as the trailblazer of the project, its first instigator. The issue is less how French citizens feel they belong to Europe but more with how Europe belongs to them and can be used as a lever to restore its glorious past.[3]

At a time when French ideas for the future of the European project are paid more attention in Brussels and in the chancelleries, especially during the French presidency of the Council of the EU, a feeling of reappropriation may gain traction in public opinion. Yet this

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2   Launched by the European Commission in October 2020, following the European Green Deal, the "New European Bauhaus" brings together designers, architects, engineers, scientists and students from the EU with a view to combining aesthetics and environmental transition. Its calls for proposals fund innovative everyday products that favour simplicity, functionality and materials from the circular economy.

3   See the report by Bruno Cautrès (Cevipof), Thierry Chopin (Jacques Delors Institute) and Emmanuel Rivière (Kantar), *Les Français et l'Europe, entre défiance et ambivalence*, Jacques Delors Institute, May 2020 (publication available in French).

must be balanced with the understanding that Europe cannot become a France —within the meaning of a State and a Republic— but on a bigger scale, which would run the risk of creating a "lone ranger" situation. Belonging to Europe is the acceptance that our country will not thrive alone but with others, the acknowledgement that every other nation is unique and necessary, and the understanding that Europe is, as much as France, our motherland and our future; inextricably so. •

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