# **ORF SPECIAL REPORT**

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We are all refugees. Zaventem Airport, Brussels | Photo courtesy: Alfred Grupstra/Flickr/CC BY 2.0

### **ABSTRACT**

The European Union (EU) had been lurching from one crisis to the next even before a majority of British voters expressed their desire to leave it. While staying away from the Brexit debate itself, its implications for UK and EU, and the politics and motivations in the run-up to the vote, this paper argues that at the very least the referendum is a wake-up call for Europe to begin to address some of its structural and operational shortcomings in a substantial manner. Accordingly, a few observations from 'a' Indian perspective are put forth and may be worth considering as the EU moves towards a renewed and reformed version of itself.

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To know more about ORF scan this code Specifically, this paper reflects on three particular challenges the EU faces, and the four fundamental weaknesses that continue to hobble it: that of being perceived as a status-quoist power; of being unduly trans-Atlantic in its orientation; of promoting values often at the expense of enlightened self-interest; and of a persistent structural inability to communicate to the world at large.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rumours of the death of the European project are, as Mark Twain would have put it, vastly exaggerated. Examples for its continued relevance and efficiency can be found in the European Union's outreach to Iran that paved the way for a diplomatic breakthrough, its continuing efforts to absorb Syrian war refugees, and its clever geo-economic manoeuvres that have effectively contained Russia's sphere of influence across Central and Eastern Europe. But the condition of the union has, without question, deteriorated rapidly, to everybody's surprise. The current period of flux is an ideal time for a dispassionate analysis. It is undeniable that 'Brand EU' is taking a beating and it is time to unpack where the scepticism and perceived frailty stem from.

The first of the three most visible challenges to the project has to be that this strong collective of European nations has achieved only patchy social integration within its members. The *gastarbeiter* model adopted by Germany in the 1960s and 70s may have addressed short-run labour problems but was not efficient in assimilating newcomers into society. Furthermore, as former colonial powers, the UK and France opened their doors to their former subjects (for a short period) but their policies over time proved inadequate in addressing longstanding grievances. None of the existing models in individual member states of the EU can be termed a full success.

Muslims make for about four to five percent of Europe's population, with the ratio considerably higher in France. According to the PEW Research Center, this figure will rise to eight percent in 2030. European Muslims have long blamed structural societal problems as key reasons behind a permanent 'Otherisation.' This phenomenon effectively undermines their integration by overriding the significant contributions of Muslim immigrants to the European project. As noted French scholar Gilles Kepel remarked, "neither the blood spilled by Muslims from North Africa fighting in French uniforms during both World Wars nor the sweat of migrant laborers, living under deplorable living conditions, who rebuilt France (and Europe) for a pittance after 1945, has made their children ... full fellow citizens."

Arguably, an immediate consequence is the emergence and consolidation of radical Islamism and its twin, racist-rightist politics. At the very least there is certainly a degree of resonance in certain constituencies. Consider the notable rise of the far-right Front National (FN) in France, led by Marine Le Pen. In the

December 2015 regional French elections, 6.8 million French citizens—one out of ten—voted for FN.<sup>2</sup> The unabated rise of Le Pen and FN will be of significant consequence in the French presidential elections of 2017. France is not alone in seeing the rise of the extreme right. Austria just narrowly escaped the election of a right-wing populist, Norbert Hofer, as president. They are now heading back to the hustings, with an unpredictable outcome. From the UK Independence Party in Britain and the Alternative for Germany in Germany, to Hungary under prime minister Viktor Orbán, liberal EU is now grappling with two illiberal ideologies, with all member states experiencing varying degrees of this new reality.

The EU's second challenge lies in the economic sphere, the touchstone of the European integration project. The EU finds itself caught in the inevitable confusion that comes from being a monetary union without being a fiscal union. The periodic eruption of the Greek tragedy arises from this cleavage. Greece's woes can be traced to two fundamental problems. One, its economy did not fulfil the convergence criterion laid out in the Maastricht Treaty to begin with. In January 1998, on the eve of the formation of the EU, the Greek inflation rate was 5.2 percent against the reference rate of 2.7 percent and the EU average at 1.6 percent; similar statistics hold for other macroeconomic parameters such as public-debt/deficit-share-of-GDP, and interest rates.3 Second, fiscal independence meant that there was very little oversight from Brussels on Greek spending or its lax attitude towards tax collection. The global financial crisis of 2007-2009 exacerbated these fundamental problems that are unlikely to go away any time soon. But even when solved, individual European countries will have to deal with the fact that compared to emerging countries such as China and India, their economies will only stay relevant on a global level if tallied.<sup>4</sup>

Segments of EU's population already feel the heat. Part of the far-right political discourse is based on the discontent of a new generation of Europeans who know that they are the first after World War II to be economically less well off than their parents. European democratic parties so far have failed to come up with a new narrative to respond to the angst among these people and prevent them from embracing regressive, authoritarian solutions.<sup>5</sup>

The third challenge to the EU is what can be called the return of history in the form of Vladimir Putin. While the fall of the Berlin Wall was a moment of triumph for Western Europe, developments thereafter have not progressed favourably, especially since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis that culminated in the annexation of Crimea in 2014. A deep misunderstanding aggravates the situation. Europe believed that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, it was now in a more friendly and settled neighbourhood. It abdicated a realist position and did not invest in follow-through diplomacy that could have produced different and more sustainable outcomes.

What is important is to draw the right conclusions from this mistake: The belief that at the end of the binary world order one side prevailed (that is, Europe

and the US) is still part of a Cold War mindset and results in a winner-takes-all proposition, limiting room for accommodation.

The rise of a multipolar world poses a whole new set of challenges, but Europe has thus far failed to develop a new vision for itself and forge new alliances. For a long time Giovanni Thomasi di Lampedusa's famous line, "Everything needs to change so that everything can stay the same" was the quintessential European mantra. No more. The old continent with its shrinking population and low economic growth rates will be only one centre of gravity in what emerges from the current global disorder. If managed well, this need not be a disadvantage. But it would mean rethinking the gospel of Monnet and a few long-cherished ideas of what Europe is and should be, as articulated by its founding fathers.

## 2. TOWARDS EU 2.0: REBRANDING AN OLD PROJECT

Based on the above analysis, there are essentially four issues, from an Indian point of view, that problematise what the EU could potentially offer to the world. To begin with, as a brand, its perceived central proposition is behind the times. While smaller countries and developing regions of the world are seeking collective weight to reform the global order, the European project is seen as status-quoist, primarily concerned with perpetuating its (members') entrenched interests. From reforms of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to those of key Bretton Woods institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European powers are seen to want more of the same.

Europe has two out of the five permanent seats in the UNSC, though only representing seven percent of the world's population. It is clearly over-represented in this particular marquee club. India's 2005 bid to a UNSC permanent membership through an alliance with three other aspirants—Brazil, Japan and Germany—fell by the wayside partly due to an obstructive strategy by the UK and France. Both these powers supported Germany's bid, although given the fact that Europe is already over-represented in the UNSC, UN General Assembly members were unlikely to allow another European power to become a permanent member. As one commentator noted, "the UK and France were effectively condemning the prospects of UNSC reform and thereby preserving their permanent seats even longer."

European countries hold 26.45 percent of voting shares in the IMF while the EU-28's share of world GDP is 17 percent, down from 30 percent in 1980. Historically, the chief of the IMF has always been a European, much in the same way that the World Bank chief is always, as a matter of norm, an American candidate. The origin of these biases lies in the manner in which IMF and other Bretton Woods institutions were created. These were shaped by the vision of two men, British economist John Maynard Keynes and US Treasury official Harry Dexter White. While Keynes argued for the need for a truly international clearing

currency—the "bancor"—White's vision was for a system which was attuned to the interests of the US. <sup>11</sup> The latter is what dominated the compromise at the end. Many see this lack of European leadership as one (though not the only) reason behind the slow pace of reforms of Bretton Woods institutions.

While some European powers do realise that this posture may not be sustainable—witness their enthusiasm for the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—they are either unwilling or unable to upend the existing global governance order and allow it to be refashioned according to 21st century realities.

# 3. NEED TO RELOCATE EUROPE'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

The second issue seems to be Europe's conception of the map – and its place in the extant geography of the world. Europe must realise that its future is to a large extent coupled to that of Asia's and Africa's. Instead of a serious institutional push towards building a common future with the powers that will shape these two regions, Europe has functionally de-hyphenated itself from both. When Europe has engaged with these two regions it has done so myopically, based on its colonial ruminations or as illustrated by its trade policies.

The EU and the US are currently negotiating the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)—a wide-ranging free trade agreement that mirrors the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership in the Asia Pacific. Signing the TTIP and not pushing ahead on important under-discussion bilateral FTAs, like the India-EU Bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement, will further orient European economies to the US. Meanwhile China, the EU's second-largest trading partner, is yet to be granted Market Economy Status (MES) by certain EU member states, something that ought to be automatic by December 2016 as per China's 2001 WTO accession agreement. <sup>12</sup> If China is not granted MES, and the TTIP is signed, it will be clear to Asian states that the EU will continue to orient its trading regimes to those of the US, to the detriment of Asia.

Geopolitically, the record of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in engaging the Middle East and North Africa has been tepid, despite its participation in the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. This is odd, since terrorism and the unabated influx of migrants pose some of the greatest challenges to Europe. Even when NATO engaged the Middle East through these two mechanisms during the Libyan campaign in 2011, NATO's promoters in the UNSC—the US, the UK and France—failed to secure a buy-in from countries like Brazil and India. India's permanent representative to the UN remarked that "responsibility to protect cannot turn out to be a tool legitimizing big power intervention on the pretext of protecting populations from the violations of human rights and humanitarian law." Indeed, Paris found multiple reasons to consult Washington for guidance on its Syria policy, but found little

motivation to engage New Delhi. There is little doubt that if Paris had been in a habit of seeking and heeding advice from India—likely only if both countries saw each other as important partners in their common periphery—the situation in the Middle East may have been remarkably different today, given India's significantly different approach. The end result of the lack of policy convergence between European and non-Western powers (India, for one, remained wary of the Syrian intervention) has resulted in the former being perceived in non-Western capitals as nothing more than a geopolitical appendage to the US.

Europe's penchant for trans-Atlanticism is a sentimental anachronism. While many in Europe might believe that only a close alliance with the US can defend what are perceived as Western values, such as democracy, human rights and a market-based economy, the reality is quite the contrary. It is the very nature of these values that make their imposition on others impossible without digressing from their liberal ethos. The value-based alliance between the US and EU has only reinforced the impression that Europe is too busy consolidating the old-boys' club by any means to realise that the geopolitical centre of gravity is inexorably marching eastwards. Obsessed with the Atlantic Order, Europe is near absent in the great debates of the Indo-Pacific.

The corollary, therefore, is that EU and more broadly Europe are inefficient in promoting their economic interests and are unable to stitch together new partnerships to keep their periphery stable. A new engagement with the emerging economies of Asia and Africa, a new partnership with them that will allow new voices to manage the world economy and politics, and the realist appreciation that such an engagement is not just a political compulsion but actually a credible actualisation of the original objectives driving the European project, must now form the basis of a revised set of "European values."

## 4. GRAMMAR OF VALUES: PERPETUATION OF INTERESTS?

This revision of the "values" discourse is essential as the old one is failing. Effectively, the tyranny of values—whether it is as self-proclaimed champions of human rights, or of liberal multiculturalism—has, in recent years, cost Europe in real-politik currency. Europe's promotion of norms was driven by self-interest in the past. A world remade in its own image was a self-serving agenda from the colonial era to the Cold War, with tangible material benefits. Its coercive assimilation of migrants in its own image took forward the same agenda. The British mission civilisatrice—liberal beliefs driven by religious beliefs—or the French promotion of egalité and fraternité—by force, if necessary—or Bismarck's nationalism all had the hallmarks of great-power politics, and not of "the visionary designs of the philosophers and the physiocrats." 16

What Europe has engaged in since is either promotion of self-determined values and norms divorced from immediate political interests; or the hypocrisy of

publicly promoting values that it chooses to ignore whenever business interests intervene. In partner countries such as India, this has led to the impression that the EU needles its negotiators with supposed human rights concerns but uses this as an excuse to slow down the pace of finalising cooperation agreements and treaties. All this while, its businesses and corporates continue to derive huge material benefits and invest large capital in China and other geographies with patchy human rights records. This has neither improved bilateral relations with key partners nor has it helped to strengthen the human rights agenda.

Even at home, this has led to the establishment of an inelastic value system that seeks to enforce conformity on those who see the world differently. Arguably Europe's problems with integrating minorities in its national mainstream are partly a consequence of this social inelasticity. France's experiment with banning the *niqab* in 2010 is a case in point. A scholar who had studied the impact of this ban summed it with a simple phrase: "It has been a complete failure." This scholar went on to point out that it "both encouraged Islamophobia as well [as gave] Muslim extremists more cause to feel the need to rise up against the French state." While this may be an extreme commentary, there is significant discontent with the policy.

While France, Great Britain and Germany have chosen different ways of dealing with their immigrant populations, these efforts all remained within a hierarchical discourse where the migrant somehow has to adopt to a culture that is immutable and inflexible. Recent events in this geography call for a new political discourse about the changing identity of the collective, its revised values, its new vision, perhaps even a new Renaissance.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, EU needs to reimagine itself and its identity through a dialogue with its own immigrants from Asia and Africa. There is a flawed conception of history and philosophical thought in certain quarters. Since Antiquity and the Middle Ages, there has been a long history of mutual influence between Europe, the Islamic World and Asia. Trying to create a more or less exclusive identity based on Christianity and/or the Enlightenment was always limiting, <sup>20</sup> and it has perhaps become untenable now.

Europe needs to live up to the reality of its composite culture not only to remain credible internationally, but also if it wants to maintain social peace and use the opportunities that immigration offers. A dialogue with India and other countries seeking to manage their individual diversities may be another new conversation that the EU could enter into.

## 5. REBRANDING AND COMMUNICATING EU

The above problems are compounded by the fact that 'Brand EU' has a serious marketing and communication problem. Brussels has made very little effort to engage the world beyond the borders of Europe in any meaningful way, to great

consequence. At a meeting between European and Indian scholars in 2015, both sides bemoaned the lack of communication initiated by the European side. A large part of the problem lies with the channels through which news about the EU is transmitted to the Indian public. A scholar noted: "Opinions of the Indian elite have tended to be conditioned by dispatches in Indian newspapers which have originated in or were transmitted by Western wire agencies. *Continued reliance on the Anglo-Saxon media has tended to reinforce stereotypical clichés about Europe.*" [Emphasis added]

A simple statistic proves the point that the EU has made very little effort to reach out to the world beyond its borders. In 2004, there were 23 newspapers covering Brussels from Belgium—12 serving the Flemish-speaking community in the country, nine serving French speakers, and one serving German speakers. In contrast, there were only four English language newspapers (print and online) operating out of Brussels—"The Brussels Times," "New Europe," "Europolitics," "Politico: Europe." Unlike Voice of America, the British Broadcasting Service regional language programmes or even Deutsche Welle, there is no truly European media operation that disseminates local language messaging to audiences outside Europe."

Instead, there has been much hand-wringing about Russian propaganda and how Vladimir Putin is using traditional strategies of disinformation as part of its hybrid warfare in Ukraine. In political circles and at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels almost everybody who is involved in public diplomacy and media relations laments the lack of funds and the fact that the Russian media has been more effective in proliferating messaging to wider geographies. This seems surprising to say the least, given the size and relevance of European media houses and Europe's existing economic strength. But failing to influence global discourse is perforce a sign of weakness and should by itself be a wake-up call for Europe.

This situation is aggravated by the fact that American media is increasingly under criticism for their poor coverage of the EU. Noting the lacklustre coverage of the recent Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, one scholar wrote: "It's true that EU stories are often hard to make interesting, but the American media has never really tried to do so for the entire past half century, during which the emergence of the European Union has been one of the world's biggest geopolitical developments." This ought to be of serious concern to EU policymakers and the public at large—the British and American media have become the de facto channels through which the world beyond the global north receives news about Europe. And if the past is an indicator, it is unlikely that these channels (US and UK media) will offer their audience coverage that is sympathetic to the EU project. For many in these two countries, this project is seen as one where the ascendancy of two countries in global affairs, France and Germany, may have upended the order that emerged at the end of WWII in Europe.

EU public diplomacy has been fairly ineffective in large parts of Asia and Africa. Positive messages that the EU could communicate to countries and regions to its east have been muted, crowded out by narratives emerging from eurosceptics in Britain and the US. Therefore, the EU seems to be in the news in countries like India mostly for the wrong reasons. It is time Europe take a hard look at its messaging, the medium, and at the concrete steps it needs to take to establish and reinvent itself among such constituencies. All the more, Brussels needs to do it alone without expecting favours or support from London or Washington.

# 6. PRANAYAM<sup>26</sup> FOR THE EU

While the EU project originated from, and belongs to the 20th century, its success and relevance will nonetheless help shape the 21st century, a period that may well witness the rise of Asia. The EU, therefore, must ensure that it brings on board a larger set of stakeholders who are co-invested in this period and by implication in a new European project.

This requires a broader understanding of the project itself. For too long it has been shaped by a limited understanding of its own identity that was sometimes called a "Christian club." This version of European identity might have suited some interests for some time, but it is outdated and needs rebooting. History is witness that European identity was always shaped by intensive exchange with its larger region and that periods of voluntary seclusion were usually not the most fruitful ones. Outreach to the external regions and to new constituencies within must be the new mantra for the EU.

The EU also needs a paradigmatic shift in its policy towards Russia. While a reversion to the "Cold War mindset" may seem to be the easiest way out of the current stand-off with Moscow, it is certainly not the most productive. While the Crimean genie cannot be put back in the bottle, the EU must aim for a partnership of equals with Russia in the future. This will most probably require extensive dialogue, much of which will fail, and several rounds of negotiations, many of which will lead nowhere. It may need to swallow some bitter pills, and that may be difficult. But the alternative, a new cold war or hot peace, will be costly and painful.

Further, the EU needs its own rebalance to Asia. This new pivot to Asia cannot be an adjunct to the US policy but must be shaped by EU's three principal dependencies on the Asian continent—economics, security and people (migrants). Sustainable economic growth, the fight against terrorism and social peace in Europe all depend to a large extent on relations with various African and Asian countries and communities. It is high time to make ties with Asia a priority in EU foreign policy and allocate the necessary intellectual and financial resources for the effort. The economic imperative that drives Europe towards the East must

effectively also come to define its strategic consensus. The stability of the region, and indeed the world's economic engine, are premised on the conduct of major powers in Asia, whether China, Russia or India. The post-war trans-Atlantic regime was built on the edifice of economic necessity, which transformed into a shared understanding of security concerns. History may not repeat itself—and China is certainly no replacement for the US on this count—but Europe should be as invested in the future of the Asian Century as it was in the post-war global order.

And last but not least: The EU must communicate beyond the elite. This is true for its diplomacy as well as for its domestic communications. Selling a relationship to the elite in India or China is perhaps already successful to an extent. The outreach challenge, however, is to make the EU understandable to the masses that remain more conversant with European countries rather than with the EU itself and whose appreciation of the collective is limited to the Schengen visa. Investing in greater number of and deeper university exchanges, engagement with the vernacular media, and using digital outreach—all need to be embraced to achieve this. The core determinant must be the ability to transmit a polysemic message from the EU. ©RF

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