



## A Brussels Declaration for an “Ever Closer Union”

*Jo Coelmont*

What is valuable, is vulnerable. So it is for peace, democracy, and the ability to lead the good life. They are never permanently gained, but remain a permanent aspiration. Throughout history, it has always been thus.

At this very moment, Europe is once again witnessing a war on the continent. How did we act after the Second World War to ensure that Europe would no longer be a continent constantly plagued by war? We aspired to an “ever closer European Union”. *Panta rhei*—everything flows. Today once more we see an acceleration of history; perhaps we are even reaching a tipping point. To be fit for purpose in this new geopolitical context, we must accelerate the construction of the EU as well.

More than ever, we must not just react, but act, with foresight. European management must give way to European leadership. That does require, among other steps, a revision of the European Treaties – that is for the medium term.

What follows, was originally conceived before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is a plea for a *Brussels Declaration*, subscribed by all EU Member States, to achieve an “ever closer Union”.

What might, before 24 February, have been seen as revolutionary, may now be seen as an evident next step, which is revolutionary only in its simplicity. A step to complement the 11 March 2022 Versailles Declaration.

### THE GENESIS OF THE EU

After the Second World War the countries of Europe had to reinvent themselves. They had witnessed another self-inflicted geopolitical earthquake, of a magnitude akin to that of the First World War. This time all European states lost relevance on the global scene, more than ever. Regaining their lost status by themselves was no longer possible. Thus they gradually built an institutionalised (West) European cooperation.

The foundations of this project of European integration were revolutionary (and, already then, revolutionary in their simplicity): The strategy: ever closer Union. The functioning principles: subsidiarity and functionalism. At the time, this construct was fit for purpose, adapted to the context of “cold war” that had crystallised. In the

end, it even served in the atypical geopolitical interlude that we lived through after the fall of the Berlin wall.

But where are we now? Facing another geopolitical earthquake, while confronting global challenges (the climate, migration, the pandemic, war) and – as always – actively upholding democracy and the rule of law. Now not just the borders of countries, but those of continents have in many ways lost significance. “Europe” is becoming less and less relevant.

These challenges are not just global from a geographic point of view. They are global also in the sense that they have an impact on all layers of society. Therefore, every policy must be both inward-looking (looking after one’s own community) and outward-looking (worldwide). In addition, speed has become even more essential, if not vital. The ability to take decisions fast, at the right level; to anticipate, rather than to react: that is key. Yet here the shoe pinches. Where did we go wrong?

### **BACK TO THE PAST**

A remarkable duo stood at the cradle of European integration. Robert Schumann abstained from high-flown rhetoric and spoke of the revolutionary project of European cooperation as if it were but a self-evident, common-sense, technical project from which all would benefit in the post-war reconstruction. Thus he quickly obtained everyone’s consent. An ever closer Union had gotten underway – that was the strategy. In the European Coal and Steel Community, the heavy industry and energy policy of all member states would hence be supervised by a civil servant: a European Commissioner. Somehow, it sounds more revolutionary today than it did then!

Areas of competence were not strictly limited. The ECSC was a first step. Eventually, after the failure of an

audacious project to create a European Defence Community (put forward and then rejected by the same member state), foreign, security and defence policy were excluded. In practice, the member states of the ECSC had already delegated these to NATO, guided by a prominent lead nation.

Consequently, individual member states henceforth pursued an outward-looking policy, aimed at establishing European directives, while the European institutions pursued an exclusively inward-looking policy, focusing on domestic economic prosperity. Both member states and the institutions approached the outside world mostly as an export market, and ignored geopolitics. At the time: fit for purpose.

It was Jean Monnet who moved from strategy to action through functionalism and subsidiarity. One starts cooperation in one policy area, and the drive for more efficiency leads to its extension to related areas. Initially, member states were quite willing to see the process of integration evolve spontaneously: ever closer. But as the decades progressed, subsidiarity came to be understood more negatively. It is not sufficient for the EU institutions to offer more effectiveness and efficiency than the member states to entrust them with a competence; not even if the member states suffer such damage that it cannot be hidden from the public. It is “permitted” only when *all* member states have become so hopeless that they see no other option but to transfer the competence to the EU. For a long time, however, the political class could allow itself to react belatedly to various developments. The damage remained limited.

Around the turn of the century, though, the first signs of a geopolitical transition appeared. The EU had meanwhile become economically so attractive that it saw a fast expansion of the number of member states. True to the original strategy, this widening was meant to go hand in hand with a deepening of the Union, which would now include foreign, security and defence policy. This was proclaimed at the time. It was even

judged that a mere update of the Treaties would not suffice; instead, a genuine constitution was to make the EU fit for purpose again. A new glorious age loomed. So far, so good.

### WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?

And then came “events, dear boy, events”. Eighteen member states ratified the draft EU constitution; two rejected it; the rest had postponed ratification. For the EU, that meant: the no’s have it. A salvage operation transformed the constitution – after a delay of many years – into the less high-flown but also less ambitious Lisbon Treaty. But the EU lost a lot of its lustre, both internally and externally.

A second event was even more determining: war. In 2003 the US launched a war against Iraq. Who in the EU was in favour, and who was against? This question of foreign and security policy, with military implications, caused a deep divide in the EU. In 1998, France and the UK in a joint declaration had pleaded for the construction of a European defence – a lesson learned from the bankruptcy of the European crisis management in Yugoslavia, where the US initially did not want to involve NATO. But now, a breaking point emerged, not just between Paris and London, but across the EU. Unity was lost. Including transatlantic unity: the US increasingly pushed back against European defence. The EU did not manage to bridge its divide, but had to agree to disagree on the issue.

This caused considerable collateral damage for all EU structures. It produced a strategic distraction. The Nice Treaty had already failed to deepen the Union before it enlarged. Now for many new member states, but not only for them, the new strategy was: we agree to disagree on ever closer Union. For these member states, their national

strategy was: the EU – what’s in it for me? For communitarian issues, qualified majority voting (QMV) remained the rule, but many member states rather sought to exercise a veto over any and all important questions. A quid pro quo attitude became dominant. Defensible, perhaps, from a national point of view, but with grave political consequences for the EU.

The EU was left without a clear strategy and a reliable decision-making mechanism. That EU became very vulnerable to great powers able to put pressure on one or more of its member states to block EU decisions. Another form of QMV thus appeared: qualified minority vetoes. The EU is at risk of becoming some sort of “United European Nations” that can no longer hold its own against global challenges. Unless...

### BACK TO THE FUTURE: A BRUSSELS DECLARATION<sup>7</sup>

The time has come to make the process of European integration fit for purpose again. A *Brussels Declaration* that would demand from all current and future member states:

1. To explicitly subscribe to the strategic objective of an “ever closer Union”. Member states that are not willing to, can still opt for a close cooperation with the EU in many dimensions, along the model of Norway. Their wishes will be heard in the EU, but they can no longer participate in EU decision-making.
2. To cancel all existing opt-outs and derogations from the Treaties.
3. To regard the deepening of the EU as its first priority, and enlargement as a permanent aspiration in as much as it contributes to deepening. Only full

membership will be on offer, or partnership with countries that subscribe to all the EU's values and overall objectives.

4. To address in a special session of the European Council<sup>2</sup> all issues related to war and peace as well as any proposed EU decision and any action by a third country that a member state considers to damage its vital interests. That is, any security issue of the first order, which must be *Chefsache*. The decision-making method requires no “qualification”, for in an “ever closer Union” nobody is secure unless all are secure. That implies the end, at all levels of decision-making, of *qualified* majority voting.
5. To constructively abstain from any further participation in decision-making when an EU decision, in addition of communitarian assets and mechanisms, requires the use of national assets (such as military forces for a crisis management operations) that a member state declines to provide. Such abstention must be explicitly motivated, however. An end must be made to the recurring reality in EU operations that “so few do so much in the name of so many” – and that those few even have to carry the bulk of the cost of the operation.

### WHAT IT TAKES

These technical-institutional proposals are revolutionary in their simplicity. But is this sufficient? What does it really take?

What it takes in these fast evolving times, and that may be revolutionary, is to move from European management to European leadership. A catharsis is required, a new mind-set, to prevent the EU and the member states to sink into irrelevance. An evolution

that is already underway, alas, including in other international organisations with the ambition to act on the world scene.

Fortunately, the European continent can build on the solid EU pillars that Schumann and Monet erected. And on the lessons learned throughout the process of European integration. Time change, and so does the EU, usually in the wake of a crisis, and with a more or less acceptable delay. Today, we cannot afford that luxury any longer. *Gouverner, c'est prévoir*. Foresight and quick and effective action have become vital, also for the EU.

The proposed *Brussels Declaration* puts every member state for a major political choice: take it or leave it. For many member states if not all, and for many European citizens, the first option probably is but common sense. Events, events (such as the Brexit saga) render the choice self-evident. That is precisely the added value of a catharsis: it clears the mind and enlightens the road ahead.

### WHAT IT DOESN'T TAKE

The idea to proceed through enhanced or permanent structured cooperation between subsets of member states ought to be abandoned right away. Until recently, this was indeed the only politically feasible way of injecting more effectiveness into certain policy areas. But it does not produce overall effectiveness for the EU, neither in its internal functioning nor on the world stage, where the Union can hardly speak or act on behalf of only some of its members. The words “European” and “Union” lose all significance then.

### IN THE END

An ever closer Union, which is inward- outward-, and forward-looking, can look forward with confidence to 2052 – the 100th anniversary of the ECSC. It will likely have more member states than today. Looking back, the *Brussels Declaration* will probably be seen as a

footnote in the history of European integration, introducing some limited and evident measures, revolutionary in their simplicity and in their return to the origins of the Union.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The first Brussels declaration was the *International Declaration concerning the Laws and Customs of War* of 27 August 1874, an initiative of Tsar Alexander II who convened fifteen states. The second one dates from 27 March 2015 and concerned the *Implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights, our Shared Responsibility*.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/seven-steps-to-european-defence-transatlantic-equilibrium-and-global-europe/>.



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