Chapter Ten

The Future of the European Union: Values, Education, Participation and Solidarity

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Introduction

The process of European integration shows a dynamic and evolving reality, exhibiting many faces and diversified forms of mixed intergovernmental and supranational cooperation. Today, more than ever, this process is in the midst of a radically changing internal and external landscape. It navigates between pessimism, optimism and realism, and is shaped by Globalisation vs Europeanisation developments. Its model of society, based on fundamental human rights, on culture as vehicle of emancipation, on sustainable development and socio-economic cohesion, and on a multilateral vision of the world order, is put under strain. There is a confrontation between the actual EU confusing reality and its responsibility in the complex international environment.

The EU already plays an important role in international relations, mainly in trade, development, environment and social issues, more recently also in security strategy. Although the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) made an important step towards strengthening the EU's global aspirations, its overall role in the world role seems to be threatened. It is facing today a number of internal and external challenges. These comprise rising global exposure, threats to economic and social cohesion, growing cultural diversity, increasing complexity, migration issues, the climate agenda, democratic deficits, populist movements and – last but not least – imperilled legitimacy and trust. But 2020 was mainly dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe as elsewhere, trying to manage its health, welfare, economic and socio-cultural impacts. Times of turbulence and change in Europe are not restricted to the impacts of the pandemic. The landscape of EU politics is dominated by both in-

ternal political strife and tricky international relations. The new European Commission led by Ursula Von der Leyen seems to have understood this dramatic reality and has already taken measures for a more efficient governance in its structure, priority policy setting and initiatives. It is attempting to make its mark, in terms of both domestic and foreign policy, with the European Green Deal being one of its flagship initiatives. The European Council in July 2020 adopted not only a new budget for 2021–2027 but also a large Recovery Package.

The chapter is structured in four main parts. In the first part value premises and trajectories for responding to the internal and external challenges the EU is confronted within the current times are briefly explained. The second part analyses the role of education in the EU. It describes and assesses the main EU education programmes while stressing the importance of citizenship education for EU citizenship building. The third part focusses on participation and the perspective of participatory governance in the EU and beyond. It explains its legal basis and summarises various steps the EU has been taken to favour EU practices of participatory governance. Both (citizenship) education and participation are seen as important vehicles for a sustainable and value-driven EU future. The final part centres on the importance of EU solidarity in dealing with internal and external problems caused by the pandemic. In the Conclusions, we suggest some tasks and responsibilities for strengthening EU's future. Throughout the analysis, reference is made to the Western Balkans, as a partner region of the EU.

The Need for a Values-Based EU

A Values-Based Community

The recognition of the EU as a values-based Union is legally embedded in Art. 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007): 'The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.'

The actual complex internal and external reality implies a permanent updating of the European narrative within a radically changing context. However, this needs to be based and developed on generally shared values and obligations. This implies a view that is embedded in a community of shared values, supports the strength of the European

integration process, and recognises the positive heritage as well as the complexity of a multifaceted EU as an added value to the European project.

A vision for EU's future relies very much on the concept of community (Bekemans & de la Torre, 2018). The EU does not only refer to a socio-economic community but also to a community of destiny, life, purpose, responsibility, and certainly to a space of multicultural learning and a meeting place of multiple identities. The original vision of the Founding Fathers should therefore remain an important inspiration for further integration. After all, they worked for a European project to guarantee a sustainable peace within European borders, embedded in a long-term vision but driven by a pragmatic policy approach. Economic arguments supported the political goodwill.

It is important that a forward-looking vision captures a sense of belonging and offers an added value to EU citizens, even in times of transformation and confusion. Such a vision should be based on a values-driven community, recognising the EU as a space which exhibits multiple characteristics in a transforming international system. These aspects have to be understood, contextualised and translated to a diversified citizenry within a context that often produces radically changing and paradoxical realities. This can be done by involving the citizen more in the EU's future, at local, regional, national and European level. Such a participation could have a positive impact on European identity, citizenship and solidarity building as well as on EU governance. It also may shape the internal and external dialogues' framework between and within countries, regions, communities and citizens, and with the Western Balkan countries (Vukčević, 2020). In his last State of the Union address on September 12, 2018, Jean-Claude Juncker called for a Europe that has to embrace its destiny: 'by pooling sovereignty where necessary, we strengthen all our component nations and regions.' Also, the White Paper on the Future of Europe (European Commission, 2017a), the Commission's contribution to the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, clearly expressed the need for a convincing discourse as well as for concrete citizens-driven policies in order to remain an attractive and inspiring project for its citizens and not an empty box.

Expected Values-Driven Trajectories

Rethinking, reforming, and transforming the EU implies recognition of a radical increase of the level of complexity within societies. One can

think of various (interrelated) tracks that could further strengthen EU's internal and external position: (1) recognising and developing European multiple citizenship (2) embarking in a differentiated, deepening and inclusive integration and (3) acting as a change-agent within the multilateral system. Of course, these approaches require commitment, courage and determination to valorise EU's role within and beyond its borders.

Recognising and Developing European Multiple Citizenship

The EU should commit more effectively to European citizenship-building, respecting multiple identities and developing multi-level and multi-actor practices. The July 2020 Eurobarometer survey on EU Citizenship and Democracy indicates that a vast majority of Europeans (91%) are familiar with the term 'citizen of the European Union' (European Commission, 2020b). This is the highest level of awareness yet since 2007 and a steady increase from 87% recorded in 2015. It seems that most Europeans are well informed about their electoral rights at national and European levels. In this perspective, citizenship education and participatory governance are crucial factors for such a forward-looking EU outlook. Member States, regional and local authorities as well as civil society organisations (CSO) play an important role in this context. The new European Commission seems to have understood the challenges ahead with the setting of its structural priorities.[1] Many CSO do play an active role in EU citizen participation.

Embarking on a Differentiated, Deepening and Inclusive Integration

As size matters, both for economic and political power, division into a multiplicity of actors does not help to respond to global challenges. Increased European integration in specific policy areas (such as trade, competition, development cooperation, economic, monetary and financial issues, and human security) is the only way forward. Only then will national interest of Member States become part of the overall EU interest: unity in diversity within a well-defined international and legal order. In other words, a multi-level and multiple actor approach is needed to deal with various challenges and issues, though respecting diversity.

It seems therefore natural for the European project to use patterns of

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[1] The political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019–2024 are clearly stated in von der Leyen (2019).

differentiated integration, so as to be able to act in an effective manner while taking diversity into account. Examples of differentiated integration processes are numerous, such as the cases of the Schengen area, the Eurozone or defence policy illustrate. However, differentiated integration should not only focus on effectiveness, but also on legitimacy issues (Bertoncini, 2017). These are key issues for the EU's functioning at a time when it is confronted with challenges but also fragmented along several divides between states and peoples. Political and institutional conditions should be met to allow a legitimate deepening of differentiation within the EU (Pirozzi et al., 2017). A differentiation based on sound political foundations should then be able to serve the interests of the European peoples, for example as regards collective security issues, migration issues, the Economic and Monetary Union, the Stability Pact, or even the forthcoming Rescue Fund.

Differentiation also concerns possible enlargements or privileged relations with other countries, such as with the Western Balkans. The EU has developed a policy to support a gradual integration of the Western Balkan countries with the Union based on Title V of the Treaty on European Union (1992) dealing with external action, on Article 207 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU dealing with international trade agreements and on Art. 49 dealing with the criteria for application and membership. This is all done in view of promoting peace, stability and economic development in the area and opening up the prospect of EU integration.

In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), as a framework for relations between the EU and countries in the region in the form of stabilisation and association agreements. Furthermore, the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe provided a broader EU framework with the aim of establishing and reinforcing peace and security in South-Eastern Europe, involving all key international players. The Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. The EU perspective that all SAP countries are potential candidates for EU membership has been confirmed in various occasions, in particular in the EU-Western Balkan Summits. Also, the European Parliament is fully involved in the process of enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkan countries.

Acting as a Change-agent in the International System

In the emerging new international world order, states, international and regional organisations, transnational policy networks and non-

governmental actors are the building blocks of the multilateral system. In other words, states are merely players amongst others. Furthermore, the interactions between all these actors are not any longer organised in mere hierarchical ways, but as issue-specific networks of variable coalitions. This implies that there is no single centre of power, consequently blurring the centre-periphery perspective.

Instead, there is a fluid web of relations, alliances and partnerships between different types of actors at different levels of governance, from the neighbourhood, city, region, state to the European and international level. The new Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy, proposed by Federica Mogherini, the then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, has certainly been a step forward in delineating the EU as a prudent change agent in international relations (Mogherini, 2016). The importance of the Western Balkans in EU foreign Policy was already echoed in 2010 by Catherine Ashton, former EU High Representative: 'In a way, the Balkans is the birthplace of EU foreign policy. More than anywhere else, it is where we cannot afford to fail' (Ashton, 2011, p. 44).

EU and Education: Challenges and Perspectives[2]
Context
General Context

The role of education as a permanent learning to live together is fundamental, in particular for cohesive and sustainable society-building in the EU and beyond. However, it should be recognised that the learning environment has drastically changed: it is more competitive, complex and fragmented, with a wide diversity of learning sources. The Corona pandemic has stressed even more national education systems.

New, innovative and human-centric approaches are necessary to respond to the challenges of fragmented and disturbed societies (Bekemans, 2013). Therefore, an urgent need exists for a revisited role and increased responsibility of education in culturally diverse and complex societies. Such a new culture for education embodies a respect of an integral human development, including various (formal, informal and non-formal) learning places and environments.

This implies a learning that copes with changes, uncertainties and risks. A focus on learning competences, life skills and practices to stim-

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[2] This section draws on Bekemans (2018a).

ulate creativity is therefore required. Such a learning should aim at bridging existing educational gaps and changing fixed mind-sets. It should prepare people to live together by acting together to tackle complex issues and to deal with diversity. This requires a variety of life competences. New forms and places for dialogue, and learning, as well as a variety of actors in the field of education and training, should be considered. This is equally valid for the Western Balkan countries.

EU Context

Education is largely a national competence of the EU Member States. It should be clearly recognised that education is not subject of a common European policy. With the principle of subsidiarity each Member State maintains full responsibility for the content and the organisation of its education system. In other words, the European Community may contribute to the development of quality education and training by encouraging cooperation between Member States through a wide range of actions. These include promoting the mobility of citizens, designing joint study programmes, establishing networks, exchanging information or teaching EU languages.

The European Commission's actions in the field of education rests on two pillars: (1) policy cooperation with the Member States; and (2) funding programmes. The basic principle is that Member States are in charge of their education and training, and the European Commission cooperates with the Member States to help achieve common goals. Therefore, the European Community has a complementary role to play: adding a European dimension to education and training, helping to develop quality education and training and encourage life-long learning. It also funds educational, vocational and citizenship-building programmes which encourage EU citizens to take advantage of opportunities which the EU offers its citizens to live, study and work in other countries.

In the EU context, education was formally recognised for the first time in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty (Treaty on European Union, 1992). The legal context for education in the EU refers to Art 165 of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) which also explicates its objectives.[3] At the occasion

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[3] Art. 165, paragraph 1 states that: 'The Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibil-

of the 25th Anniversary of the Maastricht Treaty (9 December 2016) the then European Commission President Juncker said: 'We cannot explain the European Union, the European project, simply by going back to the history [...] we want to convince younger people that the EU is a must today [...] we have to explain the European history in a perspective: What is Europe today and what will it be tomorrow and the day after tomorrow?' (European Commission, 2016).

Finally, the building of a strong European Education and Lifelong Learning Area is vital for Europe's future. This implies a broadly-defined European studies curriculum which includes all levels, sectors and forms of learning. It is meant to truly benefit all EU citizens and foster active and responsible EU citizenship. This should strengthen the European dimension of national education systems and programs as well as the EU own lifelong learning agenda. Education is essential to the vitality of European society and economy. This is very much underscored by Ursula von der Leyen's (2019) political guidelines: 'The European Education Area aims to bring to the education and training communities the support they need to fulfil their fundamental mission, in challenging and exciting times.'

In short, support for inclusive European-oriented education about responsible citizenship, multiple identities and citizens' dialogue should focus on differentiated discourses, general and specific curriculum content and social and cultural relevance of education projects. We are in need of education policies at national level as well as European education programmes that match the 21st century reality to live as Eu-

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ity of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.' The objectives are stated in Art 165, paragaph 2: 'Union action shall be aimed at: developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the Member States; encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study; promoting cooperation between educational establishments; developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States; encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors, and encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe; encouraging the development of distance education; developing the European dimension in sport, by promoting fairness and openness in sporting competitions and cooperation between bodies responsible for sports, and by protecting the physical and moral integrity of sportsmen and sportswomen, especially the youngest sportsmen and sportswomen.'

ropeans in a globalising world (Bekemans, 2013). The Western Balkan countries should be included in such a wide education perspective.

Education Strategy and Education Programmes

The following section deals with some of the recent developments in the European education area. These were meant to build and strengthen the future of education in a broad perspective: the EU 2020 Strategy and the Erasmus+ programme (2014–2020).

The EU 2020 Strategy[4]

In March 2010 the European Commission proposed the EU 2020 Strategy as a broad 10-year growth strategy, being the successor of the Lisbon Strategy (2000–2010). It aimed at 'smart, sustainable, inclusive growth' with greater coordination of national and European policy. Concrete actions at national and EU levels underpin the strategy through a growth-based building of a genuine European Knowledge Area, the empowerment of people in inclusive societies and the creation of a competitive, connected and greener economy. It identified the key measurable priorities for the period 2010–2020 on employment, innovation, education, social inclusion, climate and energy.

The EU 2020 Strategy presented the broad framework for the specific European Cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) (European Union, 2016). As each EU country is responsible for its own education and training systems, the EU policy was designed to support national action and help address common challenges, such as ageing societies, skills deficits in the workforce, technological developments and global competition. The ET 2020 focussed on six priority areas: (1) improve people's skills and employment prospects; (2) create open, innovative and digital learning environments; (3) provide support for teachers and trainers; (4) cultivate the fundamental values of equality, non-discrimination and active citizenship, (5) favour transparency and recognition of skills; and (6) invest in a sustainable way quality and efficiency of education and training systems. Flagship initiatives to support these priority objectives were: 'Innovation Union,' 'Youth on the move,' 'A digital agenda for Europe,' 'Resource efficient Union,' 'An industrial policy for the globalisation era,' 'An agenda for new skills and jobs,' and 'A European platform against poverty.'

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[4] This section is based on European Commission (2010).

The quantification of the common objectives and benchmarks was particularly important in ET 2020. In the period 2010–2020 progress was attained in the main EU education targets:

- 94.8% of children in 2020 attend early childhood education from the age of 4+, almost the 95% EU target;
- Tertiary educational attainment had a massive expansion over the past decade, from 34% in 2010 to 40.3 % in 2019, bringing the EU even beyond the 40% target;
- The proportion of youth leaving education without an upper secondary diploma and no longer training has declined from 13.9% in 2010 to 10.2% in 2019, nearly meeting the EU target of 10%;
- The EU did not achieve its target to reduce the share of 15-year olds achieving low levels of reading, mathematics and science to less than 15% by 2020. The EU as a whole is lagging behind in all three domains: reading (22.5%), mathematics (22.9%) and science (22.3%);
- The employment rate of recent graduates (age 20–34) reached 80.9 % in 2019, signaling a steady recovery from the low 74.3% registered in 2013 and nearing the 82% EU target.
- In part hindered by the fallout from the financial crisis, adult participation in learning did not reach the 15% target but has only risen to 10.8% in 2019.

EU Education Programmes

A second major development in the EU education field concerns the EU education programmes, in particular the Erasmus programme and the Jean Monnet Programme.[5]

Future Perspectives: Towards a European Education and Lifelong Learning Area

The European Commission has been developing initiatives to help work towards a European Education Area. The goals set are: spending time abroad to study and learn should be the standard; school and higher education diplomas should be recognised across the EU; knowing two languages in addition to one's mother tongue should become the norm; everyone should be able to access high quality education,

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[5] The EU education programmes are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

irrespective of the socio-economic background; people should also have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity. Also, the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) has been active in promoting studies on the future of education and training in view of the 'Future of Learning' agenda.

At the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaty, the leaders of 27 Member States and of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission declared in Rome on March 25, 2017 their commitment to creating a 'Union where young people receive the best education and training and can study and find jobs across the continent' (European Council, 2017). The European Commission formulated its vision for a European Education Area by 2025 in its Communication 'Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture' (European Commission, 2017b). The ideas formulated were intended as a contribution to the EU Leaders' meeting on 17 November 2017 in Gothenburg, where the future of education and culture was discussed. It is very clear that the Commission believes that it is in the shared interest of all Member States to harness the full potential of education and culture as drivers for job creation, economic growth and social fairness as well as a means to experience European identity in all its diversity. The Communication was quickly followed up with the launch of a new 'Future of Learning' package in January 2018, addressing key competences for lifelong learning, digital skills, common values and inclusive education. The same month the first ever European Education Summit took place in Brussels, gathering over 20 national Ministers for Education to discuss equity and diversity in education.

In May 2018 the Commission presented a second package of new initiatives to further boost the role of education in view of building a European Education Area by 2025. In its May 2018 Communication on *Building a Stronger Europe: The Role of Youth, Education and Culture Policies* the important role played by education, youth and culture in building the future of Europe is highlighted (European Commission, 2018). The proposed measures aim to enhance learning mobility and educational opportunities in the EU, empower young people, in particular by encouraging them to participate in civic and democratic life, and strengthen the potential of culture for social progress and economic growth in Europe.

The Commission's vision of building a European Education Area is

based on a combination of a strengthened Erasmus+ programme, an ambitious framework for European policy cooperation in education and training, support for Member State reforms through the European Semester, and a better targeting of European funds. It also describes ongoing initiatives towards European Universities and a European student card. This package of initiatives also includes proposals for Council Recommendations on early childhood education and care, on the automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad, and on improving the teaching and learning of languages. Such a European Area of education and lifelong learning, reaching out to citizens has been clearly supported by the Van den Brande (2017) Report.

In her Political Guidelines, Commission President von der Leyen committed to making the European Education Area a reality by 2025 (European Commission, 2020a). A reinforced approach is proposed to consolidate ongoing efforts and further develop the European Education Area along six dimensions to bring about a significant shift in equity, outcomes and resilience of education and training in Europe. The six dimensions and the principal means to achieve them are: (1) quality in education and training, (2) inclusion and gender equality, (3) green and digital transitions, (4) teachers and trainers, (5) higher education and (6) geopolitical dimension.

Focus on Citizenship Education

As was said before, education has a crucial importance in citizenship-building in each society, also at EU level. In other words, EU active citizenship refers to rights, participation and a wider sense of belonging. The ECIT Foundation (European Citizens' rights, Involvement and Trust Foundation) launched in September 2020 the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) 'Voters without Borders' – an ECI for full political rights for EU Citizens.[6] Citizenship education is therefore important for EU's future. It implies the formation of (young) people within a specific socio-cultural context who are able to respond to the challenges of globality and complexity, cultural disintegration, dispersion and fragmentation of knowledge. This also requires an integration of a diversity of learning sources and levels as to formal, non-formal and informal learning.

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[6] See https://voterswithoutborders.eu.

If education has the priority task of transmitting knowledge and competences, some fundamental questions need to be addressed concerning citizenship education. These relate to (1) education of and for all; (2) education of humanity: this involves cross-cutting the dichotomy between a 'humanistic' education and a 'professional' education; (3) education for change: this deals with the meaning of creativity and the use of a critical mind; (4) education to master a variety of languages; and finally, (5) permanent education in the search of values: this implies surpassing the so-called contradiction between tradition and innovation.

Furthermore, citizenship education should be based on a community of shared values, as was argued in part I of this chapter. The notion of responsible citizenship therefore includes an awareness and knowledge of rights and duties. It is closely related to civic values such as democracy and human rights, equality, participation, partnership, social cohesion, social justice as well as the knowledge and exercise of rights and responsibilities. Moreover, active and responsible citizenship should be conceived as a lifelong process which requires accompanying measures. Learning citizenship is interactive and deeply embedded in specific formal, non-formal and informal contexts, implying a pedagogy of communion and a culture of service.

In short, citizenship education is understood as the fostering of capacities and dispositions to participate in society at various levels. The competences involved are also essential for addressing current political challenges which cross borders and require transnational and transdisciplinary thinking, awareness and cooperation.

The Member States of the EU signed up to the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (Council of Europe, 2010), asserting the importance of quality citizenship education. This Charter was also adopted by the Western Balkan countries, members of the Council of Europe. In the actual political situation training teachers in fostering democratic learning environments and promoting active citizenship is of crucial importance. Also, the above mentioned European Education Area provides a framework that prioritises citizenship education. Moreover, the EU Council identified active citizenship as one of the pillars of the European Education Area. Concrete Commission proposals for reinforcing this key competence of lifelong learning are now being discussed.

The Covid-19 period is a moment not only to reflect but also to act

on the all-encompassing role of education, particularly of citizenship education, and on its importance for cohesive and participatory societies in the EU and beyond. In this context the NECE – Networking European Citizenship Education platform (www.nece.eu) offers a very interesting, non-institutionalised European initiative for citizenship education. It is a transnational community of stakeholders and practitioners (formal, non-formal and informal educators) of citizenship education from across Europe. It works with corresponding networks in the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe and Africa. It provides a forum for debate and an opportunity to exchange knowledge on an equal footing. It organised early Nov. 2020 a very successful and practice-oriented conference 'Reconnecting in a post pandemic world. Citizenship education for democracy and sustainability.'

EU and Participation: A Challenging Perspective[7]

Participation is another crucial and concrete vehicle for a sustainable and value-driven EU future. It has been gaining momentum as a means for countering the 'democratic deficit' in contemporary political systems. In fact, over the past twenty years, the need for bridging the gap between institutions and citizens and constructing a new relationship between citizens and public bodies has been high on the EU political agenda. The Eurobarometer findings about the EU and its citizens show over the recent years promising results (European Commission, 2019). Still two-thirds of Europeans (66%), though with differences between Member States, feel that they are citizens of the EU and that the EU is a place of stability in a troubled world.

The legal basis of participation at EU level lies in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). Its Preamble calls for enhancing the legitimacy of the Union. The specific legal reference for participatory governance in the EU is presented by two TFEU articles: Art. 10 on representative democracy[8]

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[7] This section draws on Bekemans (2018b).

[8] Art. 10 of the TFEU reads as follows: '(1) The functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy; (2) Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament. Member States are represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their governments, themselves democratically accountable either to their national Parliaments, or to their citizens; (3) Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen; (4) Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.'

and Art. 11 on participatory democracy.[9] However, despite self-imposed obligations and the Treaties' clear commitment to citizen participation, the EU's institutions appear to be slow to fully embrace it.

Various concrete steps have been taken in the last years to favour EU practice of participatory governance:

- A White Paper on European Governance was adopted by the European Commission in July 2001 with the aim of establishing more democratic forms of governance at all levels, global, European, national, regional and local (Commission of the European Communities, 2001). The Commission defined governance as 'the rules, processes and practices that affect how powers are exercised at the European level.' The content of the White Paper relates good governance to the core principles of openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence. It focussed on four main action themes: (1) Better involvement and more openness: instituting openness through all stages of decision making; ensuring consultation with regional and local governments and with civil society networks; (2) Better policies, regulation and delivery: simplifying EU law and related national rules; promoting different policy tools; establishing guidelines on the use of expert advice; defining criteria for the creation of new regulatory agencies; (3) Contributing to global governance: reviewing how the EU can speak more often with a single voice in international affairs; improving dialogue with actors in third countries; and (4) Refocusing policies and institutions (i.e. Commission, Council of Ministers and Parliament): ensuring policy coherence and long-term objectives; clarifying and reinforcing the powers of the institutions; formulating proposals for the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) based on the governance policy consultation.

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[9] Art. 11 of the TFEU reads as follows: '(1) The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action; (2) The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society; (3) The European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union's actions are coherent and transparent; (4) Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States may take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Treaties.'

- In 2009 the Committee of the Regions (COR) published a White Paper on Multi-level Governance, reflecting its determination to 'build Europe in partnership.' Multi-level governance was defined as 'coordinated action by the European Union, the Member States and local and regional authorities, according to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and in partnership, tasking the form of operational and institutionalised cooperation in the drawing-up and implementation of the EU policies.' The two main strategic objectives are: encouraging participation in the European process and reinforcing the efficiency of Community action. It proposed Regional Action Plans, tools, territorial pacts, inclusive method of coordination and vertical and horizontal partnerships. By this political document, the COR took the initiative to submit its vision of an inclusive European decision-making process, based on a mode of governance which involves local and regional authorities in the formulation and implementation of European policies.

- The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) (formerly the Interreg Community Initiative) represents a good practice of territorial cooperation (being cross-border, transnational and interregional), involving regional and local authorities, in view of strengthening the economic and social cohesion of the EU (Bekemans, 2013). The EGTC Regulation was established in 2006 and was the first European cooperation structure with a legal personality defined by European Law. The EGTC's work is financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF); in the case of the Western Balkan countries it is financed by the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA).

- More specifically, the Western Balkan countries are involved in this European Territorial Co-operation objective (Kittel, 2020) through cross-border and transnational co-operation programmes. For the Western Balkans, the South East Europe programme is of most relevance and also the Mediterranean programme covers some Western Balkan countries. The interregional co-operation programme (Interreg IVC) and the networking programmes (i.e. Urbact II, Interact II and ESPON) cover all EU Member States but are not open to the Western Balkan countries.

- The Charter for Multi-Level Governance by the Committee of the

Regions (2014) expresses accurately the need for concrete participatory governance. It refers to the principles of 'togetherness, partnership, awareness of interdependence, multi-actor community, efficiency, subsidiarity, transparency, sharing best practices […] developing a transparent, open and inclusive policy-making process, promoting participation and partnership […], inclusive through use of appropriate digital tools […] respecting subsidiarity and proportionality in policy making and ensuring maximum fundamental rights protection at all levels of governance to strengthen institutional capacity building and investing in policy learning among all levels of governance […]' It is not a legally binding instrument but rather a reference text and a tool to be freely used by signatory towns, regions and EGTC in the context of the local implementation of EU policies.

- The Charter focusses on better law-making, growth in partnership, territorial, economic and social cohesion, European Neighbourhood Policy and decentralised cooperation. It establishes a set of common values and identifies practical processes of good European governance. It commits its signatories to implement multi-level governance principles and mechanisms and to actively inspire and promote practical multi-level cooperation projects. It serves as a guide for local and regional authorities in setting up partnerships. Through the Charter, the concept of multi-level/multi-actor governance has gained importance as a policy tool in managing diversity and cross-border challenges, enhancing the citizen-ownership of the EU project.

In short, the EU can be considered a system of multi-level governance in continuous evolution. It is also a policy response for active additivity to the changing international environment and its challenges, bringing participatory democracy closer to the citizens. However, more evidence-based research on the impact of participatory approaches in political decision-making is needed, in order to determine whether, and under what conditions, participatory governance improves the sustainability of EU policies, certainly in times of global crises.

EU and Solidarity in COVID-19 Times

In the current era of uncertainties and complexities at various governance levels, the EU needs a renewed political project embedded in a

long-term vision. Only in this way the increasing influence of national interests in EU policy-making can be blocked in favour of the 'European commons.' The crisis of European solidarity, much illustrated by the difficulties in the implementation of a EU refugee policy or in the management of the current health crisis, can only be overcome if initiatives and measures are taken which restore citizens' confidence in the European institutions. This should be done within a framework of 'shared sovereignty.'

The waves of COVID-19 have spread throughout the EU with dramatic consequences. The major health risk has forced policymakers to largely shut down social, economic and cultural life, but in a rather diffuse order and without much consultation. The various diffentiated lockdowns are forcing organisations, companies and institutions to cancel activities, public events and travels and switch to teleworking and online activities. A health, economic and social drama that needs swift policy responses at all governance levels!

How the EU responds to the coronavirus crisis will determine its future credibility. Small steps are being taken, but joint European crisis management remains difficult. Today the watchword for Europe should be internal and external solidarity. David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament recently commented on the consequences of the crisis: 'No one will be left alone and no one will act alone' (European Parliament, 2021).

The European institutions have taken different steps to combat the pandemic crisis. Resources and tools have been put in place to coordinate national responses and provide objective information on the spread of the virus as well as on the effective efforts to combat it. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented in early March 2020 her 'Corona response team,' a team of Commissioners to coordinate the economic and humanitarian consequences of the crisis. Mid-March, the European Commission launched an initial, cautiously coordinated response to strengthen public health sectors and mitigate the socio-economic impact in the EU. At the end of March, Member States finally agreed to a sum of €37 billion of unused money from the European budget ('Corona Response Investment Initiative'). Member States could eventually use that money to spend on medical equipment, aid to SMES and labour market measures. This investment initiative was one of the first concrete emergency measures that the EU has been taking to combat the corona virus. Also the existing European

Stability Mechanism (ESM), being the permanent emergency financial fund set up during the euro crisis, can be used as a source of support for Euro countries in financial difficulties. There is more than 400 billion euros in that Fund.

The most important step in the EU approach to the consequences of the pandemic has been the EU Council agreement of 21 July 2020 on a €750 billion recovery effort 'Next Generation EU.' The recovery package is now going through the legislative steps to be, hopefully, ready in 2021. Following the political agreement reached by the ministers for economy and finance on 6 October 2020, Member States' EU ambassadors formally agreed with the Council's position on the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The facility is the centrepiece of the Next Generation EU recovery instrument designed to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and the challenges posed by the green and digital transitions.

Alongside the recovery package, EU leaders also agreed on a €1,074.3 billion long-term EU budget for 2021–2027. Together with the €540 billion of funds already in place for the three safety nets (for workers, for businesses and for member states), the overall EU's recovery package amounts to €2,364.3 billion. However, the whole implementation of the Rescue Fund and the acceptance of the EU multi-annual budget was threatened by possible vetos of EU Members States Hungary and Poland.

Still there is hardly a clearer common challenge than the current pandemic. And yet the EU continues to struggle with decision-making at EU level, undermining the EU as a value-based community. Perhaps in the current dramatic crisis conditions it is more important to focus on the priority objective of necessary and massive economic support rather than on the instruments. EU citizens want immediate decisiveness and vigorous action to see the European dream of shared solidarity and civic responsibility concretely applied. After all, the alternative is that Europe of solidarity dries up through passivity, no longer connects European citizens, crumbles into separate national/regional entities and ultimately does not survive the crisis. The comprehensive and unprecedented challenge demands a comprehensive and unprecedented strategy from the EU.

The crucial question is if the EU within a unifying European economic space can guarantee internal solidarity, founded on a common institutional basis in which states, regions and communities can live their diversity, as well as external solidarity, based on an open societal

model of living peacefully together with partner regions throughout the world. This task requires an inspiring narrative which responds to institutional governance structures, internal and external European solidarity and a vision that motivates citizen's participation through European citizenship education.

If there is one thing that makes this Convid-19 crisis clear: solidarity between Member States does not arise spontaneously, but needs to be supported by trust-building measures. Still, every crisis presents a provocation, but also offers an opportunity: 'in the midst of every crisis, lies a great opportunity' (Albert Einstein). Responsibility and solidarity are important values in the refounding and rediscovery of shared 'authentic' quality of life, in respect for everyone and everything, recognising human vulnerability.

Pro-active reflections and actions on possible future prospects are now more than ever urgent. The management of such radical changes requires inspiring and innovative leadership. In *A Union That Strives for More* Ursula von der Leyen (2019) clearly insisted: '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, to start in 2020 and run for two years.' This forthcoming 2-years citizen-focussed conference on the Future of Europe might give some creative answers on European citizenship-building and participatory democracy, even being a catalyst for EU change.

Conclusions: EU Internal and External Tasks and Responsibilities

Today the EU has an appointment with its destiny. As was said earlier, its model of society is put under pressure by numerous challenges. In the radically transforming international landscape, the EU is confronted with the preoccupation, but also with the moral responsibility to maintain its model of integration and diversity.

The main challenge for further European integration is the search for a new equilibrium between diversity and unity. The EU model needs to respond to the economic, historic, social and political changes which are taken place at international and national level, but it should remain faithful to its principles of internal and external solidarity. 'Rethinking Europe' implies recognition of a radical increase of the level of complexity within societies, a further development of European cit-

izenship within multiple identities and the elaboration of multi-level governance practices. Despite all current and dramatic changes, Europe still remains a civilisation project, characterised by a rich intellectual (material and immaterial) cultural heritage and common values.

Therefore, in today's multi-faceted and multi-layered globalisation era, the EU needs a revisited political project and a common long-term (inspiring) vision, to counterbalance the increasing influence of national interests in EU policy-making, at the expense of the 'European commons.' There is a danger that the Union, faced with the growing frustration, criticism and indifference of its citizens, will disintegrate or become a mere union of economic interests, detached from its very nature and identity. Moreover, the undermining of its values-based fundamentals could negatively influence EU's economic, social and ecological welfare and finally lead to its marginalisation in the international system.

However, the rhetoric of the European ideals of peace, unity in diversity, freedom and solidarity should be implemented into workable and forward-looking practices midst a radically changing environment. The role of education, participation and solidarity is therefore fundamental in developing true citizens' dialogue and linking EU citizenship to democracy. Also new forms and places of dialogue, active citizenship and participation outside the existing institutionalised structures of representation should be stimulated. In this perspective the European Citizen Action Service (ECAS, https://ecas.org) an international, Brussels-based non-profit organisation with a pan-European membership and nearly 30 years of experience, promotes activities to develop and support mechanisms of democratic participation by citizens and citizen organisations in the EU.

In short, in spite of failures and imperfections in the integration process, the EU project remains a valid working place to define Europe as a common treasure and to develop a unique institutional and operational framework for Member States and partner countries. Four fundamental tasks can be distinguished:

- First, the EU has the moral responsibility to build a best practice of cooperation internally and externally. A radical change in vision and method to survive as a European civilisation is an urgent mater. Individual and collective well-being depends more and more on a comprehension of the signs of time and subse-

quent action in the pursuit of economic and social welfare within a world of drastic changes.

- Second, the Europeans have the moral responsibility to show that people can live peacefully and constructively together in the world, despite differences in language, culture, religion and origin. In practice, EU citizens still need to show that they can form an international public space where a cultural diaspora can exist in mutual respect, tolerance and dialogue.
- Third, the EU countries and regions have to search continuously to make their social and economic systems more efficient so that the weaknesses of the one can be compensated with the strength of others. This implies the importance to strive for a just distribution of the benefits of economic welfare and to revalorise the sense of responsibility and solidarity in policy-making.
- Finally, the EU should play a more courageous and dynamic role on the international political scene by defending its model of peace and transnational cooperation and strengthening its method of collaboration with other partner regions. It should work for a transition of the traditional management of international affairs to a transversal and multi-lateral approach.

In short, only a mobilising vision of the EU future within and beyond its borders can give a new impetus and a strengthened connection with the citizen. European integration should remain the common perspective to respond to internal and external challenges. It should also be the base for enlarged EU-Western Balkan cooperation. Education, participation and solidarity are crucial vehicles for such an EU future, both for its Member States and partner countries.

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