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Key changes to be introduced in the European political system

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OUR EUROPEAN FUTURE

Charting a Progressive Course in the World

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edited by Maria João Rodrigues

OUR EUROPEAN FUTURE

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Our mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe. We operate as hub for thinking to facilitate the emergence of progressive answers to the challenges that Europe faces today.

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Our ambition is to undertake intellectual reflection for the benefit of the progressive movement, and to promote the founding principles of the EU – freedom, equality, solidarity, democracy, respect of human rights, fundamental freedoms and human dignity, and respect of the rule of law.

Our European Future

CHARTING A PROGRESSIVE
COURSE IN THE WORLD

Edited by

Maria João Rodrigues

With the collaboration of

François Balate

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



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Contents

Introduction	ix
By Maria João Rodrigues	
PART I	1
Rebuilding the European Economic and Social Model for Ecological, Digital and Post-Covid Challenges	
Synthesis of the debate	3
By Jean-François Lebrun	
Aspirations: Europe in the 2020s – setting the course for all future Europeans	21
By Halliki Kreinin and Lukas Hochscheidt	
A European Health Union	25
By Vytenis Andriukaitis	
The care crisis and a feminist society	30
By Emma Dowling	
The ecological transformation: the main driving factors and the social implications	35
By Saïd El Khadraoui	
Social policies and the ecological transformation	40
By Georg Fischer	
The digital transformation: the main driving factors and social implications	46
By Justin Nogarede	
Nordic inspiration for the European socioeconomic model	52
By Britta Thomsen	
Reinventing the state to deploy smart green growth and well-being, while disarming populism	57
By Carlota Perez	

A European Social Union	63
By László Andor	
PART II	69
EU External Action with Strategic Autonomy and Multilateral Engagement	
Synthesis of the debate	71
By Giovanni Grevi	
Aspirations: for an EU External Action with strategic autonomy and multilateral engagement	84
By Barbara Roggeveen	
Scenarios for global governance and the EU open strategic autonomy: a window of opportunity for a 'Spinellian moment'	86
By Mario Telò	
A digital and green European foreign policy that speaks to EU citizens and the world	94
By Guillaume Klossa	
The EU and global economic governance	99
By Paolo Guerrieri	
Defending the momentum, delivering on progress: the future of European defence	104
By Vassilis Ntousas	
The European External Action regarding migration	109
By Hedwig Giusto	
The European External Action and the EU constitutional system	114
By Diego Lopez Garrido	
PART III	119
Economic Governance for an Empowered European Union	
Synthesis of the debate	121
By Robin Huguenot-Noël	
Aspirations: empowering progressive ideas in the EU's economic governance by matching 'policy with politics'	136
By Alvaro Oleart	

European economic governance: key issues to assess its recent past and its desirable evolution	139
By Vivien Schmidt	
A European economic policy mix to support the European project in the long term	145
By Michael Landesmann	
Next Generation EU public finances	152
By David Rinaldi	
A European budgetary capacity to support the European project in the long term	161
By Peter Bofinger	
What can we learn from federal experiences around the world?	167
By Tanja Boerzel	
A republican framework for EU economic governance	172
By Stefan Collignon	
PART IV	177
The EU and the Next Democratic Transformation	
Synthesis of the debate	179
By François Balate	
Aspirations: : the EU's next democratic transformation	194
By Lora Lyubenova	
Key changes to be introduced in the European political system	197
By Olivier Costa	
The new prospects for the European electoral and party systems	203
By Ania Skrzypek	
The digital revolution and our democratic lives: meeting the challenges	209
By Gerda Falkner	
What are the potential and the limits of the Lisbon Treaty?	215
By Mercedes Bresso	
After the pandemic: a republic of Europe – what would it mean?	221
By Ulrike Guerot	

New horizons for a political union	227
By Jo Leinen	
Conclusion: a European legend	231
By Maria João Rodrigues	
Acknowledgements	234
Glossary	235
About the editor and authors	237

Key changes to be introduced in the European political system

By Olivier Costa

Effective reflection on the key changes to be introduced in the EU political system for the next phase of the European project needs to be based on three observations.

First, it must be remembered that the EU regime has, since its origin, been shaped by long-term trends. We need to identify those trends and assume they will continue: it is virtually impossible to swim against those trends, and if they are to be successful, reforms will have to surf on them.

Five main tendencies can be distinguished in this respect, and all of them are to some extent intertwined. The first is the empowerment of the European Parliament. This trend has been ongoing since the 1970s, and it continues treaty after treaty, day after day. The second is the politicization, governmentalization and presidentialization of the Commission, mostly as a result of internal changes and the involvement of the European Parliament in its appointment. The third trend is the emergence of a supranational political space in which European political parties and their representatives interact over various ideas and programmes for the EU. The fourth is the increasing connection between national politics and EU politics and the growing interest of citizens in EU affairs. And finally, we need to consider the increasing polarization between anti-Europeans and pro-Europeans, both at the level of each member state and within the main institutions of the EU (the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and the European Council).

The second of our three observations is that there is a need for meaningful reflection about the EU political system if we are to avoid any taboo. We must consider the EU as it works concretely today, and not as it is *supposed* to work. For instance, the College of

Commissioners is still described as an independent and non-political organ by the treaties and by those who oppose its politicization. However, it obviously is a political body, and has been for quite some time. It is closer to being a government than an agency or an independent administrative authority, and it is composed of politicians, acting as politicians. Some also refuse to consider the Council as a high chamber because it is a peculiar body that also has executive functions and that can sometimes simply be an arena for debates between member states. But its main function today is to act as a high chamber and this should be accepted.

The third observation is that any democratic political system should be understandable by its citizens. We cannot evaluate the degree of legitimacy of the EU if we only assess the rules on which it is based and the way those rules are implemented, or by measuring its capacity to take into account citizens' expectations and to provide them with public good and sound policies. We need to also consider the subjective perceptions that citizens have. In this regard, the EU system obviously needs to improve its transparency, clarity and readability: values that are key to the propensity of citizens to acknowledge that a system is legitimate.

For instance, people believe in national institutions if there is a simple narrative about the way they are designed and function that is known. This is not the case for the EU political system, which is seen as being too complex and obscure. Massive reform is therefore needed, to make it simpler and more coherent, and further politicization and a more central role for European political parties are required.

At the national level, most citizens do not have detailed information about given initiatives of their government, but they nevertheless have opinions about them, because parties have them. In most cases, they align with the position of their preferred party or political leader, either to support or to oppose it. We need a similar process of identification at the supranational level, allowing citizens to position themselves according to the various activities of EU institutions. To achieve this we need to continue the process of parliamentarization of the EU by increasing the centrality of EU elections, the European Parliament and European parties. Doing so will increase the

readability of the EU political system. Strong mobilization will be required to achieve this goal because ‘parliamentarization’ competes with two alternative approaches to the functioning of the EU.

The first of these alternatives is intergovernmentalism, which has regained much relevance since the Treaty of Lisbon and during the crises that have hit the EU since its adoption. The European Council has been institutionalized and has become the main actor in the EU’s management of crises. It also plays a key role in setting the agenda – something that was not expected. There is also a new decentralized and intergovernmental approach to EU policymaking, based on the contribution of national administrations.

The second alternative is the Community method. It is praised by actors who wish to retain the status quo: they oppose further parliamentarization of the EU, and they dislike the idea of further rationalization. They believe in the central role of the Commission, and they propose that we focus on improving the existing treaties: via the Better Regulation strategy, by searching for ‘evidence-based policies’, through the generalization of impact assessments, by consulting with stakeholders, and so on. Some also recommend a process of ‘agencification’ of the Commission: they suggest the transformation of some of its Directorates-General in charge of policies – like competition or trade – in executive agencies, acting in an independent way, like the Commission was doing before its politicization.

Both the intergovernmental approach and the ‘Community method’ of EU governance fail to pay attention to the issues of democratization and citizen participation. Parliamentarization does address these issues. The objective is not to transform the EU into a parliamentary system: some specificities of the EU need to be preserved because the EU is not integrated and homogeneous enough to function as a federation. We need to preserve the hybrid nature of the existing political system, and its virtues, especially when it comes to favouring the emergence of a consensus at various levels: among the member states, within each institution, and then between them. Six reforms could nevertheless be considered in order to clarify the overall design of the EU polity, to increase the level of participation of citizens, and to formalize the role of European political parties in the Union’s functioning.

The first one is the institutionalisation of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead-candidates) procedure. In its current form – an informal procedure that may or may not be implemented – it is highly problematic. It has demonstrated its capacity to mobilize citizens and to give them the sense that European elections have a major impact – by contributing to the choice of the President of the Commission and the definition of its programme – but a codified procedure is needed.

The second reform is very much connected with the first: it is about the creation of transnational lists for EU elections and the reinforcement of the role of European parties in this matter. It would help if campaigns focused on EU issues and on the programmes of European parties in this matter. It would also give more visibility to the lead-candidates, who would, by definition, draw up those lists. Transnational lists would also be a symbolic affirmation of the existence of an EU polity, and they would constitute a step forward for EU citizenship.

The third reform is the generalization of primaries. As the lead-candidate of the party that wins an EU election would automatically become President of the Commission, it is crucial for that person to be perceived as having been chosen by a large number of people, and not just by the board of their party. Primaries are also key to creating real political debate within each party, fueling exchanges within the European public space around the main political issues and better involving citizens and activists in the lives of parties. This would show people that EU policies are not solely the result of intergovernmental negotiations, the adjustment of private interests or debates between experts, but of political choices expressed by the different European parties and, within them, by the candidates competing in the primaries.

A fourth reform would be to acknowledge the right of the European Parliament to initiate legislation – which is currently a privilege of the Commission. While this may be less important than it seems, as most legislative texts are drafted by the executive power in all advanced democracies, it is important symbolically because most citizens do not understand why the European Parliament is deprived of such a basic right when it is the central institution described by the treaties.

A fifth reform would be to constrain the Council to behave and work as a high chamber. Today, it is partially described as such by the treaties, but it does not really deliberate as a legislative body. It still does not play the game when it comes to transparency or politics. The Council is mainly a place for intergovernmental negotiations and not for political deliberation, and it tends to leave every key decision to the European Council.

Finally, our sixth reform would be to clarify the relations between the European Parliament and the European Council. The latter is a kind of collective head of state – one that has to escape the control and pressure of the European Parliament – but the current situation is not democratically satisfying: the European Council has become a major actor in EU policymaking but it is not accountable in any way. It is totally disconnected from citizens' representatives.

All of these six changes would make more sense if they were decided upon at once. These institutional reforms require a global approach if the permanent institutional tinkering is to stop and if we are to avoid the unintended consequences of half-baked modifications. The Conference on the Future of Europe is the right place to undertake such a reflection – even if it has not been encouraged to do so. It is also crucial to link any institutional reform with further developments in EU competences. Reforms that were focused solely on institutions would probably – like the Constitutional treaty – fail to be approved by citizens because of an insurmountable communication hurdle: justifying the necessary reforms would require explaining that the EU's current institutions are not democratic enough, thereby proving the Eurosceptics right. If the institutional reforms instead saw further development of EU policies – as was the case for the Single European Act and the Treaty of Maastricht – they could be justified through the requirements of deepening European integration.

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Our European Future

Charting a Progressive Course in the World

The world is facing many great challenges: from pandemics to climate change, and from increasing inequality to the issues surrounding digitalization. In a new and rapidly changing global landscape, Europe must look for solutions to these difficulties to follow up on its impressive decades-long process of integration. Europe has the capacity to chart a progressive course in the world.

Our European Future offers solutions to rethink our socioeconomic model in the glare of the environmental and digital transformations; to redefine Europe's role in the world to contribute to renewed multilateralism; to strengthen investment in public goods; and finally, to re-invent our democratic contract. The book brings together the insights of renowned experts from across Europe, and it should prove a handy guide for any progressive thinker, policymaker or activist, and for any citizen who would like to take part in the necessary democratic debate about our future.

This book, edited by Maria João Rodrigues with the collaboration of François Balate, is a first contribution from the Foundation for European Progressives Studies to the Conference on the Future of Europe and beyond.

Maria João Rodrigues is a European politician with a long track record in different European institutions: EU Presidencies, the Council, the European Council, the



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