

## The search for Europe's new frontier

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**The European Union has traditionally been inward-looking but now the challenges it faces are global, argues Yves Bertoncini**

The European Union was born almost 20 years ago, a product of the Maastricht treaty and the re-birth of the old European Economic Community which was established in the 1950s. It is now facing, at the same time, a post-teenage and a midlife crisis – quite a big existential challenge, for sure, made up of a series of smaller ones.

It is tempting to summarise these challenges by saying that the EU is looking for a new frontier, the concept made famous by John F Kennedy in 1960 in an attempt to give a new vision and breath to his country. This new frontier could be found in the role the EU plays in globalisation – but also in the way that being a member of the EU can be perceived as a useful specificity. Unsurprisingly, the challenges linked to the definition of the EU's borders are significant in this regard.

The construction of the European Union has long been an inward looking experience. It has been tremendously successful – its main objective was to establish peace and to promote exchanges of all kinds between its member states and citizens. Much can still be done to consolidate this success, but the new existential challenges are external. What role is there for the EU in a world facing global economic, environmental, demographic and energy-related challenges and which is structured by major players such as the United States, China, Japan, Russia, India, South Africa, the Association of South East Asian Nations and Mercosur? Europe and its countries are both small and shrinking in such a context. It is time to think global and act European, but what can the EU do?

It can, first, use the numerous assets it has built over time – primarily its trade policy, its Common Agricultural Policy, its competition policy, its development and humanitarian aid schemes, its deep involvement in international economic governance and supervision, its environmental commitments and standards, its enlargement policy and its role in many peace-keeping operations.

But the EU could and should do much more in numerous fields. These include monetary policy, using the weight of the euro efficiently at the international level. In energy policy the aim should not be to promote illusory national energy independencies but to collectively reduce the risks linked to external energy dependence on Russia and the Gulf. Migration, meanwhile, is necessary for an ageing Europe and the subject of tension between member states and voters. In foreign policy, advantage should be taken of the newly established External Action Service. In defence there is a need to spend more and better so as to act as a hard power – see, for example, what is happening in Libya.

All of this is, naturally, easier said than done, but it is truly the most substantial part of the new frontier that the EU is looking for. The idea of more common action in these fields generally wins strong support in European public opinion. The second set of challenges the EU is facing concern the perception of its interventions and inputs by its member states and citizens. What are the frontiers between being part of the EU and being involved in globalisation on the one side, and being the citizen of a nation state on the other?

In contrast with the outside world, the EU must first and foremost reassert itself as an economic and social area based on the triptych of competition, cooperation and solidarity theorized and put into practice by Jacques Delors, the founder of Notre Europe. The re-launch of the internal market in 2012 will be an essential test to check whether such a balanced approach is fully promoted. The tensions around the governance of the eurozone already constitute a major test.

The EU must also consolidate the freedom of movement area imagined in the 1950s and progressively established during the last decades. This very original and promising achievement is not always considered as an *acquis* and can be regularly challenged by public controversies. The sometimes exaggerated discussions over the Schengen agreement are particularly striking in this regard.

Promoting unity in diversity constitutes another big challenge for the EU, especially in a period of crisis feeding nationalism and individualism. The EU is a federation of nation states based on shared sovereignties and the so called subsidiarity principle, but the division of tasks between Brussels and the national authorities is not always clear. Should it really be considered that the EU is a central actor to tackle issues like education, employment and poverty, which lay on the nations' and regions' competences? Or would it not be better that it focused on areas in which it proved to act usefully and could do more in the future, that is, principally, agriculture, cohesion, European infrastructures, research and few others? The next negotiations on the reshaping of its small budget will certainly lead the EU, its decision makers and stakeholders to be confronted once again with such a challenge.

Another constant political challenge for the EU comes from the fact that it is based more on the rule of complex laws than on simple direct democracy mechanisms. This opens more easily the floor to negative popular or populist reactions. Much has been done in the recent past at the institutional level, including by the Lisbon Treaty, to foster the democratisation of the EU, but the absence of a true European public sphere will remain its Achilles heel.

The last set of challenges the EU is facing concern its relations with third countries, or more precisely its borders and, more widely, its identity – here again looking for its new frontier.

Talking about Turkey and Ukraine is the fastest way to sum it up. What are the prospects and limits of the EU's apparently never ending enlargement, which is, at the same time, instrumental in stabilising and modernising the acceding countries but also sometimes a source of concern in public opinion? Talking about the Arab uprising or Russia is enlightening as well. Are our neighbours friends or foes, and what type of global partnership should the EU establish with them? And is migration an opportunity and a vital need for the EU and its countries, or is it a threat? Can the EU properly and efficiently intervene in such matter, not only to control its external borders but to develop a global and long sighted vision?

Last but not least an inspiring challenge. What is the geopolitical identity of the EU, two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall? Is it a singular model in a multi-polar world? A universal model of coexistence, whose values and soft power are to inspire any other country or region? Is it one of the two pillars of the transatlantic alliance? Is it a component of the Occidental civilization, considered as substantially different from some others, including the Islamic ones? Preferring one option or the other naturally is far from neutral, and gives the EU and its strategies quite a different context.

It is because its institutions, leaders and citizens will answer such large and highly political questions that the EU will be able to define more clearly what is its new frontier, and to act consequently. It will then give more hope and credit to the promoters and supporters of the fantastic adventure launched by the founding fathers long ago – including the hope that this new frontier outcome will be more substantial than JFK's.

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