

**Hubert Védrine**

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*Save  
Europe!*

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LIANA LEVI  
opinion



**The  
Védrine  
plan**



The European Union would be built by going beyond identities. They must be fit, with a shoehorn if necessary, into a “bigger Europe.” And this, “in the interest of the peoples.” This ever so wellintentioned vision has dominated the political scene for decades. For more than twenty years, the construction of Europe has though run up against growing resistance, passive and active. A resistance notably expressed in various referendums, culminating in June 2016 with Brexit, the symptom of an ailment that is not only British and that some have not wished to recognize. The elite have arrogantly charged the British vote as populist, racist, etc. However, to save Europe, must they not make up their minds to hear the rumbling anger and at last accept a reconciliation with the people.

This brief essay develops innovative avenues and powerful proposals to get Europe out of the maze it’s in.

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Hubert Védrine

# Save Europe!

*Translated from French  
by Leslie de Quillacq*



Liana Levi



# I

A manifest disengagement of Europe's  
peoples



More than seventy years after the end of the Second World War, fifty-nine years after the Treaty of Rome, thirty years after the Schengen Agreements, twenty-four years after the Maastricht Treaty, seventeen years after the introduction of the Euro, Europe — or more precisely, the European Union — is in a grave state of dereliction, or at least of torpor. Despite its day-to-day operations and perpetual summits, and notwithstanding a few remarkable decisions (for example, against Apple in spite of opposition from Ireland), a state of emergency has been declared. We have reached a “critical” moment, say the EU’s member states.

The real world was bound to overtake this admirably idealistic, but also peremptory and partly artificial construction. The crisis was already perceptible before the Brexit and has become even clearer since. Or in any case, it should be. *Nous y voilà*. Here we are.

### **Weaknesses of the European Union**

The European Union is deeply fragile. Its weakness is more internal than external, even if outside threats and challenges are what make headlines. Desired by most elites on the right and the left, driven “in the interest of the people” but without their involvement (apart from occasional consultations and *a posteriori* ratifications), European construction has met with growing resistance, both passive and active, for over twenty years. The disengagement of the European public is increasingly visible, from the referendums that barely passed (Maastricht in 1992)

to the referendums lost (Constitutional Treaty in 2005, Brexit in 2016), not to mention the sixty percent abstention rate for European Parliament elections.

Still, in spite of this evidence, the “*Européists*” maintain their paternalistic and authoritarian creed: Europe can only move forward, we always need “more Europe”, we should have the “courage to make the federal leap” and to overcome “national egoism,” etc. It’s a sin to look inward (hence the continual, confident expansion of the Schengen zone but without sufficient control of its borders). We have forced parliaments to adopt texts that were rejected by referendum (the Constitution via the Treaty of Lisbon) and made people re-vote until they gave the “right” answer (Ireland, Denmark). All of this without stopping to consider the trauma our actions might inflict on the democratic psyche.

Even worse, all those who object to certain aspects of European construction or are still attached to their national

identities, who are skeptical or disappointed, are thrown into the same category as the rabid anti-Europeans and denounced as egoists, nationalists, sovereignists (quite a feat to have transformed legitimate attachment to a sovereign state, an immense democratic triumph, into a sin!), or even *Lepenists*. The elite's aggressive contempt towards the will of the people has strengthened the Front National and its counterparts elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, the rift between the elite *Européists* and the people has grown wider over the years. It has become the most important challenge we face. And the most dangerous.

The second source of the Union's weakness is its naiveté. Europe claims it is the "mother of peace" when, chronologically, it is the daughter. Even if Europe's leaders deserve tremendous credit for transforming the Cold Peace imposed by the USSR at Stalingrad and the United States in 1945, into a common project, the narrative they put forward was extremely

naïve: “Europe is Peace.” The Union would supposedly be constructed by eclipsing national identities. It would influence the world through its values, norms, conditionalities and assistance, and through the strength of its civil society. The free movement of its peoples would inspire others. Without having to transform itself into a real European power or create a common defense system, the EU would show the world that power struggles were obsolete. It would be a model for other peoples with a long history of conflict. It would civilize globalization. These are moving aspirations adapted to an a-historical, post-tragic world — except that world doesn’t exist.

Alas, this self-righteous European entity, full of good intentions and confident of its irreversibility, is waking up to a painful reality. In addition to unbridled economic competition (a result of excessive deregulation of the global market economy, which we never asked for but which forces us to be competitive), to the

financial crises caused by the American financial casino, the eurozone crises and the Greek debt psychodrama, we now have to contend with an immense influx of immigrants and a flood of asylum requests from people fleeing violent conflict. All of this in the context of: our (belated) discovery of the global, deadly battle within Islam (a small minority of fanatics against a majority of “impious” or “renegade” Muslims, as well as against Christians and Jews); the Sunni/Shiite conflict in the Middle East; the specter of terrorism; and the awakening of nationalist movements in Russia, China, Israel, India, the Arab world and elsewhere. And let’s not forget the demographic crisis unfolding in Europe or the impending environmental doom. And last but not least, President Trump. It is hardly surprising that the world imagined by the European Union would crumble under these kinds of pressures, and that the latent contradictions among Europeans that had previously been more or less

managed (that is to say, swept under the rug) would be fully exposed.

### **Early signs of rejection**

The French rejection of the “Constitutional” Treaty on May 29, 2005, by a vote of 54.67 percent, dealt a shocking blow to European elites. They reacted to what was a genuine electoral rebellion with stupefaction and indignation, but they failed to reflect on the causes. After all, the “No” vote didn’t come out of nowhere.

Europe had received a clear warning thirteen years before, when only 50.8 percent of French voters approved the Maastricht Treaty, despite the fact that the most influential leaders (Mitterrand, Chirac, Balladur, and Giscard d’Estaing) supported it.

How can we explain the growing lack of public support demonstrated in 1992, then in 2005? First of all, the

words “political integration” may be the Holy Grail to some, but for others, they represent a threat. Europe’s ambition seems limited to a bureaucratic quest to level out the Common Market through intrusive, petty standards and directives — even more than in the United States. This antagonizes part of the electorate.

Second of all, the massive enlargement of the European Union was presented to electors in Western Europe as an incontestable moral duty. This included the “four freedoms,” one of which is the freedom of movement. Even if it isn’t supported by the figures, the perception that migratory movements are not being seriously controlled has been fomenting anti-European sentiment for years. It helps explain why the Netherlands rejected the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, and why Great Britain voted to leave the Union in 2016.

Third of all, there is the inevitable clash produced by the re-launch of European integration thirty years ago

(e.g. the Schengen Agreement) on the one hand, and the wave of global deregulation and competition on the other. France finds itself caught between these opposing dynamics, but also entangled in its “social model” and unable to reduce its unemployment rate. No wonder the French were annoyed by the arrogance and clumsiness of the elites during the media bombardment in favor of the “Yes” vote, and exasperated with how they stigmatized those who expressed any reticence.

And lastly, of course, we must consider the political context in France in 2005, specifically the prevailing sense among voters that they had not been listened to nor understood, the vagaries of the campaign and the very effective demagoguery of the “No” camp.

The result was that 15,422,000 French electors voted “No” in 2005. It was an outcome that was quickly echoed in the Netherlands, where the Constitution was rejected by sixty-two percent of voters,

despite the fact that the Dutch had long been considered Europhiles. This was then followed by the British decision to put its own referendum on hold. So it was already clear in 2005 that this wasn't just a French problem but a European one.

These outcomes should have led to a reflection not on the legitimacy of the European project, but on its implementation, its rhythm, and its relationship to national democracies. But there was nothing of the sort.

So are the French anti-European? Clearly not. But there is a deep sense of unease with Europe that isn't widely acknowledged. The malaise has only been aggravated by a tendency among elites to: dismiss and even mock patriotic sentiment; minimize any doubt about European enlargement even when it is legitimate and not xenophobic; view with suspicion what is a fundamentally natural desire to maintain a certain degree of sovereignty over one's destiny and identity in the face of globalization; and to

respond to any criticism with contempt. This combined with a social and identity crisis, as well as a sense of democratic dispossession, is what led the French to push back hard in 2005.

The irony is that the drafters of the Constitutional Treaty believed they had struck a good balance between Europe and its nations. I'll admit that this was my feeling at the time, even if I considered it pretentiously exaggerated and dangerous to qualify the treaty as a "Constitution," believing it would only provoke anxiety and raise expectations. The voters, on the other hand, did not view this balance as acceptable. Nevertheless, the French and most European peoples were, and most likely remain, open to a European project — as long as it is sensibly redefined and takes their views into account.

So how should we understand the aspirations expressed in the 2005 vote? Faced with the consequences of globalization and hoping to escape the rules of the global market, those voting "No" and

those voting “Yes” both wanted a Europe with social protection — *l’Europe Sociale*.

Alas, this slogan is a chimera. There has never been unanimous or even majority support for guaranteeing, much less generalizing, the French social model. Why? Because it is less a model for what works than what doesn’t. Our system has proved incapable of creating jobs that aren’t subsidized, despite its enormous and increasingly untenable cost. Many voters on the left embraced the EU because they wanted to create *l’Europe Sociale*, and many of them voted “No” in 2005 because they wanted to revive this dream. That was eleven years ago, and the French left still hasn’t succeeded in overcoming these contradictions.

In 2009, the Treaty of Nice, which had defined the number of parliamentarians and voting rights of new EU members, was replaced by the Treaty of Lisbon. The Treaty of Lisbon included all the operational components of the Constitutional Treaty rejected by referendum in 2005,

but left out the grand principles and symbols.

It therefore bypassed, and even defied, the will of the peoples. The media, however, were practically unanimous in their praise for the Treaty of Lisbon, no doubt relieved that the results of the referendum had been circumvented.

### **Brexit, the last sign to date**

When David Cameron saw no other way of countering UKIP's denunciations of Europe, he called a referendum on June 23, 2016. The result: 51.9 percent of British electors voted to leave the European Union.

The English, an extraordinary people, will likely bounce back from this absurd incident and the painful consequences they could have avoided for themselves and for us. We probably won't see short-term contagion elsewhere in Europe, and the arrogant idea of punishing the English

is unlikely to stand. And, in any event, no one can predict where Great Britain and the EU will be in 2018 or 2019. But what matters today is that we get the analysis of the Brexit right.

The most fervent integrationists — those who constantly call for an “ever closer Union” — refuse to attribute this vote to anything other than “populism.” They view it as an aberration, as Great Britain separating itself from a Europe that, up until now, was working well. They ignore any evidence that the EU was clumsily and irresponsibly inserting itself willy-nilly into anything and everything while overpromising on what it could deliver, and that people turned against it when it could not meet their expectations. The integrationists claim that the problem was austerity policy, which, let’s not forget, was adopted to curb ever-rising debt levels, and not the abusive decisions at the European level that were usurping national and local democracy. They think that all we need to fix the

Cette édition électronique du livre *Save Europe!*  
de Hubert Védrine  
a été réalisée en décembre 2016 par Atlant'Communication.  
ISBN Web: 9782867469060