**ANOTHER EUROPE IS POSSIBLE**

**IDEAS FOR A NEW EUROPE**¹

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**WHAT IS EUROPE?**

When one asks the average person about Amsterdam, Paris, or Rome, they will likely answer with an enthusiastic – or not – description of these places with their true or assumed characteristics. The same goes for countries. But ‘Europe’ tends to trigger a very different reaction. Europe stands for rules and regulations, political arm-wrestling, much cry and little wool.

Europe no longer denotes the continent in which we live, the fifth concentric circle of our existence like we’d write in our copy books at school - after ‘street’, ‘place’, ‘province’ and ‘country’, and before ‘Earth’, ‘Milky Way’ and ‘Universe’. Europe is no longer a part of us. Europe is men in pin-stripe suits, endless marathon assemblies with vague outcomes, guidelines, regulations, tenders and a lot of incomprehensible jargon. For many people the European Constitution, consisting of hundreds of pages of unreadable texts, symbolises this bureaucratic Europe. We will refer to this Europe, to the existing European Union, as the ‘present’ or ‘this’ Europe. When we refer to another or a new Europe, we mean the Europe for which the seeds were sowed in the social struggle of the past period and which we hope will be extended in the period to come.

**WHOSE EUROPE IS IT?**

Many people feel that ‘Europe’ as it now stands is being shaped by the Brussels bureaucracy. That it is the European Commission and its civil service who are running the show. This is a fallacy. In the present Europe, political power resides with the governments of the member states. They are the ones plotting its frameworks in their summits. They are the ones who appoint the European Commission. They are the ones stipulating its policies in the Councils of Ministers. As such, it also were the heads of governments of the member states who drew up the European Constitution – based on preliminaries set out in a convention. And they were the ones who zealously advocated it.

That many – regardless – feel that it is the European Commission that is pulling the strings, is a result of how European decision-making processes are being put to the public. Joint decisions by the European governments can be presented to the general public in two ways. If the message is a positive one, it is construed as a success, which the minister (or prime-minister) concerned managed to pull out of the fire only with considerable effort. If the message is a negative one, it is communicated as being dictated by ‘Brussels’. This is the

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game as it has been played by all European governments for decades and which has significantly contributed to Europe’s ever-deteriorating reputation.

Europe as it has been constructed over the past decades is a Europe of and for the market. A Europe of unfettered competition and free movement of goods, services, people and capital. Europe’s governments embraced neoliberalism and transformed Europe into an instrument for bringing this ideology into practice. The Europe of today is being portrayed as a reaction to neo-liberal globalisation. As an attempt to shield European citizens from the adverse effects of globalisation. In reality, Europe – together with the US – is one of the driving forces behind globalisation.

Corporate industry is the winner in the neo-liberal world order. Big corporations benefit from the creation of a large European internal market which they can roam virtually unhindered in search of the lowest production costs and the highest profits, while European trade policy looks after their interests at the global level – for example, in the World Trade Organisation negotiations. Among the losers are the smaller companies, who can no longer stand up to the ever fiercer competition and are failing to hold their heads above water in the race to capture economies of scale; small farmers and producers catering to local and national markets and being forced out of the market by multinationals; workers having to accept lower wages and worsening (labour) conditions or facing relocation of jobs. The majority of the population is experiencing the effects of the dismantling of the welfare state and how privatisation and liberalisation are increasingly driving up the price of social provisions.

While the strongest players at the top are consolidating their position, it is those in the weakest positions at the bottom who suffer most: women, migrants, the disabled, those with few qualifications and a bad starting position.

The other key victims of the neo-liberal world order are the countries in the global South, the environment, our climate, the natural world and animal welfare. Where profits, mobility, market forces, raising production and competitiveness take precedence, the soft powers lose out. ‘Everything of value is defenceless’, as the poet said. When value is all that counts, that which is defenceless is brought to ruin.

GLOBALISATION, NEO-LIBERALISM AND PROGRESS

The world is changing rapidly. Globalisation, increased competition, new techniques and production processes all require that we modernise and adapt. Such arguments are used to justify the continuous attacks on our social and public provisions. We need to restructure our social systems in order to be able to maintain them, is how the argument runs. By putting this spin on it, those opposing neo-liberal reforms are being portrayed as people resisting progress and modernity.
However, two issues are being confused here. On the one hand, the advances in science and technology and their effects. On the other hand, a certain ideology (neo-liberalism) and the political choices it inspires.

As a result of the development of microchips, we are currently experiencing a technological revolution which, through automation and the expansion of the Internet, has profound effects on society as a whole and the way it operates. Production processes and in particular distribution processes and information processing, are profoundly affected. These changes have paved the way for a number of new phenomena, for example, what we call ‘hot money flows’. This phenomenon can only exist because of the ‘real time’ availability of information from around the globe and because large sums of money can now be transferred at the click of a mouse. Without ICT technology this would not have been possible.

That does not mean to say that hot money flows as such are an automatic, let alone an inevitable, outcome of the current technological revolution. It is equally the result of conscious decisions to eliminate all restrictions on international capital movements. Up until the beginning of the 1970s, it was normal practice for countries to restrict cross-border financial transactions. As neo-liberalism continued to gain an ever stronger foothold, this became a taboo and the decision was made virtually everywhere to eliminate these restrictions. The same goes for all kinds of other measures which are being portrayed as inevitable effects of globalisation: liberalising international trade, reforming and privatising public services, cutting corporate tax, relaxing the right to terminate employment, etc. These are all political decisions. However, it suits politicians to depict them either as inevitable effects of globalisation or as dictates from Brussels.

LESS OR MORE EUROPE?

As the European Union is systematically being used to promote neo-liberal politics, it has continued to wane in popularity with the general public. For this reason, many people now tend to argue in favour of ‘less Europe’. And in many respects, they are right. Europe’s role in promoting ever further reaching neo-liberalism must be brought to a halt. By rolling back the introduction of liberalisation in health care and other public provisions for a start. This means that open competition – the principle of an ‘internal market where competition is free and unrestricted’ as quoted in the current Treaty – must be scratched.

And there are a number of other issues that will need to be abandoned immediately. For example, the (self-defined) obligation for expanding military capacity as laid down in the

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2 ‘Hot money’ refers to funds that are rapidly converted from one currency into another in order to profit from exchange rate fluctuations. The major players in this market, which daily shifts thousands of billions of dollars, do not limit themselves to benefiting from exchange rate fluctuations, but deploy millions to actively manipulate exchange rates. The 1997 crisis in Asia is a well-documented case in point.

3 Naturally, this does not mean that competition as such will need to be abandoned or disappear. It merely means that competition is addressed as one of the economic mechanisms available, applicable in conjunction with other mechanisms, such as direct support, tax relief or higher taxation as appropriate, or which might even be banned for ecological or social considerations.
infamous article 41 of the Constitution: ‘Member States shall undertake progressively to improve their military capabilities’. The European Defence Agency, a direct spin-off of this approach, should also be shut down forthwith.

But this does not imply that we should aim for ‘less Europe’ across the board. Most certainly not. It is an illusion to think that the major problems that we’re confronted with can be solved within the confines of national political arenas. This is obvious in relation to global warming and other ecological disasters threatening the survival of mankind. But the same goes for the almost unlimited power of multinational corporations, the dangers of footloose capital mobility mentioned before, and the growing international gap between the rich and the poor and all sorts of other global problems.

We need Europe to ward off these threats. And in this respect, a concentration of political power in Europe is a necessity. Individual countries the size of the average European nation are all but powerless to address today’s large multinational corporations. If they fail to join forces, they will be played off one against the other. Cooperation at the European level allows European national governments to take the kind of joint economic, social or ecological action that the major players in the market will not be able to dodge. What is required is the political will to do so, as well as the necessary policy instruments.

**POLICY INSTRUMENTS**

The sad thing about the direction taken by Europe in the past two decades is that these required policy instruments have continued to disappear, even though they are needed now more than ever. The European countries have abandoned them, and they have been insufficiently replaced at the European level.

Since the introduction of the Euro, Europe’s member states are no longer able to pursue individual monetary policies. At the same time, the European political level is also failing to do so. Only one monetary policy objective has been formulated: guarding price stability (fighting inflation). Implementation is being left to the European Central Bank, which lacks all democratic accountability. Where countries used to be able to decide to award combating inflation a lower priority in certain circumstances in favour of stimulating expenditure to fight unemployment, this has now become impossible. Through its stability pact, Europe frustrates an effective budgetary policy in its individual member states. This is yet another instance where pre-determined criteria define and limit policy space.

An active industrial policy and an effective employment policy (i.e. a policy aimed at maintaining and creating jobs, rather than a policy aimed at criminalising the unemployed and those drawing benefits), are being made impossible by Europe, since government support for businesses at the national level is banned (to avoid unfair competition⁴). However, specific European policy is lacking. At the European level, there is no effort to

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⁴ The arms industry, where national support is allowed, is an exception to the rule.
build and strengthen the industrial base or to invest in research and development. The only exception is the Galileo project – which took more than ten years to negotiate.

European infrastructure is another area which is largely left to market forces. Road traffic, railway transport and aviation have all been liberalised, but a coherent transport policy is lacking. Attempts to develop an integrated European railway network have failed. Plans to develop integrated European coastal navigation which might offer an alternative for road traffic never made it beyond the drawing board. In the meantime, road and air traffic is expanding, as well as the accompanying emission of dangerous substances.

As a matter of fact, there are only three areas where there is a certain level of coherence in European politics: the common agricultural policy; regional development policy, based on the structural funds; and environmental policy. All other areas are left to liberalised market forces.

What policies regarding those different policy areas should look like, is of course subject to political struggle and debate. But by opting for this kind of structure, a direction is being set without proper political consultation. For neo-liberal market fundamentalists there is no choice. For them, the market is the only possible option.

The struggle against neo-liberal politics begins with the struggle against such market fundamentalism, with showing that it is all a matter of political choices based on political ideology. The structuring of economies, the economic policies pursued, and the priorities set with regard to infrastructural development are not neutral technical issues. They are fundamental political questions in any society. These are issues that directly affect the lives of people. Where interests of different groups should be carefully weighed. This should be the core of our political democracy.

A large part of the political struggles within Europe will continue to take place within the confines of national boundaries. However, with regard to a number of core issues, including monetary policy (in particular after the introduction of the Euro), employment policy, industrial policy, the general infrastructure and social policy, a joint European approach is required for the simple reason that the existing nation states are not equal to the power of the large players in the market. Because of this, a stronger political Europe is urgently needed.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL OR FEDERAL?

The debate on the future of Europe has long been conducted in terms of an intergovernmental versus a federal approach. The intergovernmental approach entails that the Union (and its predecessors) operates on the basis of treaties between its member states. The governments of these member states formulate joint principles, which are then laid down in a treaty. Federalists feel that this is not sufficient. Their ideal is a federation, a federal state.
Formally, Europe remains an intergovernmental construct, which operates on the basis of treaties between the member states that cooperate within the union. This explains why the European Council – the assembly of government leaders – is the Union’s highest organ. But in practice, European treaties are all encompassing. European regulation has been passed and European bodies with far-reaching powers have developed, to the extent that we now have to contend with the existence of a specific administration at the European level.

The intergovernmental decision-making process has led to an ambiguous situation. This is perfectly illustrated by the proposed Constitution. Formally, this constitutes a treaty. This implies that it can only enter into force when it is signed by all parties. But in terms of content, this treaty has unequivocal constitutional pretences. It has the power to create and authorise new European institutions.

The European Council (of heads of government) is the leading decision-making body. The decisions taken by the European Council largely escape democratic supervision. Of course, national parliaments in the member states generally monitor the decisions taken by their governments at European summits and in the Councils of Ministers. But their monitoring competence is limited. The assemblies take place behind closed doors and are characterised by a complex negotiating process where various issues are traded off against each other. For the members of national parliaments it is difficult to fulfil their supervisory task at arm’s length. Let alone that there are no mechanisms that allow national parliaments to jointly call the Council as a whole to order.

The European Parliament has very limited powers and only has a right to veto Council decisions in areas where it enjoys co-legislative competence (we will return to this issue later on).

As neither national parliaments, nor the European Parliament can fully supervise the legislative powers of the Council, this means that in Europe important decisions are being taken without sufficient democratic supervision. What is needed, is a profound democratisation of Europe. Governmentalism (a central role for the national governments) must be superseded and replaced by a central role for the populace. In a democracy, the people are the ones who should have the final say.

Such a change by no means needs to constitute a step in the direction of federalism. It is perfectly possible to arrive at a democratic Europe without instituting a strict federal structure. We will come back to this point later on.

**A GREEN EUROPE**

Europe’s environmental policy is seen as a success by many. They point out the pivotal role of Europe in establishing the Kyoto protocol and stress that a large number of European environmental standards were adopted which the governments of the member states must abide by. And in part this is most certainly true. There is a large amount of European
regulation in this area and in principle it is possible to use these regulations to prompt national (and local) governments to take action.

This is of vital importance in a continent as densely populated and industrialised as Europe. It stands to reason that the European Union must play an important role in controlling these issues, which are international by nature. But this does not warrant any conclusions that Europe as it currently stands is a green Europe or that this Europe could become green.

The Kyoto objectives are not being met anywhere in Europe. Air pollution is literally taking people’s breath away. The European agricultural and trade policies lead to rapid deforestation and degeneration of the environment on other continents. In Southern Europe, climate change and inadequate resource management and conservation are contributing to ever more frequent and intense forest fires and flooding.

There is absolutely no cause to sit back and applaud European policies in this area - in particular when we look beyond the narrow definition of environmental policy alone. When we bring European policies as a whole into the equation, there is little wonder that we are regressing.

The main objective of Europe’s agricultural policy remains to increase production. In adopting the Lisbon Agenda, Europe has set out to become the most competitive economic entity in the world. Increasing production and promoting mobility and competitiveness are key concepts for this Europe, and these do not sit well with energy efficiency, sustainability and rational and ecologically sound management.

A switch towards a green Europe – i.e. a Europe which plays an active role in avoiding the ecological disaster which threatens our future – will require a drastic break from the economic logic of ever-increasing production, consumption and mobility. The welfare of Europe’s citizens and the rest of the world, the preservation of ecosystems, sustainability and animal welfare will have to take precedence over the profit maximisation objectives of individual companies.

A SOCIAL EUROPE

One can safely state that the development of a social Europe continues to lag behind the Europe of the market and the common currency. Some commentators suggest that a social Europe may be built on the foundations of this Europe ruled by market forces and monetary policies. Their reasoning is that the economic foundations needed to be laid before a social Europe can be erected.

In reality, developments are running the other way. The welfare states that came into being in Western Europe following the second World War5 have been steadily eroded over the past

5 These welfare states came about in a specific conjuncture, the post-war period in which the capitalist global economy flourished, the labour movement in Western Europe was re-established and strengthened, and the
two decades by Europe’s market orientation and subsequent monetary objectives. They have largely been dismantled under the guise of a ‘necessity’ to liberalise and privatise, to introduce market forces and promote flexibilisation of the labour market, and to bring down social wage costs.

The results have been dramatic. In the countries of Western Europe, the gap between rich and poor has widened considerably. There now exists an underclass of people with little education, flexible jobs, limited social security and very bleak prospects. And this no longer only applies to people who, for whatever reason, have dropped out of the workforce: Europe currently has a substantial class of working poor. People who are (temporarily) employed, but fail to make it above the poverty line regardless. It stands to reason that this group mainly consists of those segments of the working classes who hold the weakest positions on the labour market: youths from minority groups, women (in particular, women heading one-parent families), the disabled, elderly migrants with very little education, etc. At the same time and in all European countries, the number of millionaires and total assets continue to rise.

At the same time, we are witnessing a weakening of the labour movement. This must be attributed to three factors. In the first place, the Right’s deliberate attacks on the position of the labour movement. The way the Thatcher government in the UK responded to the miners’ strike in 1984-1985 is prototypical. Once the power of the miners’ union had been broken – teaching the other trade unions a lesson in the process – Thatcher could press on with her neo-liberal policies. Elsewhere in Europe, there were similar coordinated attempts to weaken the position of the labour movement and to make it irrelevant.

Secondly, both technological changes in production and distribution and in particular the social effects of neo-liberal policies have resulted in an objective weakening of the labour movement. The major strongholds of the trade union movement – such as shipbuilding and textiles in the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe mining and metallurgy, concentrating many thousands of workers in a single company – have disappeared. In its stead, a much more differentiated working class has emerged, which has proved much harder to organise. The ideology of neo-liberalism, focusing on individual opportunities instead of solidarity and joint action, has added to this.

Thirdly, we cannot ignore the role played in this process by the leadership of the labour movement. This group – with strong political links to the social democrats, in general – to a large extent embraced the logic of neo-liberal thinking. Rather than organising resistance to neo-liberal policies, they opted for collaboration. In this respect, the referendum on the EU Constitution in the Netherlands, where the leadership of the trade unions conducted an active (albeit veiled) “yes” campaign, speaks volumes.

governing elites were fearful of a ‘communist’ revolution in Western Europe. Against this backdrop, social security systems were put in place, which were subsequently dismantled in the wake of the neo-liberal revolution.
A European Social Model

A social Europe will never emerge as an extension of the current Europe dominated by market forces and its single currency. Rather, the dominance of its market orientation will lead to an ongoing erosion of what remains of Europe’s welfare states. A social Europe will only come about through struggles against Europe’s current market orientation. The first steps on the road towards building a social Europe consist of struggles against the further deteriorations reaching us from the European level: attacks on our pensions, the liberalisation and privatisation of health care, the services directive, etc.

However, halting these deteriorations is hardly enough. We cannot stop at preserving the remnants of our welfare states. Social rights will continue to face strong pressures from unrestrained market forces. In the area of social policies national solutions cannot suffice. Here more than anywhere, Europe-wide policies are necessary to resist in particular the power of large multinational corporations operating in a liberalised market. Only clear European standards may prevent an ongoing race to the bottom.

One of the starting points must be upward harmonisation, i.e. setting the standard to the level of the member state with the highest norms (instead of the current practice of downward harmonisation). This applies to both for environmental and social standards.

In setting social standards, we must take into account the highly diverse social, economic and cultural situation in Europe. This means that we cannot demand a European-wide set minimum wage for all member states. Instead – as suggested by the Euromarches – one might aim for a minimum wage set at a certain percentage (50 per cent) of Gross Domestic Product per person. Even though this would result in a minimum wage that may vary considerably between countries, it would still enable a joint social struggle in favour of such a standard.

In several other areas, a process of harmonisation from above can and must be initiated. This includes safety standards at work, protection of young workers, preservation of employment contracts in case of corporate takeovers, etc. On all these counts, there is national regulation, of which the most advanced should be adopted as the standard for the whole of Europe.

In addition, there are areas where new standards can and should be set. This applies primarily to issues where pan-European action is crucial, in order to deprive companies of opportunities to play off workers in various member states against one another. This includes reduction of working hours, equal rights for workers from non-EU member states, full equality for women and men, etc.

Such a social Europe will have to be enforced through social struggle. To achieve this, social movements will have to Europeanise. They will have to place their struggles against the rolling-back of the welfare state at the national level in the context of a struggle against the current Europe. They will have to radically break away from thinking in terms of national frameworks and solutions only, focusing on the European perspective instead. A number of movements, like ATTAC, are already engaged in doing so, or have even sprung into existence as international or European movements, such as the Social Forums or the
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Euromarches. But in the more traditional movements, like the environmental movement and in particular the labour movement, international cooperation tends to be limited to engaging in international bureaucratic structures and integration into the consultative culture of the current Europe.

It is no coincidence that these organisations, whether openly or not, campaigned in favour of the European Constitution, while large segments of their constituencies and in some cases – as in the case of the trade unions – a majority of their membership, voted against. This indicates that the policies of integration and cooptation into the neo-liberal frameworks accepted at the top are not being shared at the grassroots.

Extending all kinds of direct contact between the constituents of these organisations in the various European countries, participation in international ventures such as the Social Forums, may strengthen this process and contribute to building an active progressive European movement.

**CHARTER OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS**

**PEOPLE’S RIGHTS OR PROPERTY RIGHTS?**

A basis for a social Europe might be laid by establishing elementary social rights for all inhabitants of Europe. According to some, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which was drawn up in 1999 and integrated in the Constitution, provides that basis. The European Trade Union Confederation even described this Charter as a ‘springboard towards a social Europe’.

This appears to be a misconception. Contrary to what its name suggests, the Charter is not a document setting out the fundamental rights of citizens, but rather a document laying down neo-liberal politics. The preamble to the document may serve as an illustration: ‘[…] it seeks to promote balanced and sustainable development and ensures free movement of persons, services, goods and capital, and the freedom of establishment.’ Rights of persons, services, goods and capital are ranked in the same category. And we’re not talking about the rights of people to receive services or own goods and capital, but about the right of services, goods and capital to free movement. As goods, services and capital are not persons, this therefore necessarily refers to the rights of certain persons (those owning goods and capital or offering services) to operate throughout the Union.

When taking a closer look at what the Charter establishes regarding the individual rights that Europe seeks to guarantee, what stands out is that this does not entail a right to employment, but merely ‘the right to engage in work and to pursue a freely chosen or accepted occupation’; nor a right to social provisions, but rather ‘access to social services’; nor a right to health care, but again merely ‘the right to access to’. Accompanied by the express provision ‘while recognising national laws and practices’.
This means that Europe refrains from laying down elementary rights, the right to employment, the right to health care, the right to housing. In short, the right to humane living conditions. At the same time, everyone is guaranteed the right to deploy their capital reserves throughout the European Union.

All we need to do is compare this to Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN in 1948:

‘Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.’

The obvious conclusion is that Europe is taking steps backward rather than forward.

A DEMOCRATIC EUROPE

The central problem of the present Europe is its undemocratic nature. Out of all European institutions, only one is directly elected by the people: the European Parliament (EP). However, this parliament lacks the competences of a regular parliament.

It does not have the right to initiate legislation. Its legislative work is limited to passing, rejecting or amending proposals from the European Commission. It shares its legislative tasks with the Council of Ministers. In Euro-speak, this is referred to as the ‘co-legislative’ task of the parliament. In some fields, the EP may propose amendments to legislation put forward by the European Commission and has a right to veto Council decisions. But it doesn’t have co-legislative competence in all European policy areas. In certain areas, it has no co-legislative authority at all.6 In such cases, the EP may issue ‘nonbinding advice’ or the EP may only be ‘entitled to regular updates’ - as is the case in, for example, foreign policy, as

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6 In a number of policy areas, the role of the EP is limited to the right to put forward recommendations. These include asylum and justice, agriculture and fisheries, decisions on concrete programmes for research and technological development and some social issues.

The Constitution would have provided for an extension of the EP’s co-legislative powers to include asylum and justice, agriculture and fisheries. However, it would also have set a high-risk precedent, by introducing legislation which would not formally qualify as legislation. In addition to the European laws and framework laws, it would have introduced so-called ‘European regulation’: ‘a non-legislative act of general application for the implementation of legislative acts and of certain provisions of the Constitution. It may […] be binding in its entirety and directly applicable’. It would also have introduced a new category of ‘European decision’: ‘a non-legislative act, binding in its entirety’. See Article 33 of the Constitution.

These laws which are not laws offer the opportunity (to the Council, the Commission, but also the European Central Bank) to bindingly enforce a wide range of issues without any form of democratic control.
well as in cooperation in domestic and judicial policy and the fight against terrorism. In short, this applies to all policy areas which may affect civil rights.\textsuperscript{7}

Its position in relation to the executive body - the European Commission - clearly highlights the weak position of the European Parliament. The European Council appoints the Commission. Firstly, a chairman is appointed, who – choosing from candidates put forward by the member states’ governments – subsequently proceeds to put together ‘his own’ Commission. Parliament’s role is limited to officially approving the chairman and the Commission as a whole. Parliament does not have the authority to dismiss individual European Commissioners.\textsuperscript{8} Dismissing the Commission as a whole requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

As such, Europe lacks a parliamentary democracy, in which the elected parliament has the final say and is equipped to monitor the executive power and ultimately dissolve it by means of a simple majority.

The EP’s limited competences serve to depoliticise the EP. It hardly serves any purpose for the various political factions in parliament to strive to acquire majority backing for their cause, as parliament lacks the right to legal initiative, and as policy frameworks are largely determined without its being involved. As such, its role in providing a political arena is very limited.

**DEMONCRACY, PARLIAMENT AND PARTICIPATION**

There is no term in our political dictionary that is as frequently used as ‘democracy’, generally with widely varying connotations. Therefore, it seems wise to make clear what we mean by it. People power is of course a rather literal translation, but even this has become a rather worn concept. However it is about the relationship between people and power. It can prove rather difficult for the people as a whole to directly exert their power. In a limited group, a general assembly using a system of ‘one person, one vote’ may prove workable. But as numbers increase, some form of delegation of power is needed.

In a parliamentary democracy, the delegation of power is highly formalised. In the voting booths, voters confer their power on politicians. It isn’t until years later that voters are consulted again and that they can opt to switch their mandate to another politician. Such a

\textsuperscript{7} In addition, there are a number of other rules and restrictions that disadvantage the Parliament. For example, in its areas of competence, the EP may propose amendments to Commission proposals, but the Council can subsequently reject these. The procedures include strict time schedules that Parliament must meet; if it fails to do so, the Council position takes precedence. Also, in crucial votes, a voting majority requires a majority of the members of Parliament, rather than a majority of the MEPs present.

\textsuperscript{8} The rejection of the candidature of Mr Buttiglione, a homophobic Catholic, is often cited as an example demonstrating that the EP does have the option to send individual Commissioners packing. This is incorrect. It was the chairman of the Commission, Mr Barroso, who, under pressure from both the public and parliamentary opinion, decided to replace Mr Buttiglione. The only action Parliament might formally have taken, was to threaten to reject the proposed Commission in its entirety. This requires a two thirds majority in the EP. This implies that in theory the support of one third of the EP suffices to keep the Commission in the saddle.
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system is of course preferable to one in which politicians exercise power without a mandate. However, voter power is extremely limited. Therefore, there is no reason to see parliamentary democracy as the only or highest form of democracy. In general, the more directly citizens can express their power, the more democratic the system.

As such, direct elections are preferable to indirect elections. The same goes for voting for a clearly defined mandate over a broadly defined one. Preferably, the populace should be involved and be given every opportunity to not only vote for people, but also for content. In a referendum, for example.

This is what we intend the term ‘democratic’ and ‘more democratic’ to denote: maximal popular control over the powers that be, and maximal direct popular responsibility.

A PARLIAMENT WITH FULL COMPETENCE

Any democratisation of Europe will have to set out by equipping the European Parliament with ‘normal’ Parliamentary authorities: the right of initiative; decision-making powers in all European affairs; the power to dismiss the European Commission and individual Commissioners on a vote of no confidence (by means of a simple majority of the votes).

Such a strengthening of the position of Parliament would have far-reaching consequences for the aggregate of European institutions. We will assess a number of these.

The Commission would have to abandon its current position as a ‘technical’ executive body to become a political administration, an institution that is politically accountable to the Parliament and relies on a parliamentary majority. As such – like any normal government in a parliamentary democracy – it would have to make sure that it can (continue to) rely on a majority in the EP. Commissioners would no longer be appointed by the Council: a Commission would have to be formed in the course of the negotiating process based on a policy agreement that is supported by a majority in the EP. This also implies that the rule that every country supplies its own commissioner would have to be abandoned.

Such proposals are automatically met with reactions that this would entail the institution of a European state, that it is pure federalism. Unjustly so, at least in our view. As mentioned before: the present Europe has already evolved into an entity that transcends a simple cooperation between sovereign states. A European administrative level has already been instated. Issues as to whether this level should be granted less or more power, or whether we progress more or less in the direction of a federal European state, depend on the competences granted to this policy level. They have nothing to do with whether things at that level are organised in a democratic or – as is currently the case – undemocratic manner.

Our premise is that any proposals or regulations put forward at the European level must be decided democratically.
We have indicated previously that in our opinion there should be less European influence regarding certain issues and more regarding others. Others may have different views. However, those differences too will have to be settled according to democratic procedures.

A comparison can be made with the various levels of authority that exist within the European member states: municipal authorities, regional authorities and national authorities. There is a constant political struggle and debate with respect to the competences awarded to each administrative level. And this is subject to constant change. Certain issues are decentralised, while others are centralised.

But ideally, governmental authorities at all levels are being monitored by bodies directly elected by the population: municipal councils, regional authorities, and the national parliament. The supranational European level ought to be no exception.

Only those wishing to limit European cooperation to incidental treaties between European states, without a separate European executive structure or regulations, may – in our view – argue in favour of abandoning democratic monitoring at the European level, as monitoring by national parliaments would then suffice and a European parliament would be superfluous.

**FROM COUNCIL TO SENATE**

Any form of European democratisation would have the most far-reaching consequences for the position of the Council. At present, this is the highest power in Europe. The Council’s strong position is legitimised by national interests. The individual member states must maintain the initiative in Europe. Large countries – or blocks of countries – must not be allowed to usurp dominant positions. All member states must collectively agree to policy decisions. For this reason, the Council decides issues in the most important policy areas by unanimous agreement, so that in fact each country has a veto.

This appears to be sound reasoning. It is clear that politics in Europe largely take place within the national arenas. There are hardly any Europe-wide debates, nor is there much in the way of a European public opinion building. As long as this is the case, European political decision-making will continue to take place along national lines. Ignoring that reality and imposing decisions that are not supported nationally by means of European majority voting is very dangerous, and will contribute to fanning nationalistic sentiments and ideologies.

But in our view, there is no reason to let the safeguarding of national interests or national concerns remain the exclusive domain of member states’ governments. Governments constitute the executive power at the national level. As such, it must be considered rather peculiar that when these governments convene in the Council (of Ministers), they should suddenly constitute the most important legislative power at the European level. They draw up laws in Europe, which they are subsequently expected to execute back in their own countries. This conflict of legislative and executive powers is one of the core arguments against the central role of the Council.
Another Europe is possible: ideas for a new Europe

The second crucial argument is of course that where national governments formally represent the population of their countries, in fact they are only backed by a part of both their populations and their national parliaments. Governments do not only represent the ‘national’ interest, but also specific government, party or coalition interests.

Therefore it would be much more logical to have the national interest represented not by governments, but by representatives elected directly by the populace. This might be achieved by instituting a European Senate (or a House of Country Representatives) alongside the European Parliament, which would consist of directly elected, representative delegations for each country. An added advantage of such a bicameral system would be that the current system of national election lists for the EP might be abandoned in favour of European lists (for all political factions willing). This would, for example, allow Dutch citizens to vote for a French Trotskyist, an English feminist, or a Danish member of the Greens, should they so wish.

The European Parliament would then truly form the representative of the European population, a Senate of the peoples of Europe. This Senate would have to have a strong position in relation to the EP, and the national delegations in the Senate would have to have the right to veto regarding a large number of issues.

Such a system would allow a fundamental democratisation of Europe, without automatically entailing a fortification of Europe. As at the national level, a parliamentary democracy is not the only and ultimate form of democracy. And although the introduction of a true parliamentary democracy at the European level would mean an enormous step forward, other democratic instruments are also needed. For example, binding European referenda, creating opportunities for European citizens to table legislative proposals, etc.

It is clear that a Europe as sketched above would be fundamentally different from the present Union – in terms of its structure, its institutions, and their respective competences. The main difference is that national governments as the dominant forces would be replaced by democratic bodies. This would generate a dynamic that would be completely different from what we have seen in the past decades, as directly elected democratic organs are much more sensitive to what goes on in society.

A DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION

A democratic Europe can of course only come about by means of a democratic process. Here, too, the process with regard to the Constitution is an example of the wrong approach. Critiques of this process may form the basis for an alternative proposal.

\[\text{\footnotesize\[^{9}\] Such a delegation might be elected in conjunction with the national parliamentary elections. Alternatively, it might be composed of a representative delegation of the national parliament.}\]
The Constitution was drawn up by a European convention. This convention consulted a large number of civil society organisations. However, it lacked a democratic mandate. It consisted of representatives of the governments of the member states and their national parliaments. They were not the elected representatives of the people and they were not chosen for their propositions or views regarding Europe’s future. Another Europe will have to be the outcome of a different sort of convention. A convention of which the members are directly elected by the population, and based on a clear vision on the future of Europe, a programme for the future Europe. There are various ways to arrive at such a convention, but it seems essential that the following points are met.

Its members would have to be directly elected by the European population. Their election should take place based on a clear vision on the future of Europe. The result of their labours (or a number of alternatives) must ultimately be put to the entire European population in a European-wide referendum.

The French and the Dutch referendums have demonstrated that the people clearly are interested in the future of Europe and are willing to give their opinion on the issue. They have also made clear that this is only the case when people have the feeling that their vote truly matters, that there are real choices to be made.

**A NEW CONSTITUTION?**

A new Europe will have to be built on a different basis to the present one. Whether that basis be called a Constitution, or a founding treaty or something of the kind, makes very little difference. What matters is its content, and the level of support among the European population.

Contrary to the current proposal for a Constitution, such a document will have to limit itself to laying down the objectives and the operation of this new Europe. It should lay down the rules of the game at the European level, and refrain from dealing with political content. It should bring about an end to our governmental Europe and institute a democratic Europe – a Europe truly based on the will of the European people.