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European (Dis)Union: the threat of a broken Europe

(Des)União Europeia:
a ameaça de uma Europa dividida

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IF SOMEONE WANTS to know more about the European Union (EU) but doesn't have that much free time to browse around and actually read about it, it might be tempting to just type "European Union" into YouTube and check what comes up. Although this might seem a lazy and unsophisticated way to learn about the EU (sometimes from more-than-a-little biased video makers), it does bring up a few interesting points – and the European Commission itself is fond of explaining its policies using such kinds of media. In December 2014, the European Commission posted one of these videos, titled "European Economy Explained - Climbing higher together"¹. It features a group of four people (in representation of the several EU members) climbing a mountain together. Some of the EU's growth strategies are explained as the group works together to climb the mountain – its top being, evidently, the EU members' "common goals".

This is a fairly straightforward way to explain in general lines how the EU works, especially to people who might not know much about EU policy in the first place. Such an effort to make the EU understandable is to be applauded, as lack of understanding is bound to become threatening – when people don't understand something, they tend not to care about it², which in turn creates large and dangerous gaps in public awareness.

However, if we look at the EU in this simplistic way, we can also raise questions in a childlike manner. One of the recurrent comments to the said video was that "implementing a single currency [the Euro] is equivalent to having those four different people climbing the mountain together using the same sized boots".

Now, this is something of a crude commentary – things are not so "black and white". After all, much care and preparation preceded the Euro implementation, and measures such as the Maastricht criteria³ made sure that, if not the same "shoe size" exactly, everyone had at least the same *range* of shoe sizes before a standard model was issued. It is still a valid point, though, because it embodies one of the major criticisms drawn upon the EU: how well can a single system fit completely different economies (let us put the metaphors aside for a moment) into broadly the same legislation, affecting many of a country's internal affairs, from environmental law to migration policies.

Nevertheless, this is not an essay about how good or how harmful the Euro is to the EU. After all, we shouldn't be so naïve as to think the recession we are living even *started* in Europe, let alone that it was caused by the Euro (although we must admit that having just one currency impaired the European states' ability to respond to the crisis). But let us not focus on that – the alleged failure of the Eurozone is just a starting point to conjecture on why the whole project of a Unified Europe is now threatening to backfire on us.

THE EUROPEAN UNION was not devised with a financial purpose. It was (it is) a political act, with excellent motives: to forsake extremist nationalisms and thus, if not to prevent, at least to make it a lot harder for another widespread war to take place⁴. Let everyone keep this in mind before fingers start pointing: the EU was meant to promote unity and security in a long war-torn continent – with various degrees of self-interest, yes, and motivated by the need to face the Soviet Union, yes – but, ultimately, with the aim of *keeping peace*.

It's 1945 and, freshly out of a second world war, millions of Europeans are homeless and starving, major cities are razed down and the continent's economy is in shreds. European leaders are calling for the unification of Europe – and, we might add, with a critical need to tie Germany and France in friendly relations. Motivated by the success of the Benelux treaty⁵, six countries sign an agreement on what would become the preamble to the European Union, and the door was kept open for those who wanted to join Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands (the original Benelux countries), France, Germany and Italy in the European Coal and Steel Community (eventually to become the EU in 1993). It might seem as if all that was on the table was a trade deal, but this was just an effective way to engage countries in dialogue – or, as we might explain to a child, if you are exchanging toys you sort of *have to* be friends.

The United Kingdom, a major power in Europe, has always been remarkably reticent on the whole European Union concept (which is ironic, as British Prime-Minister Winston Churchill was among the first to call for an unified Europe⁶). To cut a long story short, the United Kingdom was refused entry into the EU when, past its initial hesitation, it decided it wanted in after all; but eventually, it was granted admittance and it joined the Community in 1973 (bringing Ireland and

Denmark along with it)^{7,8}. Despite becoming a member, the UK's relationship with the EU remained a little stranded, and while several European countries are working to join, Great Britain is a referendum away from becoming the first country to leave the European Union⁹. After a (well justified) panic over "Grexit", or the possibility of Greece's exit from the Eurozone a few years back^{10,11}, what sort of turmoil might we be up against if the looming "Brexit" comes to pass?

And yet, if we were to judge by how much Europeans in general are facing this possibility, we might think it's nothing serious at all. As a simple Portuguese citizen, I may be ill-qualified to appreciate the depth of the discussion around the UK's exit from the EU. However, as a student who recently spent two months in London for an internship, I do feel that I am more sensitized to this matter than the average European. When, upon my return, I asked friends and colleagues what they thought about "Brexit", reactions were mostly: *a)* blank stares, *b)* non-committing shoulder shrugs, and *c)* horrified expressions, because that would mean holidays in London might become a lot more expensive. Yes, the odd person was able to reply with the interest I expected most people (especially young people) to express, but even those simply believed it wouldn't happen because "the EU would again yield to whatever demands the UK presented" (an answer whose correctness we might debate).

Not satisfied with this feedback, I contacted some friends across Europe: one Dane, one Italian, one German and one Serbian student doing his PhD in France. I asked them how much was the "Brexit" question being discussed in their respective countries. If I expected a little more attention being given to this matter in three founding states and one of the UK's companions in EU admission, I was not appeased. Yes, they know something is about to happen, but, "quite frankly", national government reforms, the refugee crisis and the US election are by far the main focus of the news and public discussion.

Naturally, I did not expect every country in Europe to be discussing "Brexit" as much as the United Kingdom itself, where hardly a day goes by without this topic hitting the newspapers. But I can't help to feel that this generalized lack of interest about an event that may signify the beginning of the end of the EU is a rather frightening sign of European disunion.

Are we not all Europeans? And speaking for my own generation, are we not “the future”? Why aren’t we worried? And even if it is to be argued that there is next to nothing we can do to prevent the UK secession from the European Union, does that entitle us to just completely give up on the whole subject?

If we are not talking about this, why are we not at least *listening*? Conspiracy theories aside, it may be in part a risky and unexplainable decision of the media to keep us away from bad news, but even so, it does not account for our indifference towards the dangerously close eventuality of European collapse. The EU is cracking – if we don’t listen, how can we try to prevent the crack?

Or – and now things start to become even more distressing – maybe we “want” the European Union to break. Maybe we, the Europeans, are starting to feel that the EU is a burden. Well, it certainly is mightily convenient for national governments to have a scapegoat on who to blame all sorts of austerity measures and even, sometimes, simply bad policies. If someone complains, just tell the people the evil guys from Brussels made us do it.

But let’s not dissociate things. When it comes to a country, there is no (or there shouldn’t be) “them” and “us”. We, Citizens, are the State. And we should not abdicate of our right to an active political voice, seeing as, ultimately, any Government decision impacts public affairs¹². And so, it doesn’t matter whether it’s the *population* or the *government* who is looking with a bad eye upon the European Union. For practical purposes, if one of them does, so does the other.

Now, why would anyone see the European Union as a bad thing, even if (wrongfully) motivated by an economic crisis that – let’s stress this again – was *not* started by the European Union, is utterly beyond comprehension. The EU is pretty much responsible for our life as we know it today, and we don’t even realize it. To make a very brief summary, the EU safeguards water and air quality throughout member states, it takes an active position towards environmental sustainability, it is working to increase our confidence over the products we buy, it mandates transparency from traders, it advocates women rights, it provides reliable criminal and civil justice, it made mobile communications cheaper, it assures our rights and needs as travelers, it enlarges our options as students, professionals and retirees^{13–16}. It is

compromised in helping undeveloped countries, it is still a major promoter of democracy, human rights, peace and security in Europe and it was certainly not in vain the recipient of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize^{17,18}. All of these are old news, as they have been massively recapped ever since the European Union seemingly started to walk at the edge of a precipice¹⁹. And we are *still* willing to admit that “we might be better off without the EU” – so much that we are fairly unconcerned whether the UK withdraws, despite the fact that from all we know, it might not only set a bad precedent, but the blow to the EU single market may shake the European economical balance so badly that it could snowball into an irreversible collapse²⁰. No one really knows what could happen, because no country has ever left the EU^{21,22}, but here’s something we do know – if we are not aware of something, we will certainly never be able to do anything about it.

Fine, so the European Union is not perfect (is any country?). It made some errors along the way (who didn’t?) and maybe it’s insisting on a few of those errors, which consequently prevents it from running smoothly in some points. But it’s absolutely undeniable that we are facing a sad prospect if the EU starts to crumble. Instead of supporting so-called nationalist parties and politicians who claim to want “sovereignty regained” – often on the basis of the EU membership fees (which cost each European citizen something like 15€ annually²³), we should be calling for the preservation of the European Union. Because if the EU collapses, we as citizens get a large share of the blame.

AS THIS ESSAY turned manifesto draws to a close, I feel daring enough to launch entirely into a personal view. As long as we remain afraid of embracing European unity, we will never fully enjoy from the envisioned purpose of making Europe more than the sum of its parts. If we look from 1945 to present times, we have definitely reason be proud – regardless of whatever crisis we are facing and will still face. However, if we let blind, naïve patriotism, egocentrism, a shameful disinterest for European affairs and an even more shameful political inactivity take ahold of us – we risk losing everything we accomplished in the six decades of peace held by the European Union. If the EU falls, everyone falls right along with it, and we have our eyes closed as we approach a nosedive.

But we might still be in time to open our eyes.

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