

As tensions rise, it is high time to address Europe's unfinished business

by Antoine Jaulmes*

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Russia's invasion of the Crimea is an indication of the build-up of ethnic tensions within Europe. Could the answer lie in a re-launching of a European peace project, with a specific emphasis on the question of cultural and ethnic identities?

The sudden and brutal crisis in Ukraine is a terrible reminder of the dark period of the 1930s, with the unilateral remilitarization of the Rhineland and then Germany's annexation of the Sudeten Germans, at the expense of Czechoslovakia. Hillary Clinton herself recently drew the parallel. How can an apparently peaceful situation deteriorate so fast and set us back 80 years?

The illusion of a Europe at peace

We have simply been the victims of a deliberate self-delusion. The major countries of Western Europe and their leaders have wanted to believe that Europe was fully pacified, while the mutually inflicted wounds of many past conflicts were still festering. Granted, the Franco-German reconciliation was a particularly striking reality. Granted, the construction of the European Union went far and fast thanks to the initial Franco-German impetus and to the powerful support of people like the Italian Alcide de Gasperi, the Dutchman Willem Drees and the Belgians Paul-Henri Spaak and Jean Rey. However this didn't resolve the issue of Northern Ireland, or the interethnic resentments in the former Yugoslavia or the Caucasus, or the division of Cyprus and the Greek-Turkish enmity, the issue of the Roma populations, or the Hungarian minorities in Central Europe. Nor - indisputably now - the issue of the Russian-speaking minorities in the countries of the former USSR.

Since the fall of the Berlin wall twenty-five years ago, more than thirty armed conflicts have taken place in Europe. Europe is currently the continent with the most conflicts around the identity and autonomy of ethnic and cultural communities. In an article in November 2008 titled 'Europe's Unfinished Business', John Peet, the Europe Managing Editor of *The Economist*, accurately analysed these problems, predicting the current crisis in Crimea. The facts were thus perfectly well known at least five years before the crisis started. But Europe was focussed on the complexities of community management and monopolized by economic issues and chose to ignore these facts. This behaviour indicates that Europe may have lost the guiding thread of its early years, which so strongly united its leaders.

The lost guiding thread of European unity

The aims of the European construction have been spelt out fully only once, in a text that wasn't the communiqué of some international consultation and was never approved by referendum. It came straight from the pen of Jean Monnet. It is the Schuman declaration of 9 May 1950, which directly inspired the treaties that followed and was quoted in full or in part in their preambles. This text defines the objective of a 'European federation' as being: 'world peace', demanding 'a creative effort' on the scale of the challenge. A response to the failures of the 1930s' that had led to the Second World War. And the method to achieve this was laid down as a succession of practical and limited agreements, with

as a first step a 'coal and steel community'. Europe would not be built in one step, nor in one overall creation, but it would grow to include other countries that wanted to participate. The text defines the future community as open to the world 'in order to contribute to raising living standards and to develop peace', in particular in Africa, but not only there. And finally, a new high authority, whose decisions would supersede those of the member states, would build the practical foundations of a 'European Federation', judged indispensable for the preservation of peace.

This text is the foundation of European unity, in history and by the importance of its ideas, so it is not by chance that 9 May has been chosen as 'Europe Day'. The economy is clearly at the service of peace, aiming to 'make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible'. Because it was not consistently passed on to ordinary citizens, the understanding of this well-spring has largely been forgotten. Without an understanding of history, without a conscious development of the different partners' mutual knowledge and without a deep respect for differences, emotional attachment to Europe is seriously lacking. Despite some fine gestures and symbols, like the 11 November 2009 ceremony in Paris commemorating the armistice of the First World War, with French and German soldiers parading past Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy, the spirit of Europe just doesn't fly. And worse, it fails to answer the many subsisting rivalries and divisions in Europe. There needs to be a new 'creative effort' to match the challenges of the 21st century.

Ethnicity, the new incarnation of nationalism

The primary challenge seems to me to be ethnicity, or nationalism 2.0. The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War is a healthy reminder of the cost of nationalism. It looked as if the European idea would help nations to know and understand each other, respect each other and gradually move towards unity, a hearts and spirit answer to the ravages of nationalism. But another alternative developed simultaneously: ethnicity, a resurgence of pre-national identities, that appeal to cultural, tribal or communitarian elements.

Today, ethnicity threatens to tear apart several European states: Ukraine, Belgium, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Baltic countries, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Bosnia – and I could go on. How far would European nations have to splinter to make this form of identity work? And with what level of sovereignty? How many more ethnic cleansings would we need to accept to arrive at borders that coincide with cultures? Are we to regard all cross-border ethnic national pretensions as legitimate, when as with Hungarians and Russians this could spark into fire dozens of potential conflicts? In the face of this nonsense, Europe must remind people that an ethnicist vision of the world is a dangerous pipe-dream – but Europe must also guarantee an appropriate solution to each minority group within the continent. However the problem within the problem is that ethnicity and sovereignty have apparently found more ardent propagandists than the European spirit.

Expressing a European identity founded on a concept of peace

If Europeans today start to doubt themselves, perhaps it is in part that they have not been nourished by the historical facts that have made the continent a tapestry of civilizational cousins, a vast battlefield,

and finally a continent in search of its unity - all elements of a European identity that would have needed to be added to the existing elements of national identities.

Granted, the exceedingly slow process towards a more direct European democracy, with still-too-limited powers for the European Parliament, makes it hard for European citizens to appropriate this new entity. But what are we to make – 69 years after the end of the last war – of the continuing insistence on nationalist themes in thousands of commemorative events? In June 2013, I questioned the French Minister for Veterans Affairs – who didn't bother to reply – about the most recent commemoration of the end of the Second World War that I had attended. The Minister's speech, read before a host of school children, seemed to blame all the horrors on the Germans. Wouldn't it have been more to the point to remind the listeners that atrocities were committed on all sides, even if they were largely triggered by the Nazi ideology? The extraordinary suffering of civilians and the large number of civilian victims was hardly touched on. By insisting on 'victory' and military glories, we forget to remind ourselves of the exceptional circumstances that forced our forebears to take up arms, and we also forget the terrible cost in human lives, and the refusal of the inevitability of war that is the cornerstone of Europe.

There's a real danger that 2014 will pass without the language of our different patriotic ceremonies and anniversaries being aligned with our current European foreign and defence policies, and without that any thought being given to the needed foundation of a common teaching of history and European civic instruction that is so sadly lacking. Should this be of no concern for Ministries of Veterans Affairs, it should at least be at the heart of a common European policy, and promoted by all the competent ministries, notably those in charge of education.

But peace will only come through justice, and inter-ethnic tensions need to be resolved: we can never afford to ignore the rights of minorities.

Getting different communities to live together in the same space

There are European examples of demands for cultural and regional autonomy satisfied through negotiations. One example, in which the NGO Initiatives of Change, whose Swiss branch I head, was directly involved is the Italian region of Alto Adige (or for the German-speakers, South Tyrol). At the end of the 1960s, this was turning sour. Separated from Austria and annexed by Italy at the end of the First World War, this German-speaking region had been forcibly Italianized under fascism. After the Second World War, the German-speakers hoped for a restoration of their rights, but the status they were granted in 1947 was unsatisfactory and half-heartedly applied by the Italian authorities. Militants started to organize bombs attacks; 361 between 1956 and 1968. But today, the region is looked to as a model, though the general public are now almost completely unaware that the situation had the potential to turn into another Basque region or another Northern Ireland.

The social and cultural differences, the wounds from the fascist period, the irritation at the incomplete application of previous autonomy agreements by the Italian government, the preconceived ideas, all of this was tackled by the leaders of the two communities, Armando Bertorelle for the Italian-speakers, and

Silvius Magnago for the German-speakers, who had developed a relationship of trust. In 1971, the Italian and Austrian parliaments gave their final approval to the laws giving autonomy to the German-speaking community. In 2007, a report of the Franco-Italian inter-parliamentary friendship group called the agreement a possible source of inspiration for similar situations. The Austrian Foreign Minister, Alois Mock, in the thick of the break-up of Yugoslavia called it 'a landmark in European history', establishing a model where all parties respect democratic principles and renounce the use of violence. In April 2007, the Austrian Chancellor, Alfred Gusenbauer, who was working for an agreement with Serbia for the independence of Kosovo, suggested applying a similar agreement in North Kosovo, with guarantees for the Serb minority. Sadly he was not listened to, and American pressure just snatched the whole Kosovo away from Serbia, humiliating her Russian ally in the process. No wonder the Russians now push unilateral independence for Abkhazia and the Crimea 'as in Kosovo', an escalation which proves that the only reasonable way to solve such a problem should have been in the first place through patient negotiation of partial regional autonomy, in the respect of democratic principles.

A call to European politicians

There are two priorities that Europe must undertake urgently and rapidly, without delay: firstly, expressing a European identity grounded in its original vision of peace-building and secondly, establishing a capacity to settle interethnic conflicts in an adapted institutional framework. Only then can the acute or latent crises find lasting settlements, only then can the Europeans resume their progress towards a more united continent in line with the vision of the founding fathers, and renew popular support for the European ideal. We need an evolution of mentalities; we must attain a new political maturity. This is a priority European politicians should set for themselves now.

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