



Live Europe! Europa leben!

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Live Europe!

A Plea for More Encounter and Movement in Europe

by Hannes Lorenzen

Europe is much history and much projection. The story is forgotten while the projections increase. It is obvious that ambitions to strengthen cohesion in Europe have gone out of fashion. Europe sometimes seems like a bunch of foreign nation states and a swarm of hopes and disappointments of their citizens. The European Union is on the brink of renationalisation and weakening disintegration. Against this background, the EU will only remain a project for peace and cohesion if people get involved in concrete joint projects in Europe. The European rural, agricultural and food policy could become an important pillar of a new civil project for Europe.

Can Europe be understood? It has been described in many ways. Mark Twain strolls through Europe in 1878 for a year and a half ("*the innocents abroad*"), supposedly on foot. He makes fun of the superficiality of American tourists and actually only experiences German and Italian cities himself. The Dutch writer Geert Mak has been "*In Europe*" for a year at the beginning of this century. He visits Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, St. Petersburg, Verdun, the former Stalingrad and Chernobyl. He notes the helplessness of Europeans before their history of war and catastrophe. Hans Magnus Enzensberger already sighed "*Ach Europa!*" before the fall of the Berlin Wall and prophesied early "Hungarian Confusions". Cees Nooteboom sits "*In Europe's waiting room*" for a very long time and asks himself "*How to become a European?*" And in times of widespread rejection of the EU, Robert Menasse takes up one lance after another to defend Europe and its institutions in "*Der Europaeische Landbote*" und "*Die Hauptstadt*" ("*The Capital*")

Where does Europe actually lie?

The country of Europe does not exist - Especially not in the same way as the United States of Europe. There are reasons for that. There are (still) 28 capitals and just as many national interest representations in Brussels. Many national politicians base their careers on the fear of Europe. In the European Parliament, mainly national interests are defended often just following deals at the Council of Ministers to defend their national interests. A Common European Constitution failed in 2005 because a referendum in France and the Netherlands offered citizens the opportunity to give their own government a lesson. Ah, Europe!

Did we forget everything? The European Union embodies world history at its highest level. The fact that the once deeply hostile nations of the old continent have managed to work together peacefully and successfully for almost seventy years is admired in many regions of the world. The three principles - democracy, solidarity and sustainability - have held Europe together, despite many economic and political attacks by the powerful, especially Germany. In Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, the EU is still regarded as a model for peaceful, cross-border cooperation and integration. In contrast to military alliances such as NATO, its appeal is based not on fear of neighbours, but rather on the hope of democratic and sustainable development. Six founding states therefore became twenty-eight, and the list of candidate countries in the south-east is long.

But many of Europe's citizens do not like their Union. They perceive it as bureaucratic, cold and distant. Politicians of all colours and countries have contributed to this image. They can expect applause at home when they paint "Brussels" on the wall as an undemocratic monster and themselves as victims of the moloch. The distance between people and Europe is above all homemade. There is no European public sphere and no real contact with Europe. The national media tell national stories about Europe. They sound very different in England than in France or Italy. Europe hardly ever comes home to people and

when it does, it usually does so with warm words or biting comments. Europe does not come as a goddess on the bull, but mostly as an ugly distant city from which disaster threatens. A few months before the elections to the European Parliament in 2019, European politics stands for helplessness before "the markets", increasing anti-European populism and a galloping erosion of democracy.

Do we remain helpless before our history of catastrophes? Is Europe, as the British authors Brendan Simms and Benjamin Zeeb claim, "on the precipice"? Do we need a Manifesto for Europe, as proposed by Dany Cohn-Bendit and Guy Verhofstadt, in order to bring together the last upright Citoyens Européens? Or does it make sense to take a look at the countryside, where (according to various election analyses) the rejection of "Brussels" is the most radical, and here and there blood and soil ideology is again on the rise. In Robert Menasses' *'The capital'*, a pig is lost in the Brussels city centre and creates a media spectacle, while an Austro-Hungarian export cartel challenges the British for their pork exports to China. Has the former foundation of European unification become a caricature? Did the bureaucracy really win and the people lose?

Europe loses itself between city and country. Relations between rural and urban areas in Europe are as ambivalent as anywhere else in the world. The city attracts people, the countryside loses them. The old, the losers - or the particularly competitive - remain in the countryside. Where the land is beautiful, people come in search of recreation and retirement. . Elsewhere, the land is empty. Most rural regions are considered disadvantaged and receive compensation from Europe, but overall the rural people (also other than farmers) receive much less in subsidies than do the urban populations and the agricultural industries. Regional policy for the towns, and rural development policy for the countryside, are two unequal worlds that are increasingly falling apart. The ideal of social and territorial cohesion is being lost.

Cities take the countryside into custody. First, Europe's agriculture was forced to adopt a model of industrialisation that increasingly deprived the soil of fertility, made plants dependent on mineral fertilisers and pesticides, forced animals into unhealthy performance systems, and left farmers breathless in the wake of this structural change. The cities are growing out into the countryside and consume more and more farmland with housing construction and infrastructure. Land is becoming scarce and expensive because play money from urban financial centres is looking for safe landing sites and commercial investors increasingly enter the agricultural sector. The banks offer money to the farmers for the next rationalisation step and then take over their business when the loan can no longer be serviced because the value of farm produce hits rock bottom.

The countryside is losing people and money. Despite constant rationalisation, the share that farmers receive from the value chain is becoming smaller and smaller, with a current average of only 18 percent. The promise of modernisation has always worked in favour of the city. Precision agriculture and digitisation are the next magic words. Connecting to the Google data highway, without any concern for climate change and sustainability, will only give a few rationalization razors a chance. Nothing against intelligent tractors. But if the data collected can only be used commercially by John Deere, and the farmers are only users of the latest crop protection app, their own skills will be lost and dangerous new dependencies will arise.

Freeze frame (immovable) agricultural policy. The fact that European agricultural policy is so hopelessly lagging behind urgent demands such as climate protection, biodiversity conservation and soil fertility is due to the fact that the objectives set in the 1950s have remained unchanged to this day. But competitiveness and productivity are in a completely different social context today than they were then. When there was an opportunity to adapt these objectives to the new challenges under the Maastricht Treaties or the failed European Constitution, not a single Member State wanted to re-think the obsolete objectives, Germany being the first to block them.

National egoism. The rejection of a modern reform of the current Common Agricultural Policy is also based on the pronounced national egoism of the member states. The EU Commission's two major reform attempts failed because the financially strong net contributor states ignored the social and ecological challenges and instead followed the demands of the agricultural industry. Germany in particular has

repeatedly resisted necessary reforms. In 1999 Gerhard Schröder made a deal with Jacques Chirac against the then EU Agriculture Commissioner Franz Fischler and prevented unconditioned farm subsidies from being converted into rural development programmes. Angela Merkel made her deal with Tony Blair in 2005 and saved the unconditional direct payments to farmers from drastic cuts. The proposals of the Romanian EU Commissioner Dacian Cioloş to link hectare premiums to agro-ecological practices were also turned into ineffectiveness by the German government.

Re-nationalising the CAP. The trend towards the re-nationalisation of the Common Agricultural Policy is now clearly visible in the new reform proposals for the CAP after 2020. It is true that the Member States are obliged to draw up strategic plans in the area of direct payments, showing how they intend to solve the specific problems of their agriculture. They must include measures for climate protection, biodiversity and sustainable farming. However, neither an obligation to apply these measures nor an effective evaluation is foreseen at EU level. Furthermore, instead of qualifying and redistributing aid per hectare, the main cuts are in rural development and cohesion policy. The Commission is thus following the egoism of the net contributor states and is largely withdrawing from the shaping of a true common agricultural policy.

Re-shaping Europe. Now is the decisive moment to rebaptize Europe and to reshape it from the bottom up. This can build upon the many local and regional initiatives of civil society organisations, both rural and urban, which have long been working to transform society. They need support strictly linked to sustainability objectives, territorial social protection, urban-rural cohesion and democratic governance. For the farming industry this would mean abandoning minimum standards, disadvantage factors and compensation for loss of income and instead setting targets with regard to climate, biodiversity and income, which would become the basis and condition for subsidies. For the wider rural economy and community, it would include a focus on advice, cooperation and infrastructure for local and regional supply systems, which can give back to rural regions the added-value that is now disappearing into the cities.

Europe's successful history

Europe can also be different. We must not forget the many successful stories of Europe. We have quite successfully fought against hormone meat and genetic engineering in agriculture. We have preserved a fairly large variety of agricultural and eating cultures. Instead of drowning regional specialities in the anonymous Marche market, designations of origin have protected the diversity of wines, cheeses and others from arbitrariness and devaluation. What would France be without the history of Roquefort and its wine culture? Organic farming, agro-ecological conversion and numerous environmental and animal welfare initiatives are also developing astonishingly fast, and programmes such as the European Innovation Partnerships (EIP) and Horizon 2020 are enabling new forms of cooperation between researchers and practitioners.

Civil society. We live in an increasingly active civil society, which can try out new forms of cooperation and solidarity with methods and programmes such as LEADER, CLLD, URBACT and INTERREG. Organisations such as "*Access to Land*" for newcomers, community supported agriculture (CSA), agricultural alliances such as *Meine Landwirtschaft* and *Pour une autre PAC* have developed joint European strategies and actions such as the annual International Green Week demonstrations and decentralised actions such as Good Food Good Farming. It is encouraging to see that many of these initiatives communicate and grow together across national and language borders. New joint policy projects between scientists and civil society such as IPES Food, which call for a new integrating policy for agriculture, food quality and environmental protection, are also on the rise politically. It is worth taking a look at the diversity of initiatives and movements beyond the COPA associations, from which the necessary critical substance for a European agricultural turnaround could emerge.

Europe is different

Defending democracy. It is currently difficult to imagine an end to the rampant populism in the upcoming European elections. Democracy and necessary reforms will therefore first have to be defended at home in order to prevent worse things from happening in Europe too.

Search for contact across borders. We must be aware of developments in other Member States and regions and look for allies in order to build a new approach for European policy. The EU Commission's proposals could offer such scope if we succeed in implementing common socio-ecological criteria for EU funding. These include climate protection measures, which are mandatory in the promotion of crop rotation and soil improvement, as well as a redistribution of hectare premiums in favour of smaller, labour-intensive farms.

It will also be important to defend the budget and rural development measures against cuts, so that infrastructure and partnerships can emerge that will allow agriculture and other sectors to redirect more of the value-added back to rural regions.

A European framework. We need a Europe-wide political framework of conditions - from regulatory law to funding criteria and redistribution of development opportunities in Europe – applicable to all member states. Not only in Germany should the spirit of making "selfies" of their own ideas (disconnection) of non-governmental organisations be a thing of the past. The social-ecological reconstruction demands more than just placing BIOLAND products on the shelves of LIDL discounters or wanting to be paid for counting the skylark populations.

Work on a common European experience. Free movement and cohesion will only be sustainable in Europe if they can be experienced by people in their everyday lives. Debate on the future of Europe - not only before, but continuing far beyond, the elections to the European Parliament - should be conducted among all, so that an awareness can arise that we have to work simultaneously on many fronts. Above all, this includes new encounters. Students are sent from the EU to Europe with the ERASMUS programme. How would it be to offer this also to vocational schools and trainees or to enable an exchange of experiences between Europe's farmers with a programme like "FARM-ERASMUS"? A joint ecological year to promote European voluntary services is also under discussion. It will be worth calling for this kind of joint work throughout Europe.

EU Assistance to its Neighbours. Assistance must be offered in particular to those Neighbourhood countries that want greater proximity and cooperation with Europe. This applies to Ukraine, the Western Balkans and the countries bordering the Black and Mediterranean Seas. Although the EU is not highly regarded by its own citizens, our achievements are exemplary and desirable for our neighbours. Rural parliaments and LEADER projects mobilise rural civil society and challenge the often immovable central administrative structures. If the EU continues to give our neighbours the cold shoulder and does not see the strengthening of their economies and democracies as its own interest, our borders will be even more uncomfortable than before.

European education is a top priority. Education and training that prepares young people for the great challenges of the future must be strengthened and revitalised at European level. In addition to a radical change in agricultural advisory systems, school education must address much more the concrete problems associated with climate change, environmental degradation and social injustice. In many Member States, the development and management of school gardens and forests has been included in curricula. Projects such as 2000m2 or the involvement of schools in supplying public canteens from the "green belts" of the cities can involve young people in practical solutions. Here too, cooperation programmes can help to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers that still exist.

Coming together for real change in Europe. Can we reload Europe? Can we reinvent Europe? It may be difficult for the national political classes to warm up for new European goals and treaties at this time of Brexit, for they do not experience Europe at the ground level. National media too may not perceive the real problems on the ground and the possible solutions from Europe. There will be fractures, perhaps even dangerous distortions. But as Leonard Cohen so nicely puts it, "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

Finding the sources of new light. It is not enough to mourn Europe in all its weaknesses and inadequacies or to wait for the cracks that could bring light into the darkness of the abyss. We should look for the people and projects that will create a new democratic dynamic in Europe for sustainability and

social justice. For over 25 years now, the Critical Agriculture Report has been an important project for the German civil society alliances and unique in this form in Europe. Why should we not embark on a similar journey throughout the rural regions of Europe to create new contacts and alliances that bring together the critical substance for real change and reform of the common agricultural policy?

A foray through Europe

Let us start in Scandinavia, where democracy still seems to be a largely family affair. From there in the 1990s the spark for more democracy and self-determination in the countryside came, the Swedish rural parliaments. Every two years since then, rural initiatives and projects have come together and have taken their development beyond the traditional farmers' associations into their own hands. Politicians of all colours no longer dare to stay away from this movement and rural civil society has become more self-confident.

The spark jumped to Finland, Estonia within a few years. Latvia and Lithuania and later to the new Eastern European Member States. Even in the countries of the Western Balkans, national and regional rural parliaments take place every two years, as does a European rural parliament that brings together all national initiatives every two years. If a rural manifesto for Europe is needed, it is already there and its demands have at least penetrated into the discourse of the European institutions: more investment in local development, more self-determination and administration, more work on cohesion in rural regions.

In Greece is not only crisis and sellout. There are many small islands of renewal, even on the mainland. In Karditsa, a small town on the Peloponnese mainland where subsidised cotton farming once flourished, an initiative has revitalised the local economy and agriculture. The branch of a bankrupt bank was taken over without state subsidies and transformed into a development cooperative for projects in the region, from which various rural and urban projects developed according to the principle of Eco-Schemes, the associated urban-rural economy. In the meantime, numerous small businesses, tourism projects and start-ups have emerged.

In Italy, despite the shift to the right and a rampant European allergy, the Slow Food movement and the local link between farmers and citizens remain a stabilising factor in agriculture.

In Spain, too, local elections have created new links between producers, processors and community projects that focus on food quality and prices (Valencia). The sea of plastic for export vegetable production in Huelva is coming under increasing pressure from public criticism, also because of the inhumane working conditions for migrants and refugees.

In France, the debate over the very high use of pesticides and the loss of biodiversity has led to a government crisis under President Macron when Environment Minister Hulot resigned because his hands remained tied in the implementation of the ecological agricultural turnaround just announced. But the level of debate on the future of agriculture is high, European and rests on the respect of the French for their farmers and their love of good food.

In Portugal, there is a new generation of well educated young people in rural areas, who build on the work of their parents and grandparents and rely on income opportunities from areas such as healthy Mediterranean diets, new forms of adapted tourism and sustainable use of local resources. The preservation of traditional fruits and vegetables is also very popular in Portugal.

Although the media in Britain are currently mainly concerned with the exit from the Union, the movements of transition towns and villages, community supported agriculture and the common food policy initiative have become strong since the Brexit referendum and very present in the public debate on relations with the old continent and the future of food.

In Ireland, the 2008 financial crisis has hit the national economy particularly hard. Agriculture, on the other hand, got away with it. Rural development initiatives such as LEADER, on the other hand, have been frozen. Is the hunger crisis of 1879 still in the bones of the Irish? Allotments, the self-sufficient gardens, are today very popular and in many places the germ cells of new neighbourhood aids and food cooperatives in the countryside and in the cities.

In Belgium and the Netherlands, too, new dynamic citizens' initiatives are emerging to bring farmers and consumers closer together. This is where the Boeren en Buren movement, farmers and neighbours, is emerging, linking direct marketing with political debate, for example on unfair producer prices, the power of supermarkets and unusual measures to free themselves from food chains.

In Austria, the new right-wing populist government has not yet called into question the high esteem and financing of rural development and the special support for small-scale projects. In agriculture, the possibility of additional financing for the first hectares per holding also continues to apply. However, the new government does not intend to compensate for the financial losses Brexit will cause for the second pillar.

In Poland and Hungary, many small farmers have been caught with nationalist slogans. The government upgrades them politically and supports local initiatives. The informal and politically opposition civil society, on the other hand, has submerged itself in the countryside under harsh government bombardment or is directly politically persecuted. The situation is similar in Hungary, with corruption in rural areas to strengthen President Orbán's Fidesz Party on the agenda.

In Romania, the ruling Socialist Party continues to have support in the countryside, while urban civil society strongly denounces the rampant corruption of these remnants of the old regime and reorganises itself politically. In the countryside, small farmers and environmental organisations such as Eco Ruralis and Civitas have a firm place in these movements.

In the countries of the Western Balkans that are not yet members of the EU, a so-called Standing Working Group (SWG/SEE) has been set up, comprising seven Balkan countries, to provide advice on agricultural and rural development issues to ministries, administrations and NGOs. SWG also sees itself as a peace and democratisation project in the region and has promoted programmes such as LEADER and the promotion of small farmers and local projects together with the Balkan Rural Development Network.

In Germany, as in all other European countries, there are many local projects and initiatives which have acquired their special position vis-à-vis agro-industrial production via special markets or marketing forms. Politically, the various platforms and alliances that come together for the annual "We're fed up" demonstrations on the occasion of the Green Week in Berlin are visible. The rejection of mass livestock farming and industrial agriculture has a unifying effect here, while there still seem to be considerable strategic differences with regard to alternatives and cooperation.

The author

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