

**Hilde Keteleer**

## Europe: a Monster with Ice-Cold Breath? On Hope and Loathing in Belgium

Stefan Hertmans, one of the best-known Flemish authors, wrote at the close of the 20th century in *Intercities*, 'Perhaps this is how it must be: in a small, banal hotel room, with the peeping and rustling of the gypsy-like music that comes over the Alps from Sarajevo to Salzburg, you realise what an incomprehensible and impossible thing Europe is. . . . to understand for an odd moment what cannot be understood. That you're living in a history impossible to disentangle, and precisely because of that, you want to live, although life slides past faster than a dream.' The book opens with a quote from Victor Klemperer, writing in the early 20th century: 'The contemporary knows nothing.'

And now, in the early 21st century, I have been asked to comment on the public debate about Europe in my country. I know that the writer has no choice but to be an antenna, absorbing what goes on around him or her and bearing witness to it as eloquently as possible. You focus on phenomena that seem relevant, taking the risk that your own circles represent only a small part of the population, and that your image of the times is therefore quite limited in scope.

Unfortunately, only half of my country is within range of my antenna. Despite being in touch with writers in French-speaking Belgium, I do not have the same feeling for what goes on there. That only aggravates my uncertainty about the European project – a project that once, a long time ago, was welcomed with open arms here, especially in Flanders. Strong regionalist tendencies go together perfectly with a Europe that presents itself as a continent of regions. While there is growing aversion here, as elsewhere, to the idea of a united Europe, in the case of Flanders this feeling may not stem from extreme nationalism. I will return to this point below.

In our country, 'Brussels' has a different ring to it than in other EU Member States, where the name has become more and more synonymous with bureaucratic interference, with everything that goes wrong, and, over the past few years, with the entire financial and economic crisis. Most people in Flanders (fired up by nationalist politicians) also see Brussels as a den of iniquity, but they are more concerned about interference from central Belgian government than from Eurocrats.

I spent most of my working life in Brussels and still miss it. It's the only place in our country with a metropolitan feel. While working there, I came into contact with European institutions and experienced the European Union first hand: the constant bustle of officials at the Commission, the Council and the Parliament and, of course, plenty of bureaucracy and plenty of lobbying too. I was always running into the same small group of people at the many superfluous lunchtime debates and receptions and talks. But there was also a group of enthusiastic people – many of them young – from all over Europe, especially the east, whose work placements and three-year contracts gave them opportunities in Brussels that they would never have had in their own countries. Then there were the many specialists in all sorts of fields, highly motivated and giving the best of their expertise and themselves. And finally, there were the many hard-working and idealistic politicians in the European Parliament, who are becoming increasingly important as more and more legislative authority passes from the member states to the European Union and as Parliament gains ever greater powers of scrutiny over decisions made by the Council and Commission.

All those European institutions, plus the many businesses drawn to the corridors of power, create plenty of jobs in Belgium and this probably accounts for much of the country's previous good will towards the European Union. I say 'previous' because the EU has now lost much of its credit with the general public in Flanders. I remain a committed European citizen, as do many Flemish intellectuals. But our vision of a united Europe is unfortunately not the European Union we see today. 'Our Europe' was an ideal, a confluence of cultures. It was a belief in something greater than national borders, something that would protect us from future wars and allow us to travel and work more freely throughout a large geographic area. (And for the labour unions, 'our Europe' was one of prosperity and social protection, a Europe that would help to modernise the economy and thus lead the way to full employment.)

I am hesitant to draw this line between the intellectual elite and the general public, since besides coming across as extremely condescending, it may be a false distinction. Instead, the line may run between those who have money and those who do not (free movement of capital) and, on the contrary, between those who think in traditional left-wing (internationalist) and right-wing (localist) terms. In any case, we are now facing a crisis of confidence in almost everything we once believed in. On the political right, a book was published in early May with the ominous title 'Europa wankelt' (Europe Totters). Diverse factors have set it tottering. As always and everywhere, the fear of losing one's own personal income or of seeing it stagnate plays a central role. And that fear predates the financial crisis of 2008.

This country has a special place in its heart for plumbers. Jean-Luc Dehaene was prime minister of Belgium from 1992 to 1999 and a towering figure in Belgian politics for several years before that (from 1988 onwards), because he pulled off the impossible feat of reconciling irreconcilable interests to forge an agreement about fundamental constitutional reform. For this 'odd job', he was rewarded with the nickname of 'de loodgieter' – 'the plumber'. But Belgium owes its very survival to the work of this master plumber and many of the joiners and masons who followed in his footsteps, a fact that speaks volumes about the cement holding the country together and the mentality of most Belgians. Our community has little patience for deep thoughts or fine words, and is only a community at all to the extent that it allows individuals to go their own way whenever possible. We are more of a patchwork than a unified whole. And unfortunately, we discovered last year that our master plumber, who had become chairman of Dexia, one of Belgium's largest banks, could not fix the leaky taps there. The water nearly flooded our Belgian house. Dexia, once the very model of a cooperative bank, had fallen prey to greed and had to be put on clearance sale.

Belgians associate the noble profession of plumber not only with our ex-prime minister, but also with Poland. 'Polish plumber' has become an umbrella term for any kind of eastern European who takes advantage of the free movement of services in the EU to come and steal 'our jobs'. Most people in Flanders have hired a Pole at least once, because 'they're bloody skilled workers', as the cliché goes. But at the same time, we tar them with the same brush as the Albanians, Bulgarians, and Romanians who come here 'to loot our houses, sell drugs in public squares and ruin our neighbourhoods with their cheap hookers'. As in almost all of the neighbouring countries, populist politicians are feeding on this dissatisfaction, fanning the flames of xenophobia, and decrying the disadvantages of the free movement of goods and services. The many benefits of European law to consumers are almost never mentioned.

Most of the media beat this same drum. Crimes committed by foreigners are always reported, not just in the popular press, but also in the so-called quality media. And

alongside the Moroccans and Turks, who have long been targets of populist outrage, more and more of those foreigners are eastern Europeans. The present crisis in Greece, Spain, and Portugal has only reinforced the widespread belief throughout Flemish society that 'those southerners' are lazy parasites, sponging off the hard-working northerners (and from here, it is a small step to drawing comparisons with our southern compatriots across the linguistic border).

Many people also believe that the Dexia crisis, which has already had tremendous costs for our country and will probably cost us even more in the future, was as bad as it was because we were robbed blind by the Dutch to the north and the French to the south. (Ironically, Dexia and Fortis have so far been primarily a source of income for the Belgian state, because the banks are paying for the state guarantees. Up to now, the damage to the state has mainly been to its image.) Again, foreigners are blamed, this time our very close European neighbours (with whom Belgians already have a somewhat fraught relationship, because of our position on the periphery of two language areas, with linguistic standards imposed on us from Paris and Amsterdam). The undeniable failings of our own politicians are all too quickly swept under the carpet, so that we can make 'Europe' the scapegoat for all our problems. When Belgian politics is mentioned, most of us prefer to keep our mouths shut – although, of course, there are some independent-minded citizens who speak up.

In the Flemish financial newspaper *De Tijd*, politician Kurt Beck of Germany's social democratic party SPD remarked, "When politicians have no opinion, people say they don't need politicians." The context was an article about the rise of the German Pirate Party. A similar party is emerging in Flanders. The main goal of both is more transparency and open government. One of our most frequently cited political scientists has commented, "There have been calls for greater transparency for many years. The new development is that this is now one party's core message, and that they are spreading that message on the Internet." In the local elections coming up in October, residents of Antwerp, Ghent, Leuven and Mechelen will be able to vote for the Pirate Party.

### **The left and Europe**

Another party, for which the residents of most places in the country will be able to vote, is the Worker's Party of Belgium, the communist party. There is no telling how many Belgian voters really will check that box on their ballots, but in any case, it seems likely that this party of the extreme left will receive more votes than in the last elections. That has everything to do with the outrage felt by many Belgians, a sentiment that is taking root ever more deeply and searching for a way to express itself. This small left-wing party could find itself considerably larger, and if it does, that will be thanks above all to Peter Mertens, Worker's Party chairman, whose book 'Hoe durven ze?' (How Dare They?) offers a cogent analysis of the excesses of the capitalist system, in clear, graceful prose abounding in real-life examples. The book is well documented – the party's researchers did their job well, unearthing concrete figures to demonstrate the rise in inequality throughout Europe. Dimitri Verhulst, well-known in Flanders and beyond as the author of the book-turned-film 'The Misfortunates' (and, I might add, a resident of Wallonia), provided the cover blurb for Peter Mertens's book: "I welcome this book, which I would dearly like to label 'essential', as a new and heated beginning in the fight against antisocialism."

'Hoe durven ze?' spent ten weeks in the top ten informative books, outselling cookbooks and travel books, two popular genres in Flanders. That is no small feat and it tells us something about the public's burning desire to learn more about the shocking figures, the bonuses awarded to CEOs and bank presidents, the way 'they' walked away with the profits and 'we' are paying the price. Mertens devotes a third of

his book to the European Union and his unvarnished criticism appeals to the Flemish contrarian streak. He revives the spirit of Tijl Uilenspiegel, the irreverent trickster of comic medieval tales, and of the sixteenth-century Calvinist rebels known as the Geuzen (Beggars), as models for a new counterculture with the objective of reclaiming democracy, liberty, and the economy from 'the papists and technocratic governments of capitalist Europe'. The starting point for his critique is the exploitation of German employees. Under the heading 'Strooptocht Oosten. Treuhand en de afwikkeling van de DDR' (The Looting of the East: Treuhand and the Settlement of the GDR), Mertens reveals how, as he sees it, East Germany became a testing ground for lowering export prices through ultra-low wages and weak labour standards ('wage dumping' and 'social dumping'), a model that has since been copied across the continent. And he quotes Bernd Riexinger, one of the driving forces behind a network of labour unions, "We have to make it clear that the conflict regarding so-called aid to Greece is not between Germany and Greece but between the haves and the have-nots."

Mertens's book is a hit in Francophone Belgium, too. By the way, the Workers' Party is the only Belgian party that is not yet regionalised, the only one that calls itself 'Belgian' rather than 'Flemish' or 'Walloon'. In his chapter 'Het Europa van concurrentie en ongelijkheden' (The Europe of Competition and Inequality), Mertens quotes Gérard de Selys, a journalist at the Francophone public broadcasting company RTBF: 'I want to open the eyes of those who still believe that the Europe now being built is the Europe of their dreams, a continent of peace, democracy and justice.' In 1993, the Worker's Party was the only one in Belgium critical of the Maastricht criteria. In their eyes, the proposed unified currency was 'a superstructure needed by the big European bosses in their economic war against the United States and Japan' and its adoption was yoked to a new nationalism carefully nurtured by the European establishment. The European Union recapitulated the same steps that had accompanied the birth of nation-states in earlier centuries, inventing a flag, a national anthem, and a new history. "The continent of colonialism, the slave trade, and the two world wars was suddenly being described as a continent of peace. European chauvinism was born." This criticism of 'Euro-phoria' is followed by a scathing indictment of the banking crisis of 2008: "The inequalities in the European Union had not been smoothed out, as the Maastricht boys had predicted they would be. On the contrary, they had grown exponentially." After a critical discussion of the fact that member states could not even borrow from the European Central Bank and so were forced to turn to private banks, where they pay interest rates varying from 4 to 11 percent, while those same private banks can borrow the same money at a rate of barely 1 percent, Mertens comes to a bitter conclusion: "The euro is not intended to bring about harmonious cooperation between countries, to promote national and regional industry and agriculture, to create robust employment, to encourage a sustainable approach to environmental challenges, or to foster a modern system of collective services. From the start, the euro was forged from the nickel of large-scale competition."

Unsurprisingly, the author believes that his political analysis also points to the way out. 'More authoritarianism or more nationalism' will only plunge the EU still deeper into the mud. A different solution is called for, he writes, one that makes short work of bloodsuckers and speculators. Politicians, he writes, must find the courage to take on the most morally corrupt practices. To begin with, he argues for a three-part ban: on hedge funds and speculative funds, on structured risk products and risk derivatives, and on shorting. The second step he recommends is to take measures against all financial operations from offshore tax havens and to prohibit tax havens within the EU. And of course, he sees a tax on all financial transactions as an absolute minimum. Peter Mertens dreams of European socialism 2.0: the cancellation of

government debt and the redistribution of wealth, a continent where collective services and companies are driven by the needs of the public.

There is a good deal to be criticised in this book; for instance, the frequent comparisons between things that are not, strictly speaking, comparable, and the many quotes carefully wrenched out of context. But it has one fundamental thesis with which many left-wing (and centre-left) intellectuals agree: there is a global class struggle in progress for the distribution of national income, a struggle that has always been going on, but which is now being waged by especially dirty means and in the name of an economic rationality disputed not only by progressive economists such as Krugman and Stiglitz, but also by their orthodox colleagues. What makes Peter Mertens relevant, as I see it, besides the sheer number of people buying his book, is his call to action against the falsification of history. He hopes to reawaken the rebel, the Beggar, in the Flemish soul – in the words with which our great writer Louis Paul Boon, born one hundred years ago in March, ended one of his most famous novels, he intends to ‘kick people hard till they get a conscience’. He wants the Flemish to stop playing the victim, a bad habit exploited in recent decades by the extreme right.

Koen Schoors, professor of economics at Ghent University, is one of the highest-profile academic contributors to economic and political debate in our country. He is now working on a book about the crisis, to be published in October. In a televised debate with Peter Mertens, he too advocated a fairer tax system, with lower wage costs and a new wealth tax. He agrees about the need to deal with unemployment, but asks, what kinds of new jobs do we want? Most commentators have pointed to Scandinavia, where 30% of the work force is in the public sector. But Schoors observes that the Scandinavian model also makes it relatively easy to dismiss employees. In Belgium, bold political decisions would be needed to bring that about, because our strong labour unions make dismissal very difficult. About the European Union, Schoors comments, “I disagree with all those who view the euro area as the biggest problem. Greece represents 1.8 percent of the gross European product. Why should that threaten the euro? The real problem is the banking sector. Because we want to protect our banks, we have always said that we will not allow even a single country to go bankrupt, not even Greece. But that is the arrogance of the elite. Greek sovereign debt is owed in large part to Greek banks, but after that, French and German banks have the greatest exposure. Everyone knows by now that Greece will eventually go bankrupt. But by continually proclaiming that no Member State can go bankrupt, the EU creates the illusion that all of them are at risk. This is manifestly untrue; Greece is a special case. The other problem countries – Portugal, Spain, and Italy – can pull themselves out of the mire, but Greece cannot. It has a national debt of 180 percent of GDP. There’s no way it can ever pay it back.” Schoors concludes, “Why should Europe be obliged to save Greece, anyway? Greece will be better off if Europe doesn’t save it. The rescue plan now on the table would only double Greek debt, even though we know that the country can never repay its debt even now. The best thing for Greece would be bankruptcy. That sounds very grim, but in fact it implies a collective debt management arrangement – the kind of second chance you would offer a bankrupt family. The creditors then pay some of the costs. That’s only fair, since for years they had a healthy return on their investment. Another advantage of such an arrangement is that it makes creditors more careful in the future. It is because Greece was allowed to borrow so much money in the first place that the problem reached such proportions.”

### **The right and Europe**

Opposite Peter Mertens we find the intellectuals of the right, equally critical of the European Union and surprised to find themselves in such strange company – although perhaps that is not really so surprising. Wim van Rooy is an erudite,

conservative pundit and essayist, the man behind the collection of essays entitled 'Europa wankelt. De ontvoering van Europa door de EU' (Europe Totters: The Abduction of Europe by the EU). He, his son Sam van Rooy (who works for the research division of the far-right party Vlaams Belang) and Remi Hauman, the co-editors, are notorious Islamophobes. With fitting cynicism, the book was presented on 9 May, which is Europe Day. Besides the father-son Van Rooy team, there was an invited speaker: Nigel Farage, who not so very long ago accused EU president Herman Van Rompuy of being the quiet assassin of European democracy and of Europe's nation-states. Farage also supplied the foreword to the book, in which he calls Belgium a 'failed state'. He closes with the question, "If Mr Van Rompuy cannot ensure the large-scale transfer of taxpayers' money from the North to the South of Belgium, why are we surprised when it does not work for the transfer of taxpayers' money from the countries of Northern Europe to Southern Europe?" Oddly enough, this type of discourse, inspired by Vlaams Belang (and the other successful right-wing Flemish party, the more democratic NVA) is completely absent from the rest of the book. It is unclear to me whether André Van Halewijk, once a strong candidate for most left-wing publisher in Flanders, has published this book because it includes essays by respected writers and political commentators who are not in the conservative camp or simply because he believes that freedom of speech includes giving hate mongers a chance to be heard alongside serious Eurosceptics. For along with Flemish nationalist thinkers, there are also some contributors who are strongly committed to Belgian unity, such as Benno Barnard (who may have nothing at all in common with the others aside from his fear of Islam).

There is also a delightful essay by Slavist and poet Johan de Boose, who starts by explaining what first drew him to that other Europe, which lacked the freedom of the West. He then continues:

"Once that freedom came . . . the people Behind the Wall were welcomed with open arms by the people In Front of the Wall. The politically correct point of view was that the Wall – once a despicable but defensible dividing line between the two options (more or less) of post-fascist imperialist capitalism and socialism – had, in the last analysis, had kept many Europeans to imprisoned in and that the time had come everyone to receive equal treatment. As the irony of history would have it, however, the people Behind the Wall quickly learned that the cliché spoon-fed to them for decades, namely that the West was a monster with ice-cold breath, was true: the chill wind that blew over Eastern Europe from the wealthy West had soon claimed many victims among those who had a different gravitas, a different mode of existence, or a different, overly naive view of life. . . . Utter disorientation. An ideological vacuum. And the phantom pain of an amputated limb: Who are we Westerners supposed to hate now? [A question answered in detail in the last section of this book by Wim van Rooy and company: Islam! – HK] Had we truly won our freedom? And if so, what next? Escaping Europe's third world war and founding our own Schlaraffia [land of milk and honey, HK] has not made us immune to other catastrophes. But perhaps when Europe discovered the black depths of its own soul and the squalor of its own collective unconscious, the trauma was so great that the continent will never again puff up its chest with pride. Europe, once a tender young maiden on the Phoenician coast, is now an old floozy full of self-hatred, and not entirely without reason. Yet that insight is of absolutely no use to us (except philosophically). What other catastrophes, you ask? As a seasoned observer of Eastern Europe, I had hoped that the end of Communist totalitarianism would have a positive impact on the Western world view. But I was disappointed. On the contrary, the Westerners' fondness for those pathetic slobs in the East and the disoriented flailing of their inexperienced democracies soon degenerated into fresh distrust and a new totalitarianism. In a few short years, the poor Eastern Europeans had been demoted from adorable victims to

the new niggers. Sympathy and compassion had transformed into suspicion and hatred. After all, wasn't it obvious that the niggers were migrating to the West in huge packs, stealing jobs from locals wherever they went and spending their free time swiping cars, guns, and virgins?"

See 'Polish plumbers' above. See also Sam van Rooy's disdain in a speech that he gave about Bulgaria and Romania, countries that obviously should never have joined the club, since they are home not only to purportedly Christian criminals but also (can you believe it) to Muslims.

Benno Barnard, who writes nostalgically of the old Danube Monarchy, describes his "fantastical, Habsburg-influenced view of Belgium as a potential model for a united Europe . . . a sloppy, contradictory Europe in a permanent state of irritation, but then again, that's the reality of a polyethnic state." And he continues, "Shouldn't the state borders within the European Union ideally be changed into language borders like the Belgian one, with at least the fields of education and culture falling within the political purview of the language areas? But on the other hand, isn't there a good deal to say for maintaining the current state borders within a united Europe, because each of those borders expresses a cultural and historical reality? Collectively, don't they symbolize the very structure of European diversity? Admirez-vous les uns les autres! the French-speaking Fleming Emile Verhaeren once urged the people of Europe. It is not mere chance that this poet was a Belgian."

Luc Devoldere, editor-in-chief of the Flemish-Dutch cultural magazine *Ons Erfdeel* (Our Heritage), has plenty of concerns about contemporary Europe, but he argues for proceeding cautiously. His contribution ends on a positive note, with a reflection on the European "doubt, irony, and tolerance that make us vulnerable". Devoldere calls on his readers both to respect the national context that makes it possible to achieve solidarity and a willingness to sacrifice and to be more aware of the broader European context in which, for better or for worse, we share a common European fate. Study your European history more carefully, he urges us, and learn as many other languages as possible. His closing words are, "Quarrel with each other. Europe is an ongoing conversation."

If 'Europa wankelt' is an attempt at such a conversation, it is only half successful. The criticisms made by the Eurosceptical contributors (who are in the majority) relate to the economic crisis, intrusive bureaucracy, the dismantling of the nation-state by multiculturalism and neoliberalism and 'an inner propensity for self-destruction'. As noted, there are interesting avenues of thought and well-grounded critiques, wedged between three introductory essays, which mostly spew gall about 'the progressive intellectuals, a general term for the intelligentsia tied to the establishment and propagating a leftist discourse, the group that essentially consists of flunkies of the Europe of the political elites' and even about 'an evolved form of the apparatchik' (Remi Hauman) and three concluding essays that mainly fulminate about the 'Islamisation' of Europe. Wim van Rooij criticises the report 'Living together – Combining diversity and freedom in 21st century Europe', produced at the request of the European Council by a group that included Joschka Fischer, Emma Bonino, Timothy Garton Ash and Javier Solana. Van Rooij writes, "It is a hallucinatory document of a new transnational elite, exuding a mentality that is frivolous, uninformed, vapid, self-satisfied, moronically humanistic and tinged with masochism and the 'white man's burden', because naturally, these European despots believe that the aforementioned intolerance is entirely the fault of the racist and intolerant Europeans, who must display never-ending remorse." This is a fine synopsis of the sentiment underlying right-wing criticism of the European Union: the EU is too elitist; tolerance is elitist. This species of sophistry thrives in many nationalist circles.

## **The political centre and Europe**

Of course, between the two extremes, there is also the broad middle of the political landscape: the centrist parties and the mass movements allied with those parties. Our country has a long tradition of 'pillarisation', with organisations serving specific ideological or ethnic groups, organisations that run in large part on voluntary work but also have substantial professional arms and a great deal of influence on political parties. Their power is now on the wane, partly because of the rise of new initiatives by empowered citizens, but they continue to play a major role in shaping public opinion on certain issues. The ACW, the confederation of Christian trade unions, has an interesting monthly magazine for its intellectual elite, *De gids op maatschappelijk gebied* (The Guide to Social Issues), which frequently includes editorials on European affairs. In the latest issue (April 2012), Chris Serroyen, head of the research arm of ACV (Belgium's largest Christian trade union), takes aim at current European policy. In an article about the EU's failure to reduce poverty, he says, "And don't expect much of a response from Europe. The Europe 2020 strategy, with its ambitious goals for poverty reduction, was a stillborn initiative. Surely you don't believe the European Council will reprimand the member states for laughing off the European poverty objectives? That is not what the Council did last year, and it will not happen in the new European semester either. The only things that still matter to the European Union are rigid budgetary discipline and economic governance. Between 2005 and 2010, Germany saw a 27 percent increase in the number of people at risk of poverty. But you can't possibly think the EU will chastise Germany for that?"

Renaat Hanssens, an advisor to that same research division, adds, "Instead of making still more budgetary rules, what the European Union needs to do most is to update the social narrative of its founding fathers. It can start by acknowledging the failure of neoliberal ideology, which has only exacerbated poverty and inequality and weakened social cohesion. More European integration is necessary, but without a stronger European Parliament and a much greater emphasis on social dialogue between employers and trade unions in the best tradition of Rhine capitalism, the EU will remain dominated by backroom lobbying and the backroom work of the Commission." In closing, Hanssens writes, "It is to be hoped that the Belgian Parliament will soon hold a serious debate on whether the new Fiscal Compact is truly a solution to the debt crisis and an effective way of furthering European integration. The Christian labour movement will use all the influence it can bring to bear to prevent the parliamentary ratification, in its current form, of this pointless symbol of an excessively strict budgetary policy."

One interesting experiment in reflection on our democracy by a group of citizens is the G1000 initiative, launched in 2011. The idea was to bring together 1,000 people from all parts of Belgian society to spend a day debating themes selected in advance by a large group of citizens through online voting. Observers from the European Commission also participated in the discussions, which took place on 11 November in Brussels. They came from the Citizens' Policy Unit, which aims to encourage active citizen participation in the process of European integration. Here are a few quotes from their report: "As European democracies are in crisis the G1000 shows a way forward. . . . One of the most impressive features of the G1000 was the diversity of participants with regard to gender, age, political preferences, and with regard to social, professional, and cultural background. . . . We experienced an overwhelming positive atmosphere among the participants who also expressed a strong belief in their ability to arrive at workable policy recommendations." European cooperation was not explicitly included among the three selected themes – social security, migration, and the financial crisis – but at this stage, the quest for democratic

innovation is a pan-European adventure, and the Belgian initiative could certainly serve to inspire other countries and perhaps even the European institutions. For more information, see <http://www.slideshare.net/G1000org/report-of-the-international-observers-on-the-g1000>.

The G1000 soon gave rise to similar initiatives elsewhere, such as the G500 in the Netherlands. In November 2011 the Belgian financial newspaper *De Tijd* published the following article just prior to the event, which I include here virtually in its entirety, because it is probably a fairly clear statement of what is keeping our country's liberal 'elite' awake at night.

"Aren't all these prophecies of doom making the Belgians nervous?" our editors wondered. So we called fifty opinion leaders, with astonishing results. Whether at work or on holiday, practically every CEO, economist, scientist, scholar, politician, and artist that picked up the phone was immediately willing to make time for our 'G50 of concerned citizens'. Nicolas Saverys, chief executive of a ship owning company, succinctly formulated the general feeling: "It seems as though it is just a matter of time before the next man with a little moustache emerges." Some expressed their concern in more nuanced terms than others, but the basic theme remained the same. Many fear for the future of the European welfare state. The challenges keep growing in complexity and have to be addressed at a global level. Meanwhile, politicians are standing on the sidelines doing nothing. Of course, it is important to be realistic. Today's global politics is characterised by compromise and small steps forward. There is nothing wrong with that. What is frightening is the growing gap between what must happen and what our leaders have the courage to do. But those leaders cannot sell their ideas to the people, who are turning their backs in a deadly mix of distrust, pessimism, and apathy. We need a new grand narrative, many of our G50 told us. And long-term thinking. And political engagement. That is precisely why, however small its scale, an initiative like the G1000 citizen summit is a constructive step. Next week, thousands of Belgians will be asking themselves what should really be keeping us up at night. There is no telling whether the event will lead to practical results, but maybe that does not even matter. The most important thing is to send a signal that we will remain critical and alert, that we will not fall into a poisonous spiral of negativity. That is another of the conclusions of our G50, which is much more than just some Belgian intellectuals venting their concerns. The responses convey a firm belief that defeatism is pointless.

## **Conclusions**

In the meantime, Sarkozy is out, Merkel took a heavy blow in the German state elections and the disaster in Greece (as well as the danger that Spain will leave the euro area) is on the front pages of all the papers. The European narrative is evolving every day, but for the time being, the only enduring mood in Belgium, that most European of countries, is fearful anticipation. We hope that democracy will survive, that it will be renewed from within, that optimism really will prevail over the pessimistic truisms we hear all around us. We hope the EU institutions will send out a clear signal that their objective is a Europe for all citizens and not merely for a tiny elite (and in Belgium that elite has a face: the EU officials and their camp followers, the corporate lobbyists, who live in the peaceful green suburbs surrounding Brussels and the better neighbourhoods of the city, driving land and property prices sky-high because they can afford more expensive housing than the average Belgian).

These changes will take more than glossy brochures and Erasmus programmes. They will demand political courage from all our heads of state, the courage no longer to use Europe as a scapegoat for unpopular measures, but instead to show the citizens that the EU is more than just a playground for the European elite.

Perhaps François Hollande's decision to reduce the salaries of French ministers by 30% will inspire his peers. Yes, it is a symbolic act, but in times of crisis, perhaps symbolic acts are not such a bad idea. Lowering the salaries of EU officials would not only enhance their credibility in the eyes of the locals, but might also help to attract candidates for the European civil service who are motivated more by European idealism than by the prospect of a generous salary. And of course, alongside symbolic acts of that kind, there is also a need for fundamental changes, such as stricter regulation of financial markets and investment, as well as a cohesive European tax system, an issue recently stressed by a number of Belgian politicians and economists. Take Paul De Grauwe, for instance, a professor emeritus at the University of Leuven, now teaching at the London School of Economics. Or consider the words of Bart Staes, a long-time member of the European Parliament for the Flemish Green Party: "This is not my Europe. European leaders are not offering a promising way out of our problems. The only way out is a policy emphasizing a sense of responsibility and better governance and management among all governing and business elites. . . . A green New Deal."

No, the contemporary knows nothing. But he can keep his eyes open and criticize. And above all, he can go on believing in the utopia that Europe once was, in that incomprehensible, impossible Europe where, in spite of everything, we all want to go on living.

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