

Series 'Which Europe?'  
Number 41

## **European Federalists confronted with Themselves**

Towards a real confrontation?

Robert Verschooten  
Chairman ESIC

The author is writing in personal capacity

November 20, 2010

Dedicated to those who favour  
a Dynamic,  
Pluralistic,  
Democratic and Federal Europe

**Europees Studie- en Informatiecentrum (ESIC) vzw**  
(European Study and Information Centre)  
Ryckmansstraat 5, 2020 Antwerpen, Belgium  
e-mail: [esic@telenet.be](mailto:esic@telenet.be)

# **European Federalists confronted with Themselves**

## **Table of contents**

Aim

Introduction

Basic Ideas of European Federalists

Comments on Basic Ideas of European Federalists

Basic Questions at European Federalists

Important Assessments

European federalists seen as a Brand and a Content

Provisional Conclusions

# European Federalists confronted with Themselves

## Aim

This paper (nr 41), titled 'European Federalists confronted with Themselves', paper (nr 42), titled 'European Federalists confront Europe with their Project', and paper (nr 43), titled 'How can European federalists develop their project?' are complementary.

First paper (nr 41) clarifies internal measures, European federalists will have to consider, in order to improve their *modi operandi*, viz. through systematisation, co-operation, and professionalisation.

Second paper (nr 42) points at external factors, viz. context of European integration, assumptions by main actors and ideas formulated by European federalists.

Third paper (nr 43) will highlight some operational recommendations and ideology.

Fourth paper (nr 44) is in preparation and goes about 'European Federalism'. This paper will reflect on recent views regarding European federalism.

All papers are directed at those who have a keen interest in European integration.

Formulation of all papers is open to discussion, thus open to amendment and improvement. A common project at best. Ultimately the federalists, all over Europe, will be aware of common assumptions underlying their efforts.

If joint efforts are limited to a formal and disconnected exercise, it isn't worth being undertaken. The exercise can be called a success if participants effectively transpose co-operation into their organisation and operations.

## Introduction

There are as many European federalist opinions as there are European federalists. This is normal, knowing the number of variable factors in federalism.

Profusion and diversity of ideas are no objection, as long as European federalists remain aware of the basic ideas they share and want to propagate.

Publicists, militants and academics can venture a personal track. Those who choose action operate in team. European federalist campaigns are for like-minded volunteers.

Volunteers can generate great passion. Their main restraints are: limited available time and for all limited useful specific knowledge. Not everyone is an excellent doer, communicator, educationalist or political analyst.

This short paper will not bring about a manual explaining how to undertake action. Here

and there implicit or explicit recommendations can be found. It is no scenario. Just a modest methodical contribution. A starting point.

This paper has a specific form. It will raise many (hopefully pertinent) questions, which European federalists have to ask themselves when engaging in action. Most questions are related to basic European federalist ideology and preconditions to joint action. In this paper most questions will even be neither not nor completely answered.

Most federalists don't even raise these questions. Due to shortage of time or by lack of interest? Action matters, isn't it? Consequences of this attitude are known. Action in spread order. Discordant messages. Campaign objectives failing short most of the time, despite goodwill and perseverance. This high rate of failure can be reduced.

Moralizing and wisecracking is senseless. Though, something can be done about it. Bundling efforts and investing the available limited resources in joint campaigns, can yield a multiplier effect. However, subject to numerous conditions.

## **Basic Ideas of European Federalists**

Following ideas try to clarify assumptions of European federalists. Wording is open to discussion.

1. European federalists call European integration a societal project with specific features.
2. European federalists regard European federalism as the right political system able to materialize their societal project.
3. European federalism can safeguard European Union from war, protectionism, national egocentrism, dominance and totalitarianism.
4. The European Union is a political project. This project is based on a number of specific European values and standards, such as democracy, human rights, a co-operative model, reciprocal solidarity, unity in diversity, a socially corrected free market economy and separation of state and church. Proper institutions will consolidate the values and standards of EU.
5. Checks and balances stand centrestage in European political system.
6. Democratic steering of internal and external public interest bestows European Union greater legitimacy.
7. EU shall not meddle in all policy domains.
8. A federated European Union opens up a promising future to people and society.
9. European federalists express loyalty towards different levels of government in a complementary manner (and-and), not in terms of exclusion (or-or).

10. A 'Europe for citizens' implies a more democratic society in Europe. A higher democratic grade implies greater efficiency, openness and transparency of European institutions. Meaning to people greater participation and ownership.
11. Efficient democratic institutions and public authorities play an important role since facilitating sustained growth and prosperity.
12. National states continue to exist. National states will assume different powers. Hereby principles of subsidiarity and proportionality play an important role at national and regional level, if the latter is constitutionally empowered.
13. European federalists place centrestage interests of people and European public interest.
14. In order to improve democracy, transparency and efficiency of European institutions the principles of responsibility and mutual control will apply.
15. European federalists assume they are capable of spelling out a truly federalist counter-project opposed to a deficient intergovernmental system.
16. European federalists assume they can mobilize adequate political forces in Europe in order to make a joint step forward towards a European federation.
17. European federalists elect constitutionalisation of Europe, but exclude a European centralized superstate.
18. European federalists elect such a system of governance which empowers functional and complementary bottom-up and top-down systems.
19. European federalists elect a political system where people feel bonded with the European project. Ties with European Parliament will be strengthened.
20. Soft power is the cornerstone of current European foreign and safety policy. European federalists don't exclude recourse to hard power as and when European vital interests are at stake. This implies a multifunctional European intervention units and civil assistance groups capable of operating outside of Europe, if needed. Europe will have the ambition to become a giant among other giants of this world.

### **Comments on Basic Ideas of European Federalists**

1. Has overall strategy of European federalists been spelled out in a coherent manner? Is the federalist counter-project workable in a multilayer political system?
2. Have intermediary steps, essential to reach the objectives of European federalists, been identified? Has their feasibility been checked?
3. How can people and European political elite be convinced of beneficial, effective and revivifying features of a federal Europe?

4. Which political dynamics will yield a robust European society? Which political ideologies will confront each other and how will they interact?
5. How will European political mainstream get momentum, enabling a big bang towards a European federation?
6. Which federal Europe will prevent the creation of a centralized European superstate with eurocentric characteristics?
7. When will other political actors consider European federalists credible political partners?
8. How can the European co-operative model compete with more integrated US and Chinese models?

### **Basic questions at European Federalists**

Following questions shall be answered by European federalists. Questionnaire and associated replies are incomplete.

1. Why would nation states give up their control over European integration?  
 What drives European integration?  
 Who steers European integration?  
 How can damaging character of national sovereignty come on the political agenda?
- The Union evolved from a technical and economic co-operation to a political framework.
  - Thanks to transfer of powers to European level, member states recovered a lot of power. Nation states transfer powers by sheer self-interest, surely not on ideological grounds or for federal ambitions (MO).
  - Why do nation states reduce their sovereignty by conceding majority vote? It is a question of credibility of deals, rather than a matter of efficiency or reduction of transactional costs (MO).
  - Thanks to Europe the point of gravity of political decisionmaking shifted from inland to European level. Prime ministers have relatively more leeway when taking decisions at EU level. European level enabled nation states to occupy centrestage in European politics (OR).
  - National governments delegate power to European institutions since these institutions can execute complex functions faster, cheaper and more efficiently and because they can monitor deals. European institutions are able to keep an overview of the playing field (PO).
  - Delegation eases taking of unpopular decisions. Delegation dilutes responsibility for political decisions (PO).

- Member states are amidst a continuous negotiation process. There is no other alternative than to co-operate (SC).

## 2. How can European Union become a democratic alternative to the nation state?

- A truly democratic system can emerge by the existence of choice, debate, controversy and a European demos. Periodical consultation of demos is essential in order to link up people with decisionmaking in Europe.
- Treaty of Lisbon introduces timely consultation of national parliaments on new legislative initiatives. National parliaments can make their objections known.
- The new civic initiative will promote direct participation of people and can help reduce gulf with European level.

## 3. Europe shall be democratic to what extent?

- Absence of European demos can damage democratic perception of the Union. A more uniform demos will help enhance public spirit, overstepping national borders, and easing acceptance of being minorized. The absence of a European identity renders majority decisions often illegitimate (WE).
- EU is for all involved in regulatory functions. Many functions relate to technical and economical issues already transferred at supranational level by member states. Public opinion is generally ignorant about or uninterested in these subjects (MO/MA).
- Europe does not want to oust nation states, but on the contrary helps them to realize very important societal objectives. Themes which move people most, continue to be handled at national level, such as pensions, employment, taxation, healthcare, safety and education.
- In absence of true political debate, at European level, EU can hardly be qualified a democratic political space (OR).
- A central place of EU in political debate will create public spirit vital to a democratic Europe.

## 4. How can European fractions in European Parliament stimulate European demos?

- Serious public debat regarding challenges and possible solutions shall receive due attention in media and shall strengthen people's perception of being involved with Europe.
- European Parliament shows, depending on the theme, a dynamic of changing political alliances. Consensus within political groups increased over time.

5. What is influence of strong economic and social lobbies on decisionmaking?

- Relevance of the global European project is mostly not questioned. Supposed shortcomings are sharply criticized.
- Critical people doubt whether more Europe is the right answer to today's challenges.
- Economic and social lobbies play a determining role when national preferences are defined (MO).
- If economic interests are unclear or negligible, the playing field of national governments grows, enabling them to push forward their opinion (MO).
- The degree of dependence of a member state hinges on cost of non-accord or cost of exclusion (MO). New member states found, despite many concessions, joining EU more profitable than a status quo (OR).

6. Why will people take a pro-European attitude or choose for the idea of a European federation?

- In European politics extremists succeed mobilisation around the identity factor (Dutch and French popular rejection of European constitution), while centre parties try to stop politicization of EU. The former development will stay and can seriously impede further integration of Europe (bottom up legitimacy) (OR).
- Lack of interest of people in EU-politics is not due to the uninteresting nature of European politics, rather due to absence of political debate. As soon as impact of Europe becomes evident, people and policymakers will debate about European policy and will start shaping preferences on European issues.
- European demos will not bud spontaneously. European policymakers can create demos themselves by placing EU political debate centrestage. However there is a limit as how far European issues can be politicized. European powers are no evident subjects for 'passionate' debate. Most hot topics remain national.
- Creation of a European demos by enhanced political debate cannot occur in the void. EU will remain boring as long as political debate will not be geared more explicitly at the nature of European integration and at generated policies. People have to be convinced European politics go about very concrete issues (OR).
- According to Habermas institutions can generate an affectionate bond with people living in that institutional system. The concept of constitutional patriotism is based on common loyalty towards a given set of political values laid down in a constitution. Such post-modern democracy is embedded in common values but acknowledges differences in culture (OR).

7. Which core ideas completed the peaceproject at the start of Europe after WWII?

Do preferences at time of creation of EU still correspond to current preferences?

- The starting point was the peace idea, viz. no more war among European countries.

Later adds were: prosperity for everybody, transnational solidarity, struggle against poverty and exclusion, durable environment, public interest, consumer protection, competition policy and four basic liberties of the internal market

- Europe can never overrule interests of major member states. Member states' preferences change through time. This is true for people too, though in a less conscious manner.

#### 8. Which public values and public interests enforce European federalists' project?

Are political values and standards still considered important by people?

Are political values and standards still considered part of our identity?

- European values and standards are: democracy, rule of law, human rights, gender equality, separation of state and church, and a socially corrected market economy.
- European integration and internationalization have accrued the number of public values and standards: European public interest, transnational loyalty, European public spirit and reciprocal transnational solidarity.
- Values, standards and ideas shape action and even our identity. Ideas are capable of keeping a complex process together. It is like a mental chart guiding policymakers in politics. Question is not whether interests or values are decisive, but rather the way how the so-called 'self-interest' is socially construed (OR).

#### 9. Why is a federal Europe such a difficult objective?

Is ideology of European federalists plain enough?

Are virtues of European federalism understood?

- Various enlargements, with a greater heterogeneity of preferences by member states, increased opportunities for a standstill.
- European treaties are very detailed. Adjustments by unanimity are extremely difficult to achieve. Federal states, with shorter constitutions, seldom need to adjust.
- A novel trend can be acknowledged whereby national referenda are held to ratify new European treaties.
- Neo-federalists define Europe already as a kind of federation. Although EU is not yet a federal system, it does so in the field of legislative matters (OR).
- The scope of powers of 'normal' federal states is greater than for EU, since including distributive functions (OR).
- Member states with a tradition of centralization have great difficulty to acknowledge virtues of European federalism.

10. Can an economic policy for Europe contribute to maintain prosperity in Europe?

- Economic governance for Europe precedes economic government for Europe, which implements joint macro-economic guidelines. Multiplier effect and scaling up are proper policy tools in the internal market. Internal cohesion is improved and EU shielded from exclusion in a globalized world.
- A common economic governance commands nuance as to avoid adverse effects on weaker member states (viz. consequences of a straightforward monetary policy in a situation of asymmetric growth between nordic and eastern or southern member states). See interest rate, exchange rate and anti-inflation policy by eurozone.

11. Will a Common External and Safety Policy better safeguard European external interests?

Will it foster worldwide EU-prestige, as well as public awareness or public involvement?

- Speaking with one voice to the exterior proved repeatedly difficult or impossible. Consequences were adverse to the image and the interests of EU as an equal international partner. Big international actors apply the divide and rule game.
- A European External Action Service will possibly facilitate a stepwise build-up of a coherent common external policy.
- People expect Europe's external protection. How to proceed is not people's concern. European population will almost automatically approve protection of European common interests, as this meets their vague expectations. This will enhance public involvement, self-confidence and European civil spirit.

## **Important assessments**

Sometimes role of public opinion, (European) political parties, media and education is lost out of sight or is underestimated.

### **Public opinion in Europe**

- There is not just one European, rather a national, regional or local public opinion.
- European public opinion will bud as soon as European political parties initiate border crossing political and public debate on all important European issues.
- Public opinion in Europe lives a paradox. On the one hand people do have high expectations, even in areas where EU is not competent. On the other hand public opinion displays indifference, criticism (some times hostility) and blatant ignorance.
- In spite of above paradox public in Europe shall increasingly be involved in European issues.

## **European political parties**

- People in Europe shall start viewing European political parties as advocates of their interests.
- European political parties shall start giving precedence to European public interest and assess interest of people higher than that of limited national interests.
- In absence of true European political parties no fair, transparent and innovative European policy can be conducted. The other option is a shortsighted, limitative and incoherent intergovernmental governance of Europe.

## **Media in Europe**

- More than 80 percent of national/regional legislation is of European origin. As a consequence Europe is no longer 'abroad' but 'inland'.
- Media shall give reporting on Europe centrestage attention.
- Media will take their pedagogic function at heart, and will upgrade their European newsdesk (information, interpretation, refutation of malicious prejudices, critical attitude towards 'doubtful' developments).
- Media will adopt a critical/positive attitude, associated with positive proposals. Media will explain options proposed by European political parties, by European institutions, by pressure groups and civil society.

## **Education**

- A neutral attitude in education towards current political developments hinders schools to extend objective information to pupils on European integration.
- Individual initiatives by teachers and lecturers cannot generate a overall positive attitude towards the European project. These initiatives will not be discontinued, but a large scale joint programme will make the difference.
- European integration can hardly to explained in too short a time. Unpreparedness of teachers and lecturers, prejudice against the European project, holding on to an outdated reference framework of values, outspoken criticism or hostility continue to prevail in schools or colleges. Too many teachers or lecturers can even not bring about reasonable arguments against prejudices.
- A few precautions make a neutral interpretation of the European project possible. European project leaves much room to diversity and to different preferences. So teachers and lecturers can keep their freedom (as long as objectivity is upheld).

## European federalists seen as a Brand and a Content

What stages have European federalists to pass through in order to gradually develop their identity? This is called branding. Here identity branding matters.

1. Is there an overarching concept behind each activity of European federalists?
2. Does each communication by European federalists contain a plain/relevant message?
3. Without concept and recognizable message no branding can take place.
4. Without coherent vision on communication, time, resources and HR are wasted.
5. Without branding or identity any campaign is doomed to mediocrity .

A strong brand/identity serves one goal and or an endgoal (finalité).  
A strong brand/identity creates value.

European federalists need a strong wake-up call in order to create a new brand/identity and formulate a new communication model.

European federalists will, in times of change and uncertainty, offer an inspiring vision. The project will imply the prospect of societal progress. If solidarity is at stake, the prospect of political effect shall be present. Many outdated assumptions will have to be replaced by new assumptions which do conform to current European and international context.

Though European federalists' ideology may sound utopic or does embrace long-term objectives, their European political and societal project can generate political mobilization. Today, the European Union is the major driving force behind societal innovation in Europe.

A negative attitude or pessimism doesn't fit a positive message. Justified critic together with solution oriented proposals will sustain reputation and credibility of European federalists.

Correct perception of European federalists deserves proper attention. European federalists shall be known as not endangering existence of nation states, but will strive for a better, more effective, equitable and decentralized Europe.

Good examples of European achievements can neutralize prevailing misrepresentation, some time on purpose, of the European project. European federalists will find out who feeds these misrepresentations. These critics will be a priority target group for European federalists.

A second priority group are national policymakers who decide on Europe. A third group are members of European Parliament and European public servants. A fourth priority group are teachers and pupils.

European federalists will differentiate communication to groups or individuals in order to meet type of information demanded or specific interest shown by addressees. As opportunity presents itself, misrepresentations about Europe will be refuted.

European federalists will feed dissatisfaction about missed opportunities (at least reprimand those who caused missed opportunities) and will enhance a positive/critical attitude of people towards the European project .

Opinionmakers will be persuaded European federalists are right. Opinionmakers will be told about harmful effects of national reflexes of retraction, such as protectionism, short-term thinking and unilateral priority to national or particular interests.

An important factor to European federalists is the steady increase of its supporters. European federalists must know exactly who their political friends are and induce them to network and co-operate as much as possible. Reciprocal respect will grow stepwise, as well as willingness to listen at and co-operate. These political friends will mainly be chosen for their capability, their networking capacities and their ideological affinity.

Virtual democracy can, through social networking, amplify influence of people or towards people. Significant target groups will be convinced of rightness of European federalists' message. This can induce national leaders to move in European federalists' direction.

European federalists will stick to their basic strengths. Significant parts of public opinion will be made clear where European federalists differ from other ideological groups. The active part of public opinion wants short and readymade information, which helps shaping an opinion right away.

Today many people stay clear of sociopolitical groups. These people have changing political preferences. Emotions are present everywhere. This requires special attention.

'Be better unefficient together, than be efficient at your own'. This opinion has to be put aside according to Louis Verbeke, chair of Vlerick Management School, referring to Belgian institutional reform. At European level Verbeke's opinion applies as well. Those who support the opinion that joint inefficiency is better, shun transparency and objectivity. European federalists will have to forcibly refute this opinion and replace it by: take joint action where needed, on condition of added value thanks to Europe and subject to the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

The reassuring and optimistic message of a stronger Europe overcoming whatever crisis or challenge cannot satisfy European federalists. This type of message does go by the content of getting stronger (as if any adaptation would mean an improvement and be applicable for ever), as well as how to enable the Union to undertake steps on a continuous basis (flexible adaptation process).

European federalists will have to convince public opinion that 'if Europa does well, nation states will largely benefit from it too'.

## **Provisional conclusions**

European federalists constitute a movement of militants and volunteers. The potential of spontaneous action is great. The spirit of local groups depends on the capabilities of local leaders. Need to co-ordinate joint action in the whole of Europe, is enormous.

There is a big difference between local action, with its own agenda and its own themes on the one hand and co-operation of local sections within a larger, coherent and semi-continuous campaign on the other. The former passes by almost unnoticed. The latter has more potential to be remembered as a true political campaign.

A campaign means an intensive mobilization of a large number of volunteers. It requires more resources, co-ordination and participation of a larger number of individuals, external groups or instances willing to co-operate with European federalists.

A campaign means a mobilization on well-defined objectives. A limited message, clearly defined target audience(s), striving for promotion of general support/goodwill/adherence and/or prestige/influence/recognition regarding content of the federalist message.

Strategy means on the one hand formulation of long term and global objectives and selection of best instruments to reach these objectives. Strategy is not an operational document. It needs translation into part-strategies, policy plans and ultimately action (BI).

Without strategy European federalists cannot really act, but will rather react. Federalists not knowing their objectives, cannot pursue a pro-active plan (BI). European federalists will beacon in advance their future path.

Antoine de Saint Exupéry said: 'An objective without a plan is just a wish'. A daring and coherent plan is the only reasonable answer to an ambitious objective. European federalists shall undertake the apparently impossible.

European federalists will not forget: (1) European federalist ideology is failing completely outside the scope of reference of the man in the street (as well as of most policymakers), (2) European project still doesn't cover adequately people's concerns, and (3) institutional answers alone will not increase attractiveness of European politics for the public.

As soon as European federalists reach critical mass they can start influencing political agenda. Whether European federalists will aspire to become a political party has been rejected in the past. Today the answer will probably be negative again.

The aspiration to become a significant political movement is a tremendous assignment to European federalists. This attempt can be successful under a number of stringent conditions. The number of active, dedicated and capable collaborators has to grow rapidly. So are specialists in various disciplines needed for political action. The volunteers will consist of doers and thinkers.

Media, politicians and opinionmakers have to notice, take into account and find European federalists interesting. The former shall be able to endorse the larger part of the message, because this message will look like an evidence. The message will be plain, focussed, realistic, innovative, relevant and future-oriented.

This message will be backed by a coherent ideology and a strategy which is accepted by a majority of European federalists in Europe. The European federalists need a joint and inspiring manifesto, as a basis for joint action.

This paper is but one among many other attempts to bring about an explicit ideology and a strategy for European federalists. It is never too late to formulate such an ideology and strategy.

European federalists shall do it together, better now than later.

## Quotations

**A number of quotations** were taken from the book 'Theorie van de Europese integratie' (translated: 'Theory of European Integration', by professor Jan Orbie, PhD, University of Ghent, Acco Leuven, 2009, 217 pages.

Correlation between abbreviated names and actual ones: MA: Majone; MI: Milward; MO: Moravcsik; MR: Marvilles Rojo; OR: Orbie, RO: Rosamond; WE: Weiler.

## About the author

**Robert Verschooten** (1939)

Masters in business, transport and consular sciences (RHSA) (1960-1961).

Programme of business management (IPO) (1975).

Was active in logistics, sales, procurement, public relations, environmental matters  
European federalist since 1956.

Plays an active role in 'Europees Studie- en Informatiecentrum (ESIC), a non profit association in Antwerp, created 1963, as director (since 1977) and chairman (1996)

Editor of ESIC Nieuwsbrief, Welk Europa? (c) and website ([www.europadebat.be](http://www.europadebat.be)) (c)

Initiator of Café-Europa (c) and annual cycle on 'Federalism, Democracy, Europe'(c)

Lecturer on European themes and organiser of training sessions

This paper is also **available in Dutch**: 'Europese Federalisten confronteren Europa met hun project', 2010. Can be found in: [www.europadebat.be](http://www.europadebat.be) under ESIC/publicaties.