FROM MY BOOKSHELF 29.06.2021 | Marius Müller-Hennig

The future of Europe is here

Even though there is much to criticise about the EU, Geert Mak's 'The Dream of Europe', shows that we have come a long way

The European Union is often described as being elitist, with a self-referential discourse that only Brussels insiders can understand. The Conference on the Future of Europe, aims to change this perception by involving more European citizens in the discussion on what is happening. Whether this can succeed, especially during a pandemic, is unclear. But critical issues regarding the future of Europe and the European Union have not yet been decided and the conference provides a good occasion to open the debate.

What are the key issues? What should we – or do we have to – discuss? The list is long and involved, with countless individual topics that are covered in political science literature and European law. The maze of treaties, articles, laws, plans and strategies often obscures not only the big picture but also everyday reality – the long evolution of the European peace and integration project and the particularly human aspect of the abstract notion of 'integration'. Dutch journalist Geert Mak treats both topics in his latest book, *The Dream of Europe*.

A travel through time and space

With impressive ease and simplicity, Mak explains and classifies the major developments and crises in European integration of the past two decades – both systemically and in their personal and mundane dimensions. It starts with the – perhaps naive – euphoria of the turn of the millennium (which was more concerned about the much-trumpeted 'millennium bug' than the EU's political or economic future). It continues with the '9/11' terror attack in 2001, the EU's largest expansion in 2004, the financial and economic crisis of 2008, as well as the 'Euromaidan' protests in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea the following year, the refugee crisis, upheavals in the trans-Atlantic relationship during the Trump Presidency and ends with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mak's personal experiences and impressions of all the nooks and crannies he visited in Europe, deftly rendered with interlocutors' stories make the more than 500 pages of *The Dream of Europe* worth reading.

The Dream of Europe starts in Norway, showing that Mak's Europe isn't defined by the EU's current borders, which he impressively and depressingly examines in a chapter on the refugee crisis.

If there is anything one could criticise the author for, it is perhaps that he did not travel more and start his project earlier, in the 1980s or 1990s. But knowing the background of the book, this criticism is superfluous since *The Dream of Europe* is the direct continuation of a collection of Mak's travel reports dating from 1999. It was during this time that Mak was a correspondent for the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad, for which he travelled the continent on the eve of the millennium and wrote regular columns, which were then published in the form of a book, *In Europe*, in 2004. Mak's current book follows in his own footsteps and seeks out people he had interviewed 20 years earlier.

It is interesting to note that both books are not restricted to the European Union. *The Dream of Europe* starts in Norway, showing that Mak's Europe isn't defined by the EU's current borders, which he impressively and depressingly examines in a chapter on the refugee crisis.

Is Europe constricted to the European Union?

Mak pays a great deal of attention to the non-EU part of the continent. In 2004, he made a striking comment about the EU borders: 'Huntington's line may seem convincing at a glance, but the reality is much more jagged, much more ruled by emotions of the day, much more, too, by recent experiences'. Keeping this in mind, it is a bit surprising that Mak doesn't examine Turkey as much this time as he did in *In Europe,* especially since heeven went as far as to publish a separateslim volume, *The Bridge: A Journey between Occident and Orient*, in 2007.

One sentence that struck me from *The Bridge* hints to what might be missing in *The Dream of Europe*: 'To the countries bordering the Black Sea, Istanbul has once again become 'the City', [...]; if Turkey ever joins the European Union, it might easily become a new Byzantium, 'the metropolis' of southeastern Europe and the Near East'. Instead of mentioning the great expectation from 2007 in *The Dream of Europe,*

Mak discusses Turkey's role in the refugee crisis and President Erdogan's policies. It is a shame not to be able to join Mak in a conversation about our expectations of Europe with the 'sole man', the 'bookseller' or the 'old Spanish couple' at the Galata Bridge 20 years later.

But what do all these small and big stories about Europe have to do with the Conference on the Future of Europe and its focus on reforming the EU and its structures?

The future of Europe, however, is not decided in the EU alone.

This, in fact, is the first of two important points to realise when reading Mak: in the very title of the conference, but also in many other current processes and narratives, one must be careful not to become part of a new exclusive project. A project that increasingly seems to claim to speak for 'Europe' as a whole, when it is actually about the European Union in its current composition. Because let's be honest: the Conference on the future of Europe, just like strategic autonomy or European sovereignty, is first and foremost only about the European Union. The future of Europe, however, is not decided in the EU alone.

A united Europe

The more important insight to be gained from reading *The Dream of Europe* is entirely positive. With respect to the Conference on Europe's Future, this past April, the leader of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats parliamentary group in the European Union, Iratxe García Pérez wrote in the IPS Journal: 'Our debate cannot be limited to the cosmopolitan elites or to the capitals. We must also give a prominent role to young people'. Readers of Mak's latest book who follow his path to European capitals and provinces will notice that, perhaps without realising it that we have already come a long way.

As Mak makes very clear, it is no longer just elites who are debating, speaking and thinking about the EU and Europe. 'When I travelled around the continent in 1999, it was almost impossible to speak of a Europe-wide public debate. European news was marginal and European engagement minimal. Twenty years later, Europe was on the front pages every day; we followed the Greek, British, German and Italian elections as if they were being held in our own country; and whether I was in Zürich, Brussels, Stavanger, Vienna, Amsterdam or Berlin, people were discussing the same subjects, and the public had the same questions and

the same worries. Something that in 1999 people talked of in theoretical terms was very slowly becoming a reality because of the internet: a European ‘coffee house’, featuring a permanent and open European debate’.

This assessment by a clever and sensitive observer like Geert Mak should encourage all those who might otherwise be feeling a bit disappointed by the Conference on the Future of Europe.



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