Each of the four common visions of “Europe in the World” discussed earlier on the basis of FP7-SHS EuroBroadMap results has specific advantages but also several shortcomings for the future of the European Union. None of them, in our opinion, provides a sustainable future for the institutional development of the EU. For this reason, we have tried to elaborate a fifth vision which is based on a more pro-active scenario for the EU than on evidence-based results. This vision of Europe as (just) the European Union is certainly not the most popular in the political debate. In exactly the same way as the four visions of “Europe in the World” were proposed by ESPON in 2007, it is just introduced here as food for thought and stimulation for debate1. And of course it does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Commission nor the EU Member States.

Hypothesis: “Europe” as a political obstacle to the European Union

When one examines the psychological constraints on scientific progress, we come to the conclusion that the development of scientific knowledge is a matter of overcoming obstacles. And it is not so much a matter of external obstacles, such as the complex or transient nature of phenomena, nor the limitations of the human mind, but rather within the act of knowing itself that we encounter necessary functional difficulties, demonstrated by hesitation, doubt, and slowness in accepting new knowledge. It is at this level that we identify causes of this stagnation or even regression, i.e. causes of inertia we call epistemological obstacles.


The four visions of Europe as (1) a world economic power, (2) a continent with borders, (3) a normative soft power and (4) an attractive cluster of nodes in global networks seem to be complementary. But they are, in fact, contradictory, because they require different definitions of the geographical area called “Europe” and different strategic choices concerning political priorities. We assume that the contradiction can only be solved if we decide to give up the references to a mythical notion of Europe and replace it by a secular concept of the European Union. In this case, the problem is no longer a question of identity or of so-called “civilization”, but a question of strategy and political choice to be debated by citizens and their political representatives.

In scientific terms, we consider that “Europe” is an epistemological obstacle to the understanding of the European Union. In political terms, we could equally well say that “Europe” is a political obstacle, because it is simultaneously used very frequently in political debate and never clarified, which introduces internal ambiguities and external perceptions of double standards.

The question of enlargement (fixation of final borders, adhesion of Turkey, attitude toward the Arab revolutions, partnership with Russia and the USA, priorities of neighbourhood policy towards the east and south, etc.) is clearly at stake here. But also at stake is the attitude of the most powerful Member States (Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Spain, Poland, etc.), which more and more are subject to doubts about the chance of maintaining a common win-win strategy at the EU level: the trend for these countries could be to adopt selfish strategies under the assumption that the world economic crisis has introduced a zero-sum game with winners and losers. Therefore, we suggest exploring different strategic paths for the future of the European Union which are derived from the same common assumption that “Europe” is not a relevant concept and that only the European Union has to be considered in the debate.

These political options take the form of fictive scenarios which are presented separately here but which can eventually be combined to some degree. The different political options and scenarios we present are not based on evidence as were the four previous visions. They should therefore be considered mainly as prospective remarks to be validated by further researches and analysis. The most important point to consider is not the reality or probability of each of these scenarios, but the fact that they are all based on the existence of a “secularized European Union” not constrained by the myth of a “forever-existing-Europe”.

"EUROPE" AS AN OBSTACLE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

THE WEST SCENARIO or the contraction of the EU towards a “giant Switzerland”

This baseline scenario assumes that the most powerful Member States of the EU, mainly located in the north-western area, will more and more be tempted by strategies for the defence of their national interests, and will eventually turn against the interests of the other members of the EU. This assumption is consistent with many recent decisions of these countries, for example in the field of energy (bilateral gas contracts with Russia or Algeria without EU coordination, nuclear development or stopping nuclear development, etc.), but also in finance (the adoption of or refusal to adopt regulation of hedge funds), trade (promotion of national firms in the negotiation of contracts with China, etc.) and diplomacy or geopolitics (separate action towards the Arab revolutions). The results from EuroBroadMap on the attractiveness of EU countries for students located abroad and on migrants’ external perception of the EU support this scenario as they demonstrate that there is currently no unified perception of EU countries and cities. The fact that the Schengen area does not cover all EU Member States, and that it involves non-EU countries, is in line with a scenario where each country decides on a tailor-made area of cooperation. The same is true for the Euro zone, including the proposal to exclude some states and eventually to split it into different parts, and is also shown by the fact that permanent members of the UN Security Council (France and the UK) refuse to share their seats with the EU. In this scenario, only the common trade policy would be likely to remain as a common umbrella for the current 27 EU members, precisely because it ensures that all Member States (including Germany) have the same power towards external countries. As a result, the EU would become a pure economic union, sharing nothing but a common trade policy and eventually money, after the exclusion of the weakest partners from the Euro zone. Something like a giant Switzerland² …

THE NORTH SCENARIO or the strategic alliance of old industrial countries

On the basis of our analysis of voting at the UNGA, we propose another scenario of an increasing political and economic alliance of old industrialized countries from the “North” against emerging economies from the “South”. We have indeed clearly observed a consolidation of the political attitudes of EU countries, which are more and more sharing a common political attitude at the UNGA, especially on the question of “values”, and also of economic models (defence of free trade) with some important differences (like climate change). In this scenario, the limits of the European Union will clearly remain bounded to the south by the Mediterranean Sea, where students’ mental maps fit precisely with the current political limits of alliance at the UNGA. The situation is less clear towards the East, where membership of Turkey is not really accepted by all Member States despite the fact that the country has all the characteristics for membership to the Northern group, such as participation in NATO, common voting at the UNGA, and strong economic integration with EU economies. In the case of Russia, the situation is clearer, and the Northern alliance is clearly a way to defend the eastern part of the EU against possible threats from this country. The recent events related to the Arab Spring, in particular in Syria, confirm the geopolitical opposition between the EU and the USA on the one hand and China and Russia on the other hand. The problem with this scenario is the fact that it does not really fit with the functional reality of trade and air flows; these indicate that the world is divided between an integrated area including the EU, Africa and Russia and a Pacific integrated area including Northern America and Eastern Asia. This scenario is also in contradiction with the existence of institutions like the Council of Europe, and it certainly underestimates the importance of functional links between Central and Eastern Europe.

EUROPE" AS AN OBSTACLE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

THE EAST SCENARIO or the dream of a great continent from the Atlantic to the Urals

This scenario fits nicely with students’ mental maps of the world in which Europe is a continent, clearly separated from Africa, Asia or the Americas. Textbooks also support this traditional vision, even if the inclusion of the western part of Russia is not systematic. Moreover, we have noticed in our survey that only very few Russian students use the geopolitical category of “Eurasia” which is implicit in this vision. They are more likely to support the idea of a partnership between Russia (and the former republics of the USSR) and the European Union, considered as a political entity.

Such a “continental” scenario is in some ways supported by our research on the evolution of votes at the UNGA, but again not really by the functional analysis of trade and air flows. Indeed, it clearly appears that the common area of the EU’s trading influence is split into two parts: one eastern part led by Germany and Italy which is more oriented towards the East (Russia, Asia and the Middle East); and one western part led by France, the UK and Spain, more oriented towards the South (Africa) and the West (Northern and Southern America).

On a local scale, this scenario of a greater Europe could be supported by the new Member States of East-Central Europe which are directly interested in the development of cross-border relationships with Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, for which they have a comparative advantage and which are considered as attractive destinations (that is not the case in the rest of the world). “Europe” is clearly used as an argument by a responsible politician from one of these countries who claims that neighbourhood policy should be more focused on the East than on the South because “The European Union has European neighbours in the East, whereas to the South, there are just neighbours of Europe”3. But this scenario would probably not be supported by the countries of southern and western Europe which are more interested in the development of exchanges across the Mediterranean Sea or across the Atlantic Ocean.

THE SOUTH SCENARIO or the building of an integrated Euro-African region.

This scenario of a North-South partnership is certainly the least likely to happen, at least in the short term. Despite (or because of?) the development of the Arab revolutions, the fear of migrations from South to North across the Mediterranean has been reinforced, and a political movement in favour of the closure of external borders seems to be more and more powerful in the majority of EU countries.

The results from EuroBroadMap confirm the difficulty in overcoming the mental barrier that is certainly formed by the Mediterranean Sea and is considered to be the result of nature (a continent with geographical limits) or culture (the historical limits of civilization) as regularly taught in textbooks inside and outside the European Union. At the same time, our analysis of undergraduate students’ visions indicates that the EU is still importantly attractive to qualified workers and elites located in Arab countries and sub-Saharan Africa and also in Southern America. But an analysis of migrants’ visions confirms that these flows have begun to move towards countries more open to migration like Northern America, Southern Africa and Australia.

The strong economic and demographic complementarities between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea will have to be considered in the future as well as the current integration of trade and migratory flows. In the long term, the limitation of mobility between north and south could hamper the attractiveness of the European Union and limit its demographic and economic growth4.

More generally, the EU immigration policy appears unfair and cynical, as it proposes to favour the brain drain of highly qualified migrants without any compensation for the countries of origin which are losing human capital. At the same time, the external perception of the EU is adversely affected by the regular death of migrants along its external borders5.

Conclusion

“A bad plan is better than none at all”. (Frank Marshall, US Chess Champion from 1909–1936)

Our mission as researchers is not to display our preferences between these scenarios, but simply to underline that the citizens of the European Union could better decide on their future if they were aware of the different possible paths. The European Union needs a broader perspective on its position in the world, and it should elaborate roadmaps for a sustainable future. Our firm conclusion is that such enlargement of perspective implies a dramatic change of the current mental maps of EU citizens, which will not be possible without a kind of farewell to their fuzzy and contradictory notions of Europe.

3 Declaration of R. Sikorsky, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, 26th of May 2008 in Brussels (GAERC) during the presentation of the Eastern Partnership Initiative.


“Russian students see the limits of Europe in a fairly traditional way. This vision is determined by socialisation at school and at institutions of higher education. In their opinion, Europe is clearly separated from North Africa by the Mediterranean, and also has relatively well-defined boundaries to the West, including the UK and Ireland. As regards the Eastern boundary, many students draw it as they learnt at school, along the Urals, although not all students can define the correct location of these mountains on the map. […] The Eastern border of Europe appears on mental maps as a large band featuring a gradual transition from “Europe” to “Asia”. In the minds of the respondents, the composition of this band depends on the place in the world of Russia itself. If respondents consider their native country to be part of Europe, they either draw its conventional Eastern border along the Urals or extend its limits to the entire Russian territory, up to the Pacific coast.”