

NON-FICTION

Add to my list

Europa28: Writing by Women on the Future of Europe

Essays on the EU's future deliver warnings on the dream of becoming a beacon for the world



Julia Rabinowich, who warns that the idea of a common European identity is 'beautiful ...but delusory' © Alamy

In 1996, shortly before the 40th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome which gave birth to the European Economic Community, the British historian Tony Judt published a widely discussed essay entitled “[Europe: The Grand Illusion](#)”.

The illusion, Judt wrote, was to believe that “chanting ‘Europa’ like a mantra” could be a solution to the continent’s problems rather than an “impediment to recognising them”. [EU leaders](#) were taking the achievements of the union, which succeeded the EEC, for granted, he thought. Yet they faced long-term [challenges](#), notably an ageing population and generous welfare states designed for an earlier era of steady growth combined with a relatively young labour force.

And while western European states were planning monetary union, they were at the same time extending the hand of friendship to the newly liberated countries of the former Soviet bloc. But, as Judt pointed out, the goal of “ever closer union” among existing member states was not obviously compatible with the desire for eastward expansion.

Read in the midst of a pandemic that, as French president [Emmanuel Macron](#) told the FT in April, threatens to undermine the “European idea” by aggravating tensions that previous crises had already laid bare, Judt’s jeremiad looks remarkably prescient. It also provides a useful frame in which to consider *Europa28*, a collection of essays and short fiction on “the future of Europe” conceived and written before Covid-19 struck as part of a Hay Festival project.

In truth, some of the pieces here do little more than chant Judt’s “mantra” (one of them is entitled, with unwitting accuracy, “My Dream for Europe”). Others, though, restate with considerable power the predicament he described — one that two subsequent decades of rolling crises (think of the botched treaty on an European constitution in 2004, turmoil in the eurozone and Brexit, not to mention the exacting test now being applied to the notion of EU [“solidarity”](#)) have done little to ease.

In her introduction to *Europa28*, the British writer Laura Bates says the collection, written entirely by women and featuring contributions from all 27 EU member states (plus the UK), “dare[s] us to move away from a hard and dry consideration of economic factors . . . and to think instead as people”. The idea here, Bates writes, is to “encourage us to look at Europe with a fresh perspective” — to look beyond “numbers and currency and market movements” and beyond the jumble of institutions (European Commission, European Central Bank, European Court of Justice etc) that for many is all that “Europe” as a political project amounts to, or could ever amount to.



One of the best pieces in the book, by Julya Rabinowich from Austria, warns against pious invocations of a common European identity. “The idea is beautiful,” she writes. “But also delusory.” EU leaders frequently insist that the bloc is a community of values, as well as a single market. But, as Rabinowich points out, such reminders are



empty so long as Brussels stands by while [Viktor Orban](#) of Hungary dismantles press freedom and the rule of law.

The anxiety that the promise of accession for eastern European states might have curdled is shared by the Czech writer Apolena Rychlíková. She notes that 16

years after her country joined the EU, following a referendum in which 70 per cent voted in favour, there is “growing mistrust” in the European project. A “new iron curtain” has fallen across Europe.

As well as warning of east-west tension to come, Judt despaired of the EU’s failure to act collectively in military and foreign affairs. And again, here little has changed in the intervening 25 years. What Germany’s Yvonne Hofstetter calls “Europe’s global strategic role” remains a will o’ the wisp. She argues that Europe has failed to become a “major hegemonic power”, or at least a counterweight to the duelling superpowers in Washington and Beijing, in part because it has yet to tell a “coherent narrative about itself”.

But, as Judt pointed out, doing so is easier said than done. For one thing, it requires thinking deeply about Europe's relationship to what he termed its "Byzantine" periphery.

Without such hard thought, urged in her essay by the Franco-Moroccan writer [Leila Slimani](#), Europe's image of itself as a "lighthouse for the world" will always be, as Judt feared, a grand illusion.

Europa28: Writing by Women on the Future of Europe, edited by Sophie Hughes and Sarah Cleave, *Comma Press*, RRP£12.99, 200 pages

Jonathan Derbyshire is the FT's acting deputy world news editor

Join our online book group on Facebook at [FT Books Café](#). Listen to our podcast, [Culture Call](#), where FT editors and special guests discuss life and art in the time of coronavirus. Subscribe on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), or wherever you listen.