

A European Vocation

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Fifteen years after Portugal joined what was at the time the EEC it is clear that this choice was one of the most important decisions taken by Portuguese political leaders in this century.

Portugal entered the European project with the aim of consolidating democracy and development in the country, while reconciling itself with its geopolitical roots. After a long authoritarian regime that suspended democratic structures already in force from the second decade of the nineteenth century, and a phase in which the State was reshaped following the 1974 Revolution, a new generation of Portuguese politicians quickly expressed their agreement with the institutional project that in western Europe was created following the Second World War.

Having spent a long time with its back turned to the continent of Europe, and not having been quick enough to interpret the historic destiny of its colonial period, Portugal let itself be left on the fringe of the European family and fell into a position that placed it politically and economically on the periphery, further aggravated by its geographic location.

Joining the European project therefore reflected a solid determination to ensure that the country would return to its historical and cultural origins and to its undeniable European vocation. But this move also meant that in this project for integrating the continent Portugal could contribute the rich heritage gleaned from the country's long experience of historic relations with other parts of the world and, in this way, add to the diversity of the project.

Portugal in 2000 is a country very different to the one that on 1 January 1986 began its involvement in the Community institutions. The modern country we see today – where the economy, infrastructure and, above all, attitudes, have all been changed – is the result of the positive shock that forced it to change radically the national way of life and the way in which the country was organised, as well as to understand the advantage of working to build up an ever more solidly based common process, now accepted as a specific model for civilisation.

The European Union had a significant impact on Portugal's economic and social fabric and on the modernisation of public administration, introducing a more studied culture and growing harmonisation based on quality standards. The effect of regional financial aid has been felt in sectors as important as road infrastructure, the environment, health, education, and staff training in many different fields.

But today Portugal no longer interprets its presence in the Community institutions only as a source of resources, although this is still essential for reducing the gap between Portugal and the European average in terms of wealth and development.

The Portuguese philosophy underlying the approach to European issues is now far more active and participative, based on a genuine collective interest in deepening integration with its partners, adding strength to common institutions and collaborating in defining a European position in the major strategic challenges faced by the Union.

Portugal is present in all areas where more integration has been achieved, from the Single Currency to the Western European Union, and including the Schengen Agreement. The country has shown that is ready to share fully all the major political options outlined for the European Union of the future.

By way of example, Portugal is playing its part in strengthening the Union's foreign involvement in military operations in areas of conflict management. Without jeopardising the trans-Atlantic link that is seen as a priority to be preserved, Portugal is among those who see this as being compatible with increasing a security dimension on a European scale to act as the operative element in a Common Foreign and Security Policy, essential for the Union's foreign expression as a political entity.

Although to the surprise of some, Portugal's position has been particularly firm and consistent in meeting the major challenge of enlarging the Union. From the start Portugal has made it clear that it interprets this step as a geopolitical imperative to which Europe must find an effective, positive response, immaterial of economic considerations that will have to be regulated within their own framework. The political reunification of the continent is an objective that the Portuguese government holds high on its list of European priorities and to which it has given much attention and acceptance.

It is clear positions such as these that define the way in which Portugal is placed in today's Europe and that describe the country's deep attachment to the integration project. Support for this at home has a definite political majority and the solid backing of the Portuguese people.

This positive sentiment witnessed in Portugal towards Europe is the result of what we could call the "balance" of our experience over these years of integration. It is of this experience, and of the successes and errors made, that the articles in this book speak. They were written by distinguished figures from a range of political sectors and with experience in different specialist fields.

At the close of the Portuguese presidency of the European Union, during which once again there was an opportunity to demonstrate the enthusiasm with which we view the European project, this book aims to mirror something of the past fifteen years of our presence in the Community institutions. But above all it is proof that, for a country such as Portugal, the European Union is today the right space for affirming its national project for development and that, basically, Europe is seen by us today as another name for freedom.