

The vision and actions for a Federal Europe (2000-2026)

Origins and development of UEF-Belgium¹ : People and ideas

UEF-Belgium is the Belgian national section of the Union of the European Federalists (UEF) created in Paris in 1946. But its creation as a proper and registered organisation took a while. Since 1946, there were some federalist activists in Belgium, most of them represented by the Belgian *Union Fédérale*, led by Baron Allard, and participated into the first years of UEF life.

However, it's only later in the 1980s that several French-speaking activists decided to launch an organised group around the Belgian Senator Angèle Verdin-Leenaers, who became the leader of the group. To better coordinate at the Belgian level with the Dutch-speaking group, an umbrella structure (a de facto organisation), with no statutes or legal personality, was created in 1992. In the 1990s, this coordination structure was chaired by Willy De Clerq, MEP and former EC Commissioner, and, between 1999 and 2005, by Fernand Herman, former MEP and Belgian Minister. Bernadette Costers and, from 2002, Pico Lantini, ensured technical assistance.

In 1994 Hubert de Viron took over from Ms Verdin the leadership of the French-speaking activists and

organised conferences on European integration to better gather resources and raise awareness on the European project. A new publication was then launched, to inform on specific activities and events mainly in Brussels and to disseminate reflection papers. The *UEF-INFO* was thus born.

The group grew in number and in ambition, though it was still managed by a person alone. After few years of federalist activism, and thanks to the commitment of younger activists and to the continuous support of Fernand Herman and his Belgian umbrella organisation, the group evolved into a more stable organisation. On 9th of May 2001 the *UEF-Belgique francophone* was created as a formal ASBL, with its own statutes and legal personality.

The first board was composed of Hubert de Viron as president, Michele Ciavarini Azzi as vice-president, Domenico Rossetti di Valdalbero as secretary-general, Vincent Van Wijnsberghe as general manager, and Ivan Govers as treasurer.

This group of people will shape the structure, the functioning, the networks, and the development of the organisation during the following years. New activists started to join the organisation in Brussels and on 26th of June 2003, the ASBL held its *first*

¹ Website: <http://www.uef-belgium.be/>
X: https://twitter.com/uef_belgium

General Assembly. The new elected board was composed of Michele Ciavarini Azzi as president, Hubert de Viron as vice-president, Domenico Rossetti di Valdalbero as secretary-general, Pietro Emili as general manager, Claire Lodor and Daniela Biciu as communication officers and Ivan Govers as treasurer.

This team, around the core-duo of Domenico and Michele, will continue to foster the organisation for many years, together with new activists joining the board in the successive General Assemblies, specifically Jean-Jacques Schul (president of Promeuro), as vice-president since 2005, Yannick Bollati, as general manager since 2005, Pierre Bodiaux, as communication officer since 2007, Francesca Nastri, as general manager since 2008, Paul Frix (former director-general at Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as vice-president since 2009, Françoise Jurion de Waha, as co-communication officer since 2010, Olivier Lenglez, as co-communication officer since 2011, Aymeric Olibet, as general manager since 2012, Monica Tiberi, as co-communication officer since 2012, Bogdan Birnbaum, as co-communication officer since 2015.

Further to the passing away of Fernand Herman, the president of the Belgian umbrella organisation, a new step was reached by the ASBL by voting important modifications at its 2006 General Assembly. *UEF-Belgique/UEF-België* was finally created and recognized by UEF as being the official Belgian national section of the UEF.

This new step was needed to better face the challenges of the federalist action in Belgium and to better coordinate with the European secretariat of UEF on the European campaigns that were run.

To define the political priorities of the organisation in the context of the UEF campaigns, the General Assemblies elected few political advisers, among which Fabrizio Caccia Dominioni, Dieter Hammer, Paolo Clarotti, Roger Vancampenhout, Salvatore Rossetti di Valdalbero, and Robert Verschooten. These senior advisers, with an exceptional European commitment and career, helped UEF-Belgium to elaborate its federalist strategy and to develop new federalist sections in the country.

The years between 2003 and 2013 are to be recalled as the years of the consolidation of the federalist presence and action in Belgium. They were very rich and intense. A variety of initiatives were launched both on the organisational side, with events and activities, and on the strategic analysis of the political context. These were years of great visibility, of ideas and contributions which resulted in many synergies with other UEF sections or pro-European organisations.

Shaping Europe: Citizenship and participation

One of the first aim was to tackle the topic of the European citizenship and raise awareness among the civil society organisations on the need of an active participation to contribute to shape Europe. The bottom-up approach. This topic was combined with the reflection on the Future of Europe.

The political and institutional context of that time gave us the opportunity to enter the debate on Europe, trying to understand and influence the process: the works of the European Convention (between February 2002 and July 2003); the further Intergovernmental Conference (between October 2003 and June 2004); the EU enlargement since 1st of May 2004; the EP elections in June 2004; the signature of the Constitutional Treaty in October 2004; the new EC in November 2004; the Constitutional Treaty's ratification process, and the negative referenda in France and in the Netherlands, in May and June 2005; and the difficult adoption of the European budget.

UEF-Belgium followed closely all this news by interacting with several civil society organisations in Belgium, inviting them to participate in the debate and trying to develop local federalist sections. In that frame, we organised several public events, one in Mons: "*Sommes-nous tous des citoyens européens? La citoyenneté européenne dans le Traité constitutionnel*", with Fernand Herman, Elio Di Rupo, who was a member of the European Convention and the mayor of Mons, Didier Donfut, the Belgian Secretary of State to European affairs, the MEP Gérard Deprez and Michel Theys, a well-known journalist at *Agence*

Europe and Télé Bruxelles. New local activists such Prof. Safar, Raoul Pierard, Anne Grell and Michel Amory, a former EC director, joined.

Another event took place at the University ULB in Brussels, together with the European magazine Cafébabel.com and New Europeans Magazine: “*L’élargissement de l’Europe: Naissance d’un géant ou mort programmée du projet européen?*”, with several political personalities such as Bronislaw Geremek, MEP and former Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, François Roelants du Vivier, chair of the Belgian Senate committee on foreign affairs, Melchior Wathelet, Belgian MP, Franck Biancheri, director of the think-Tank Europe 2020, Alix Chambris and Vanessa Witkowski, both journalists at Cafébabel.

UEF-Belgium reflected also on the various models of federalism, in particular the Swiss model, and on the topic of the core political integration, debating and exchanging with several activists across sections, as Philipp Agathonos, vice-president of UEF, Prof. Giulia Rossolillo, Paolo Vacca, Harald Stieber, Luisa Trumellini and Franco Spoltore, all members of the UEF Federal Committee. These analysis and brainstorming resulted in several papers from the section activists Dieter Hammer, Paul Frix, vice-president of UEF-Belgium and member of the UEF FC Presidium, and Bob Verschooten, among others.

“*L’Europe, c’est aussi notre affaire! La démocratie participative dans le Traité constitutionnel*”, was organised at the university of Namur, together with local organisations, and with the participation of Salvatore Rossetti di Valdalbero, political adviser of UEF-Belgium, MEP Gérard Deprez, Prof. Paulin Duchesne and Olivier Gosset, journalist at l’Echo.

At the City Hall of Waterloo, we debated on the topic “*Le Traité constitutionnel européen et la gouvernance économique*”, with Didier Reynders, Belgian Minister of Finance, Pervenche Berès, chair of the EP committee on Economic and Monetary affairs, Jean Pisani-Ferry, director of the Think-Tank Bruegel, and the federalist activists Jean-Jacques Schul and Denis Tytgat. The event was organised with the local authorities and with several civil society organisations, such as Promeuro, la

Ligue européenne de coopération économique, le Centre d’études européennes de Waterloo and the Info-Point Europe-Brabant Wallon.

Later, between 2010 and 2011, while UEF-Belgium was already well established in Brussels and in few other cities, among which Antwerp, Mons and Namur, several other events were organised on the topics of the European challenges and citizenship. A series of debates took place within the project called *Les Midis de l’Europe: Enjeux européens et Citoyenneté* and saw a strong cooperation with many civil society organisations. Some of them were pro-European, such as the European Movement, the Forum permanent de la société civile, Promeuro, Ephec, the Association des Journalistes européens, EUR-IFRI, the Réalités européennes du présent, the Cercle de culture européenne. Some were more focused on information: Cafébabel.com, the Club de la Presse du Hainaut, the information network Radio Europeandyou, Agence Europe, VOX, the AIACE (association of the former officials of the European institutions) magazine.

Most of these debates, involving experts in the field, showed the need to strengthen the European integration process towards a federal system and highlighted the urgency to act. “*L’Europe au bord du gouffre financier? Sauvons l’Euro!*” was organised at the RTBF-Hainaut centre in Mons, with Paul Goldschmidt, former EC director on financial operations, and Paolo Clarotti, political adviser at UEF-Belgium.

“*Quel budget pour la nouvelle Europe?*” took place at the Info-Europa Schuman in Brussels, with the Belgian Secretary of State for the budget, Melchior Wathelet. The debate was on the priorities of the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

“*De l’Acte Unique au Traité de Lisbonne: perspectives pour une Europe fédérale*” took place at the La Piola library in Brussels, with the presentation of the comics “*La Nebbia ed il Granito*”, a book inspired by the biography of Altiero Spinelli. Both the authors Davide Caci and Fulvio Gambotto were present, together with Pier Virgilio Dastoli, former EP assistant of Altiero Spinelli and former director at the EC.

Further to a collaboration with UEF-Luxembourg, the debate “*Que fait l’Europe pour faire face aux défis de l’emploi, du développement durable et de la recherche?*” was organised in the city of Luxembourg together with EM Luxembourg, UEF-Groupe Europe, European Youth in Luxembourg, EP and EC information offices in Luxembourg, and with the participation of Simone Beissel, vice-president of the Comité des Régions d’Europe, Jacques Santer, former EC president, Rémy Jacob, Director-General at the BEI, and Frank Engel, MEP.

It’s worth to recall also two other workshops: “*La crise économique et financière: le projet des Etats-Unis d’Europe*”, held at Overijse, with Pierre Defraigne, EC honorary Director-General and director of the Madariaga Foundation of the College of Bruges; “*L’Union européenne, vers une démocratie participative: l’initiative citoyenne européenne*”, organised at the Club de la Presse du Hainaut at Mons. It gathered Roger Vancampenhout, political adviser of UEF-Belgium, prof. Pierre Vercauteren, professor at the University FUCAM in Mons and Thierry Van Gullick, RTBF journalist.

Based on the successes of *Les Midis de l’Europe*, we launched the format of the lunch-time seminar, the so-called “*Les Midis fédéralistes*”. Thanks to the UEF secretariat, they took place in its premises, at Chaussée de Wavre 214 D, in the former offices of the Nonciature apostolique.

Pier Virgilio Dastoli, intervening as a member of the Forum of Civil Society, presented the topic “*Que faire avec le Traité de Lisbonne et comment aller plus loin? Quelles sont les perspectives pour une Europe fédérale?*”. While Keith Richardson, journalist and former secretary-general of the European Round Table of Industrialists, focused on “*A Europe of hope, democratic and effective*”.

All these debates and conferences were the result of a dense reflection among the activists within UEF-Belgium and of an expanding network of contacts and collaborations. One has also to remind the presence of UEF.be at almost each year “European Days” to celebrate the 9 May (Schuman Declaration). With a specific stand in the Parc Léopold or in the European Parliament, the UEF.be

activists were raising the profile of the European Federalists to the visitors coming to the open days of the European institutions.

A special relationship: UEF secretariat in Brussels and UEF Groupe Europe

Being based mainly in Brussels, it was natural for UEF-Belgium to develop special links and exchanges with the European secretariat of UEF, as well as with MEPs particularly active in Brussels.

We thus established a special relationship with the UEF secretary-general in office at that time, Bruno Boissière, who helped the organisation in several ways and encouraged its members to contribute to the UEF political strategies, with papers and draft resolutions for the UEF institutional bodies. Thanks to his support, UEF-Belgium became very involved in the UEF Congress, Federal Committee and in the UEF Bureau, providing technical documents, intensive commitment and active participation, alongside critical views.

Strong ties were also kept with the successive secretary-generals, specifically Friedhelm Frischenschlager, Joan Simon, Christian Wenning and Paolo Vacca. Since Christian Wenning’s mandate, the UEF office left Chaussée de Wavre and moved to the little Federalist House located in Square de Meeûs 25. From that moment, the UEF-Belgium activists started to meet in that house at any time of the day and night, until the Covid pandemic.

In Brussels’ institutional context and environment, UEF-Belgium built bridges also with prominent MEPs, as Guy Verhofstadt, MEP and former Belgian PM, who accepted to become its honour president once elected for the first time at the EP. Among other European politicians, Gérard Onesta, vice-president of the EP, Monica Frassoni, MEP and former JEF president, and Jo Leinen, MEP and president of the UEF, were particularly connected to the Belgian federalists and involved many of them in EP’s participatory initiatives, as the Agora.

One very high-level event that can be recalled as an example of this “federalist trust” and cooperation among federalists in various institutions, was the

seminar “*L’Europe de demain: perspectives constitutionnelles et gouvernance économique*”, at the premises of the EP.

Distinguished political personalities participated in the debate, in which a book on Fernand Herman’s life and contributions to Europe, *La Passion de l’Europe*, written by Françoise Jurion de Waha, was presented. Several European politicians took the floor to remember Fernand Herman, specifically: Jean-Luc Dehaene, MEP and former Belgian PM, Marianne Thyssen, MEP, Prof. Mario Monti, former EC commissioner, Karel van Miert, former EC commissioner, Karl von Wogau, MEP, Gérard Deprez, MEP, Jean-Louis Bourlanges, MEP, Wilfried Martens, former Belgian PM, Íñigo Mendez de Vigo, MEP, Jo Leinen, MEP and UEF president, Prof. Franklin Dehousse, judge at the EU Court of justice, Friedhelm Frieschenschlager, UEF secretary-general and former Austrian Minister of defence, and Nicolas Estgen, president of the Fondation Pégase and former MEP. The seminar was organised by UEF-Belgium and Fondation Pégase, together with the UEF-Groupe Europe.

It would not be possible in Brussels not to meet here and there a representative of the UEF-Groupe Europe, a peculiar group of activists representing officially the federalists among the EU officials. A group whose strength – specific policies’ expertise and global understanding of the intricacies of the European institutions – has been very useful within UEF. And of course, the cooperation between the two Brussels’ based organisations has been, and still is, intense and productive. Several policy papers, appeals, resolutions, publications, have been launched, written and signed together. Common views and common understanding.

The special role played by its first secretary-general, Mario Greco was great, specifically by creating a team of committed colleagues and by building bridges with other pro-European organisations, as UEF-Belgium, and advocating cross-memberships. Thus, you could meet several activists being actively present at the General Assemblies (notably at Rudy Tissing-Herman’s home), or Congresses of both organisations. His successive colleagues, Michel Soubies and even more Catherine

Vieilledent-Monfort, followed the same direction. Synergies and friendships were created.

Within this general brainstorming and *bouillon de culture politique fédéraliste*, the friends from UEF-Luxembourg, with its secretary-general Alain Calmes, and the activists of the Luxembourg section of the Groupe Europe, were often involved in complex paper discussions and long video-meetings, much earlier than in the Covid period.

The intellectual analysis produced by the synergies of the various Brussels-Luxembourg groups was much appreciated within UEF. We can recall, during Jacques Santer and Richard Corbett presidencies of the Groupe Europe, the untiring campaigning work of Michael Cwik, Dieter Hammer, Roger Vancampenhout, Catherine Vieilledent, Keith Richardson, Monica Tiberi, Domenico Rossetti di Valdalbero and Michele Ciavarini Azzi, and later, during the UEF presidencies of Mercedes Bresso and Andrew Duff, the technical contributions of Paolo Ponzano.

From one generation of federalist to another: The youth and communication challenges

Monica Tiberi, UEF-Belgium’s communication officer, invested time and energies trying to rejuvenate the organisation and create bridges between JEF-Belgium and UEF-Belgium. A tough job, considering that JEF-Belgium has historically always been linked to the Belgian section of the European Movement (EMB).

However, since the Chaussée de Wavre period, UEF-Belgium has tried to communicate, cooperate and interact with the younger federalists, being them members of JEF, JEF-Belgium, or as individual federalists. This helped also to come closer to the EMB, with cross-memberships. We can recall several cooperations and meetings with Olivier Hinnekens, vice-president of the EMB, and with Anne Vanlancker, MEP and EMB president.

A special relationship was then established informally with several JEF representatives among which, Alison Weston and Jon Worth, both presidents of JEF; Marko Bucik, Elina Viilup, Joan

Simon, JEF secretary-general, before becoming UEF secretary-general; Philip Adriaenssens, JEF president, and Peter Oomsels, JEF-Belgium president, with whom several flash mobs and meetings in Leuven were organised together. But the limited participation in time in the youth organisation, from two to three years maximum, made it difficult to ensure continuity. The UEF-Belgium continued to ‘refresh’ its blood with the continuous commitment of the younger activists like Francesca Natri, Bogdan Birnbaum and Nezka Figelj.

Having specialised policy texts or appeals advocating for specific political measures published in magazines, newspapers or info-websites, has always been one of UEF.be major goals in terms of strategy and communication. Unless you have plenty of resources to invest on membership development, the visibility you may have with focused articles, it’s still one of the best ways to have some impact. For a little section like UEF-Belgium, this has been a must since the beginning of its political action.

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, already at the end of the 1990’, Hubert de Viron launched and edited the *UEF-INFO*, a newsletter published four times a year to inform the activists on what is the debate within the federalists. At that time, it was mainly a collection of articles coming from other UEF sections, including, on a regular basis, the “*Lettre européenne*”, published by the European Foundation Luciano Bolis.

The format of the newsletter changed with the new editor Michele Ciavarini Azzi, in 2001. In fact, the new ASBL *UEF-Belgique francophone* decided to create a proper tool of federalist analysis and of political action, trying to contribute to the political debate in Belgium. And with a clear structure. You could then find regular columns: the editorial of the president of the umbrella organisation, Fernand Herman (and later of Michele Ciavarini Azzi); analysis of a specific topic; the federalist calendar; the UEF resolutions; and references to books and articles published by the whole federalist family. It was realised for more than a decade in the offices of the Fondation Pégase, Eastman Building, thanks to the whole board of UEF-Belgium, and specifically

thanks to Pierre Bodiaux, Francesca Natri, Bernard Van Walle, Anne-Marie von Puttkamer, Monica Tiberi and Ivan Govers.

During the long evening meetings in the little Federalist House in Square de Meeûs, discussing and defining articles and publications for the website and for the national newspapers, a young Spanish activist, political adviser at the EP, joining UEF-Belgium, was proposing the presentation of several books connected with the European political integration in the library *LIBRE BOOK*, close to the EP. One evening he proposed the translation in Spanish of the most important reference of the federalist thought: “*El Manifiesto de Ventotene – Por una Europa libre y Unida*”. We were happy to have met with Domènec Ruiz Devesa that will later become MEP and President of UEF.

UEF.be made efforts in stepping into new digital technologies and social media: the web site of UEF.be was created (<https://uef-belgium.be/>) and several platforms shared the UEF.be positions on Facebook, LinkedIn and on the emerging platforms. Tens of articles and opinions of UEF.be were published in the newspapers *La Libre Belgique*, *Le Soir* and *L’Echo*.

UEF.be achievements and challenges: the lens of 25 general assemblies

The Belgian section of the Union of European Federalists (UEF.be) has been a driving force in advocating for a stronger, more integrated and federal Europe. Over the past 25 years, its General Assemblies have brought together prominent European federalists, policymakers, academics and activists to discuss the past, the present but especially the future of the European Union (EU).

The debates at the 25 last annual General Assemblies have centred on citizenship, democratic reform and the need for a truly federal Europe, i.e. moving beyond economic integration to political unity. Among the keynote speakers intervening at the UEF.be General Assemblies, one has to mention the former Belgian Prime Ministers Léo Tindemans and Mark Eyskens, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and

Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini, Minister of State and MEP Gérard Deprez, Minister and MEP Fernand Herman, Ambassador Philippe de Schouteete de Tervarent, Prof. André Sapir and Guntram Wolf.

In this period, three books written by key UEF.be actors have been published: *L'Europe, notre Etat souverain en devenir* (collective authors led by Michele Ciavarini Azzi, ed. by UEF in 2005), *Europa patria mea* by Fernand Herman (ed. by D. Devillez in 2006) and *L'Europe fédérale, cette utopie vivante* by Domenico Rossetti di Valdalbero (ed. by L'Harmattan in 2022).

The next chapters underline the key messages from the invited speakers and participants at UEF.be's General Assemblies. They highlight the challenges, proposals and visions that have shaped the federalist movement in Belgium and across Europe. They synthesize below the reflexions and actions of UEF.be in three parts: First of all, the question of European Identity (Europe is being constructed but Europeans have to be made); secondly the Federal Europe (Democratic reforms needed to face the EU's legitimacy crisis); and finally the 'Europe that works for all' touching upon the economic and social solidarity.

Towards a European identity: Europe is being constructed but Europeans must be made

One of the most recurring themes in UEF.be's discussions is the lack of a shared European identity. Despite the EU's institutional and economic successes, many Europeans still identify primarily with their nation-states rather than with the European project. Several articles from the UEF.be section described the differences between Confederation and Federation, and the different Federal configurations - Germany, US, Switzerland. Europe has to choose a model.

As Amartya Sen and Amin Maalouf used to write, an identity is not exclusive, one or the other (cf. *Identités meurtrières*). In the same way, the European identity is not substituting the national or the regional identity. It transcends it.

The core challenge is that institutions alone cannot create a 'European demos'. People must live, study and work across borders to feel European. A study of the think-tank *Europe 2020* estimated that only 5% of EU citizens (around 20 million) had lived, studied or worked abroad. Despite programmes like Erasmus, Interreg and research exchanges, the number of Europeans with direct cross-border experience remained low, at less than 50 million (including 'frontaliers', researchers and Erasmus participants), i.e. around 10% of EU population.

Most Europeans still lack first-hand experience of other EU countries, reinforcing national rather than European identity. Also following UEF pressures, the 2017 pilot project offered €415 travel passes to 2,500 young Europeans. But this project revealed a class divide: Wealthier participants used the pass immediately; Nearly half of the passes went unused, likely because many young people could not afford additional travel costs (accommodation, food, etc.); and finally, the scheme was seen as benefiting those who would have travelled anyway, rather than broadening access.

The UEF.be proposed an initiative called #BEcomingEU, a universal European mobility right offering €1,000 travel grant for every 18-year-old EU citizen to spend 1 or 2 months abroad within the EU (cf. Giorgio Clarotti). Other proposals concerned partnerships with InterRail, buses and low-cost airlines (e.g. for Erasmus discounts) to reduce costs of 'knowing your neighbour' and to ensure that every young European has at least one meaningful cross-border experience, fostering a sense of European belonging.

Jo Leinen (former MEP and UEF President) and others have long argued for expanding the Erasmus exchange programme and making Erasmus universal, not just for students but for apprentices, workers and volunteers. The proposal was a "European Civic Service" where young people could work on EU-funded projects abroad. The youth mobilisation was another key point pushed by UEF.be for e.g. by the pro-EU marches (Pulse of Europe), the climate strikes (Fridays for Future), and the visits of teenagers students at the European Parliament (Giovanni Merlini).

Finally, several UEF.be actors insisted on the need for ‘Federalist Education’ with EU studies in schools underlying the benefits of federalism like peace, prosperity, mobility and the critical thinking on Euroscepticism (cf. Robert Verschooten, François Mennerat, Salvatore Rossetti di Valdalbero).

Towards a Federal Europe: Democratic reform to face the EU’s legitimacy crisis

The UEF.be’s assemblies pointed out at the democratic deficit in the EU and the need for federal structures to make Europe more accountable and effective. Many citizens feel disconnected from Brussels, seeing the EU as a bureaucratic project rather than a democratic federation. The 2016 Brexit and the rise of Euroscepticism highlighted the urgency of reform.

The UEF.be has closely collaborated with the Spinelli Group (a network of MEPs and federalists) to push for: A European Constitution (reviving the 2004 Constitutional Treaty) to replace the current treaty-based system; a directly elected European President or at least a ‘Spitzenkandidat’ to democratise Europe and to give a face to Europe (Guy Verhofstadt); A genuine European federal budget (funded by own resources or EU taxes, not just national contributions) - for comparison, the US have a federal budget accounting for around 20% of US GDP vs. a 1% federal budget at EU-level (Anne Montagnon).

Other important UEF.be battles were for: A European army and common defence - The Ukraine war (since 2022) showed the urgency of EU defence integration (Jean Marsia); A bicameral EU Parliament with one Chamber representing the EU citizens and one representing the States) or at least more powers for the European Parliament (such as the right of legislative initiative). As many UEF.be participants claim: *‘We need a federal Europe where decisions are made by a sovereign European Parliament, not by 27 national vetoes.*

UEF.be was also campaigning for: Replacing unanimity with qualified majority voting in key areas (foreign policy and defence, taxation and

energy); Citizens’ and participatory democracy with permanent EU-wide citizens’ assemblies to involve young and ordinary Europeans in policymaking as highlighted in the 2021-2022 Conference on the Future of Europe; Merging pro-European and federalist parties across Europe into a single pan-European party to run in EU elections; An EU digital sovereignty, AI ethics, data protection and digital rights to avoid dependence on the US or Chinese Big Tech and risks of political interference in EU democracies (Daniel Schaubacher).

Towards a Europe that works for all: Economic and social solidarity

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) and the energy crisis (2022-2023) exposed the fragility of EU solidarity. UEF.be’s recent assemblies have focused on how to make the EU more fair and resilient. If the EU is to survive, it must act as a union, not just in name, but in fiscal and social policy. Several proposals aimed at increasing solidarity: The €750 billion Recovery Fund (2021) was the first major EU-wide fiscal response, funded by joint European borrowing (a key UEF battle). The Recovery Fund (NextGenerationEU) has been a model of EU public debt serving the EU citizens. But the Recovery Fund was temporary while UEF.be argues for a permanent fiscal union.

UEF.be underlined in several occasions the inequalities between Member States: Eastern vs. Western Europe (disparities in wages, infrastructure and youth opportunities persist) and North vs. South (the eurozone crisis - 2009-2010) showed the lack of risk-sharing mechanisms. With UEF Groupe Europe friends (cf. Jean-François Drevet), UEF.be proposed an EU-funded unemployment benefit as an option to support workers in crises (e.g. in case of pandemics or strong recessions). This would also prevent brain drain from struggling regions (e.g., Southern Europe). A European minimum wage and social standards (cf. Luca Visentini) could also limit social disparities in the EU.

UEF.be was also making a plea to harmonise EU labour rights to prevent social dumping. The 2022 EU minimum wage Directive was a step in the right

direction, but UEF.be calls for binding standards. The UEF.be also proposed a green transition fund to be financed by EU bonds and carbon taxes, to ensure no region is left behind.

Michele Ciavarini Azzi and Domenico Rossetti di Valdalbero, respectively President and Secretary General of UEF.be

Conclusions

The UEF.be actions and reflexions over these last 25 years demonstrate that European federalism is not a dream or an utopia. It is a realistic path to a Europe that can compete, defend itself, and deliver for its citizens.

The quests for a European identity, for a federal Europe and for EU economic and social solidarity requires a strong political will supported by in-depth reflexion roots and active citizen activism. This is what UEF.be has been pushing for over the last 25 years. Bold leadership in ideas and policy, in operational actions and civic mobilisation are necessary to move towards the United States of Europe.

Democratic reforms are necessary for making the EU a more legitimate supranational entity. Without a proper Constitution, a stronger Parliament, a federal budget, and the end of vetoes, Europe risks stagnation. As Paul-Henry Spaak used to say: *Quand l'Europe n'avance pas, elle recule*. This was repeated by Count Etienne Davignon on 5 December 2022 at a large UEF.be event in Brussels (*Cinéma Galeries*) for the *Avant-première* of the movie *Spaak* by Hugues Lanneau from a script of Willy Perelsztejn. The testimony of Etienne Davignon on Paul-Henri Spaak (that signed the 1957 European Treaties) was completed by one of Baron Bernard Snoy et d'Oppuers remembering his father, Jean-Charles, that signed the original European Economic Treaty.

The question is not if, but when Europe will become a genuine democratic federation - respectful of human rights and international law - able to lead as a world lighthouse surrounded by autocratic empires. The challenges remain significant - nationalism, bureaucratic inertia and public scepticism - but the federalist vision is clearer than ever. Europe must federalise or risk to become irrelevant.