

Interview

## Our future is not on sale

### Young people from Germany and France promote a common Europe

Shortly before the European Parliament elections, Europe is experiencing a conflict over the Ukraine – one of the sharpest international crises since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, more and more EU citizens are turning away from the colourful community and its institutions. That's where the entrepreneur Michel Marlière sees great danger. As a result, the Frenchman, who now lives in Germany, has launched a very special project. Around 2,000 young Europeans have been involved so far.



Michel Marlière | Photo: Frank Rumpenhorst for TerraEuropa © 2014

*You were born in France in 1966 and came to Germany in 1986. When did you discover that your heart beats for Europe?*

**Michel Marlière:** Very early! I met a young woman from Dortmund when I was sixteen on a student exchange programme and then, already at a young age, I began to commute a lot between Germany and France. I witnessed over the years how travel options were changing, how tangible the internal market was, that there was no passport control at one point and finally that there was only

one currency in my pocket. For someone who lives between two countries in the middle of Europe, it was an uncanny improvement. This was noticeable! I was personally affected by the European unification.

*What does Europe represent to you?*

**Marlière:** Let me explain it in some detail. The generation of my parents experienced a world war, my grandparents even two. My paternal grandfather fought in the resistance against the Nazis, my maternal grandfather survived five years as a German prisoner of war. And yet after the war, both advocated that the French and German come to good terms again. Without this conciliatory attitude, the European Union as the guarantor of peace, stability, progress and solidarity would have been unthinkable. This has influenced me. My generation has experienced what Europeans can achieve together – starting with the internal market on the Schengen Agreement, ending with the introduction of the Euro and the Erasmus programme.

*Meanwhile, this Europe is getting less and less approval, only 43 percent voted in the 2009 European elections. And it remains unclear whether the crisis in Ukraine will translate in the imminent European elections to a higher turnout.*

**Marlière:** That's not surprising. It started with the eastern enlargement: within merely four years, twelve countries expanded the Community. However, due to the Lisbon Treaty's back and forth, the rules were not consistently adapted. In 2008 came the financial crisis. That was a real paradigm shift. We had believed that the political and economic financial system in Europe was solid as a rock. And at once everything was uncertain, even the euro – the cornerstone of European unification! Since then, more and more people doubt whether the entire European construct is good at all. Europe is in a deep crisis of meaning. And in this situation, nationalism and separatism suddenly become acceptable again. I find that threatening, especially against the backdrop of the current crisis situation.

*And with your project you would like TerraEuropa to liberate Europe from this identity crisis?*

**Marlière:** We want to contribute, yes. The relationship between the EU and its citizens has become very flimsy. What they need is a kind of marriage counselling. Where does the problem lie? Why did we go off course? These are important questions, and above all: what does the younger generation wish for? What do they expect from Europe? Finally, when we take into consideration the demographic development, can Europe not be a solo project by the older generation? The objectives of the European project must be discussed in the dialogue between generations. And TerraEuropa provides them with a platform.

*You have invited students from France and Germany to jointly seek answers to these questions. Looking back into the Franco-German history, it sounds ambitious. Are the old resentments gone?*

**Marlière:** There are some encouraging signs. German-French cooperation has become a rule. And you won't open any French newspaper today without reading "How are the Germans doing it?" Germany has become economically and socially an explicit model for the French. As for culture and spirit, we still feel far ahead (laughs). We think we're the smart ones, the visionaries, and strategists. This is evident especially in foreign policy. I observe a similar pattern with the Germans: you admire French culture and French esprit. But as far as the economic and social policy goes, they feel superior. In short: France thinks, Germany makes. In this respect German and French complement each other perfectly. And both groups know that they cannot live without each other. This is a great opportunity for Europe.

*Germany brings the economic and social know-how to the table. France has the vision. How do the young students today go about it? Does the post-wall generation tick differently than the post-war generation?*

**Marlière:** Yes, I'm sure of this. Our grandparents and parents were Europeans out of conviction, we are Europeans from experience. The youth of today are Europeans out of habit. In this habit lies also great danger. Youth has a more open approach than the generations before because they have travelled

around the world much more and much earlier and because they learn other languages as a given. They are much more international.

*You spoke about the danger of habit. What do you mean exactly?*

**Marlière:** Young adults consider the achievements of the European Union as a matter of course. This is completely understandable. Only: it is easy to get used to an established standard. You no longer need to fight for it, because it's there. You live in peace, freedom, and – compared with most other parts of the world – in material wealth. A democracy that allows this to happen must be repeatedly rethought and grappled with. Therefore, we need young citizens who participate, who want to command Europe, who know: our future is not a product that one can buy in the supermarket.

*You have asked students from the German-French campus of the French Sciences Po in Nancy and students from the Free University in Berlin how they perceive Europe in everyday life and why Europe is important to them.*

**Marlière:** We, strictly speaking, proceeded in three stages. Students initially talked about their experiences and expectations and defined the most important projects and measures for Europe from their perspective,. in a second step we have then submitted the results to a fact check in a broad survey of 2,000 young people in Germany and France. Finally, we deepened it with so-called focus groups with other young people from different social backgrounds from Berlin and France.

*You are investing your private wealth in the project. Has it been worth it?*

**Marlière:** Definitely yes. I remember the scepticism of the participants at the beginning of the project and experience and how they argue for it now. You can tell they burn for Europe, and for a very simple reason: they have thought about it together, very intensely. They have discussed it among themselves and with experts, and they have interviewed more young adults and all of this has them stimulated to deal with Europe in the same way. They have analysed the results and discussed their findings.

*What are the findings?*

**Marlière:** Alarming: From the perspective of the students and of the ones who were questioned, many decisions from politics and business are taken without reference to the living realities of the young generation. They fear an increase in competition among themselves. They do not want it. They do not want "every man for himself" in Europe. They want concrete joint projects of all EU members in areas of education, environment and sustainable energy.

*And what is next?*

**Marlière:** I hope our efforts will create additional impulse for European integration, which will produce a potentiated effect together with numerous similar impulses from other projects. And maybe as a first step, we will manage to get more people interested in the European elections.

Michel Marlière was born in 1966 in a small town near the Bay of Somme, in northwestern France. He studied economics in Paris and Dortmund, then worked for eight years for the oil company Elf Aquitaine. In 1998 and founded a biotech company. After that he worked for ten years in senior positions for Autobahn Tank & Rast GmbH. In 2010 he rose to be a major shareholder and a board member at the biotechnology company Global Bioenergies SA, which was awarded in 2012 by the organisation EuropaBio as the most innovative biotech medium-sized enterprises among 1,800 other companies. 2012 Michel Marlière founded TerraEuropa. With the project he wants to convince Europeans to contribute to a new understanding of Europe.

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More information about TerraEuropa:

[www.terra-europa.eu](http://www.terra-europa.eu)

**Press contact:**

Information Office Terra Europa, Karin Lange

Burgstraße 27

10178 Berlin

Telefon: +49 30 24086-674

Fax: +49 180 5 223285

E-Mail: [presse@terra-europa.eu](mailto:presse@terra-europa.eu)