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## International Solidarities and the Liberation of the Portuguese Colonies

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# The European Community as an Opposer of the Portuguese Colonial Rule: Debates and Initiatives, 1970–74

*Lorenzo Ferrari*

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## Introduction

Typically regarded as an economic organization, the European Community (EC) is generally not considered as an actor concerned with political issues on the international stage – at least for the first decades of its existence.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the early 1970s the EC countries collectively discussed the political problems posed by the colonial policies of Portugal, and in particular by its military campaigns aimed at repressing independence movements in Sub-Saharan Africa. It was one of the first signs of the EC's growing interest in issues of decolonization and fundamental rights, and one of the first cases where the EC tried to present itself as a new, original international actor. While the results were limited in terms of actual initiatives targeting the Portuguese government, the effort at promoting the European Community as a novel version of Europe – detached from and even opposing colonialism – was to prove a lasting one.

This article explores the origins and unfolding of the EC debates and initiatives in favour of the independence of the Portuguese territories in Africa up until the achievement of decolonization. It is based on a variety of sources drawn from the archives of the

EC/EU as well as from national and diplomatic archives of France, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Particular attention is paid to the documents held in the Archives of the French Foreign Ministry: because of the special attention devoted by France to the EC position on Portugal's colonial war, they offer a good vantage point on the views held by the EC actors altogether. Indeed, France had remarkable diplomatic presence and interests in Sub-Saharan Africa, it enjoyed a prominent role at the United Nations, and it was part of the EC since the very outset, playing a central role in the definition of the relations between the EC countries and the European colonies and former colonies. The existing literature on the international involvement in the Portuguese colonial crises and decolonization tends to focus on a handful of Western countries, namely the United States, Britain, France, and West Germany (see Rodrigues 2015; Bandeira, Jerónimo, Costa Pinto 2013; Aires Oliveira 2013). Some attention is paid to their bilateral interactions and to their competing national visions, but a thorough analysis of the Western European countries' collective debate and activity vis-à-vis the Portuguese colonial crisis is missing, namely their debate and activity in the EC context. This is probably due to the fact that the stream of scholarship focusing on the end of European empires continues to remain apart from the one looking at the rise and unfolding of European integration (Garavini 2012 and Hansen, Jonsson 2014 represent the most notable exceptions in this regard).

Yet Western Europe was more than the sum of Britain, France, and West Germany, and the European Community was more than the sum of its members. Each of them had its view on the accession to independence of the Portuguese territories, and each of them took (or chose not to take) certain initiatives in favour of it. To look at what they all did collectively – that is, to shift the attention from the national sphere to the sphere of intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation at the EC level – is important because the EC dimension of foreign-policy making was gaining more and more influence at the time and it could enjoy significant leverage on Portugal. It is also important in order to shed light on the reassessment of Europe's profile on the international stage in the wake of decolonization. The Western European states had to adjust their international identities, targets, and instruments – and they partly did so through cooperation at the EC level. In this endeavour, they were constantly under observation by both the European public opinion and foreign countries.

### **Paying increasing attention to Portugal's colonial war**

Starting from the first half of the 1970s, the violation of individual and people's fundamental rights became a major object of political debate and action in many Western countries and at the United Nations, where the topic had been gaining salience for years, mainly thanks to the developing countries and a few European ones. Formed by six and then nine Western European countries, the EC at the time was an organization focusing almost exclusively on commercial and economic matters, both



inside and outside its borders. When looking at the international sphere, the EC was mostly concerned with tariffs, commercial flows, development cooperation, and the activity of economic international organizations. However, the EC was directly involved in colonial and post-colonial issues as well, since it was associated with its member states' colonies since its very inception in 1957 and it had preserved links and policies towards them even after their accession to independence (Hansen, Jonsson 2014). Therefore, colonial and post-colonial issues did not represent a new topic of discussion for the EC – but they tended to be framed in a technical and economic perspective, leaving political aspects aside.

It was in the early 1970s that the EC institutions and the EC governments collectively started to pay increasing attention to international political affairs, including colonial crises. At The Hague summit of 1969 the EC leaders decided to combine the Community structures and policies with a new system for cooperation between their countries, the European Political Cooperation system (EPC), which was gradually set up in 1970–72 (Guasconi 2004). Until then, the EC had not been given specific structures nor competences to address international political affairs. Its members either discussed them in a bilateral way, or in the context of other organizations, such as NATO, the UN, and so on. The EPC functioned as an intergovernmental forum for cooperation in political matters and especially in foreign policy, inviting the EC member states to discuss together issues of their choice and possibly reach common positions (Möckli 2009; Gainar 2012). The system was deliberately conceived as lightly structured, flexible, and based on unanimity and consensus. In order to preserve the member states' autonomy in foreign policy, the EC's own institutions such as the Commission, the European Parliament and the Court of Justice were only loosely connected to the EPC. One of the areas where the EC countries focused their efforts at cooperating in foreign policy was the promotion of fundamental rights abroad. This was in part due to the obstacles that cooperation in other areas of international affairs would entail: security concerns and Cold War constraints hindered extensive cooperation and the adoption of bold initiatives at the EC level in many areas, as the outcome of the EC's clash with the US administration in 1973–74 clearly proved (Möckli 2009). To some extent, claiming to support values such as individual and people's rights in Africa and Latin America represented a more feasible domain for joint declarations and initiatives, which would help to stress the distinctive character of the EC as an international actor and to differentiate its profile from that of the traditional European powers and of the United States (Ferrari 2015). Most of all, attention to these issues was fuelled by international and internal pressures. At the United Nations, the Soviet and Third World countries sought to exploit any chance to present resolutions criticizing the Portuguese rule, putting the Western European countries in an awkward position. Within the EC, public opinion was becoming increasingly concerned with decolonization and human rights violations. This concern was expressed through youth protests and civil

society mobilization, spanning from the activities of Amnesty International to the establishment of devoted committees of solidarity with specific foreign countries (see Sapire, Saunders 2012; Thörn 2006).

Portugal played a major role in the increase of the EC countries' attention to the violations of fundamental rights taking place outside their borders. On the one hand, the oppressive policies of the Salazarist regime against real or potential opposers among its citizens attracted increasing scrutiny by the EC countries, along with the similar policies adopted by the Spanish and Greek dictatorships (Fernandez Soriano 2015).<sup>2</sup> Other EC governments devised some political and economic pressures. On the other hand, Portugal's overseas policies – namely, its brutal repression of independence movements in its African territories – attracted more and more scrutiny by EC citizens during the early 1970s. Their governments discussed the adoption of joint measures to discourage and counter the Portuguese colonial policies, mainly in the context of EPC. Starting from June 1971, the ambassadors of the EC countries to Lisbon regularly convened for collective meetings in order to discuss the situation of the country.

What was new with regard to the EC countries' attention to the Portuguese colonial war was that it was the first time that the former took collectively notice of massive violations of fundamental rights occurring outside their borders or their immediate neighbourhood. To be sure, in the first half of the 1970s the EC countries were also active in pushing for the respect of human rights in the Soviet bloc in the context of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, but that was still a matter of protecting rights of citizens of European countries (Thomas 2001; Lamberti Moneta 2012). They did stress their attachment to democracy, human rights and liberal values in the 1973 Declaration on European identity (Chassaigne 2011), and they did consider mentioning them in the new partnership agreement of the EC with the former colonies of its member states (the Lomé Convention, signed in 1975). Yet specific attention to the violation of rights of African individuals and peoples was genuinely novel for the group of the EC member states, which had always been shy of discussing collectively the political aspects and problems of decolonization.

### **Imagining the end of the Portuguese empire, and preparing for it**

In the early 1970s, Portugal was the only European empire which had not undergone decolonization.<sup>3</sup> For both domestic and international considerations linked to prestige and to the preservation of strategic assets, its right-wing authoritarian government was extremely keen on keeping control of its territories in Central and Southern Africa, namely Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, São Tomé e Príncipe, Angola and Mozambique (MacQueen 1997; Costa Pinto 2001: 41–64). On the contrary, increasing resistance to the Portuguese rule had emerged in those territories, in the wake of the decolonization process undergone by the vast majority of Sub-Saharan countries during the 1960s. While in most cases the other European powers had decided to cave in to the pressures

for the independence of their overseas colonies, Portugal undertook major military and political efforts to retain control over them, deploying a large set of financial and human resources, as well as diplomatic and propaganda efforts.

The Cold War proved to be the most important external factor playing in the hands of the Portuguese government during its colonial war. Indeed, Sub-Saharan Africa was an increasingly important theatre of confrontation between the West and the Soviet bloc. By the early 1970s the latter appeared to be about to expand its influence in the area, counting on good relations with several governments or movements – including some in Angola and Mozambique – and aligning itself with some of the demands made by the Third World on the international stage, especially those targeting the Western countries and their policies (Westad 2005). Portugal was not only a staunch opposer of communism, but also a member of NATO: in its endeavour to counter independence movements, it was thus able to call for solidarity from its Western partners. As it had been the case in the previous decade, the Portuguese pressures were successful with regard to the US, also because of the strategic importance of the Azores military base (Cardoso Reis 2013: 273; Del Pero 2007; Rodrigues 2013).

As for the EC countries, the results of the Portuguese pressures were more mixed. The vast majority of the EC member states were also NATO members, and thus military and political allies of Portugal. Yet they clearly tended to distance themselves from the Portuguese colonial war, albeit in different degrees and at different stages. They were certainly aware and wary of the risk of increasing Soviet influence in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the developing world more in general, and as allies and partners of Portugal they were willing to continue commercial relations, military cooperation, and arms trade with it (MacQueen 1997: 55; Fonseca, Marcos 2013). At the same time, the EC countries agreed in deeming the colonial policies of Portugal outdated and ultimately doomed to failure.

Moreover, the EC and its member states had been cultivating constructive relations with a large set of Sub-Saharan countries since the outbreak of decolonization in the early 1960s. They had established an ambitious coif somehow neo-colonial – collective structure for development cooperation and dialogue with almost all their former African colonies, the so-called Yaoundé system of cooperation, which would later turn into the Lomé partnership. Also, at the UN, the EC countries had been adopting relatively positive and forthcoming positions towards the developing countries' demands focusing on a reform and rebalancing of the international economic system (Garavini 2012). With all the limits of these initiatives, the EC states had gained a capital of trust among the Sub-Saharan countries that an uncritical endorsement of the Portuguese colonial war would have inevitably shattered. As a Burundian diplomat declared, "it is not possible to be at the same time Africa's friends and friends of Africa's mortal enemies".<sup>4</sup>

Endorsing the Portuguese policies would have made little sense also because the EC member states believed that the demise of the Portuguese empire was very likely to

occur. According to their forecast, only the specific path and timing of decolonization was still to be defined – and that is where Cold War considerations entered the picture. In order to ensure stability and the preservation of Western influence in the African regions concerned, the most desirable pathway was a peaceful and negotiated process of decolonization, which would allow Portugal to withdraw from Africa without losing its face.<sup>5</sup> In this perspective, the EC member states were ready to imagine forms of political and economic support to Portugal, in order to smoothen the transition period: for instance, according to the Southern Europe division of the French foreign ministry, “if they undertook the path of decolonization, not too faraway in the future, we would completely support them in all the domains”.<sup>6</sup> This could turn out to be a valuable offer, since the EC was a crucial commercial partner for Portugal – especially with the entry of Britain in the Community being defined in 1971-72. The EC countries even envisaged providing some sort of support at a cultural level: a proper “political education”<sup>7</sup> of the Portuguese was deemed necessary in order to make them change their attitudes towards Africa.

### Nuances and differences between the EC countries

Even though all the EC member states had a negative opinion about the Portuguese colonial war, they were not explicit to the same degree about it, nor were they entirely in agreement with each other on the initiatives that should be taken to invite Portugal to change its policies towards its African territories. Their strategic concerns and goals were partly different from each other, and differences could be observed at the domestic level as well, with governmental parties and social movements being more critical of Portugal in countries like the Netherlands, and less in countries like the United Kingdom (whose government's attention was rather devoted to other crises abroad). In general terms, two different approaches can be identified, one more prudent and one more vocal. These two approaches could be observed in most internal discussions taking place between the EC governments, as well as in the adoption of many external positions by them.

The Portuguese government was reportedly characterized by an “extreme susceptibility”<sup>8</sup> about any sort of external pressure on its colonial policy. According to the French ambassador to Lisbon, “it is easy for the country's leaders to exploit foreign criticism and attacks in order to make public opinion almost instinctively converge and stick to the official positions”.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, governments and diplomats of Britain, France and West Germany repeatedly argued that the exertion of public pressures on Portugal could end up alienating it, thus further hindering the launch of the decolonization process. These governments rather favoured the pursuit of confidential, patient dialogue with Portugal: the EC group could still take advantage of its economic and political leverage to promote gradual change in Africa, but in ways that would not imply a face loss for Lisbon.

The approach favoured by Britain, France and Germany was in keeping with the prudent position that they adopted more in general with regard to the multiple crises hitting Sub-Saharan Africa during the 1970s. Apart from the Portuguese colonial war, there was for instance the problem of Rhodesia, and the problems posed by South Africa's domestic apartheid policies and assertive foreign policy (Ferrari 2018). Part of the reason behind the prudence expressed by the biggest members of the EC lied in the economic interests that they had in Africa (Ponte Vieira Lopes 2011: 33-38).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, they had serious geopolitical concerns, especially regarding the safety of shipping routes and the expansion of the Soviet influence in the region – a risk that the German government was particularly wary of. For this reason, they were clear that decolonization should not come at the price of stability, but it should rather occur via a negotiated process, even if that might imply slower and less spectacular developments.<sup>11</sup>

Despite their prudence, there are reasons to believe in the sincerity of the British, French and German commitment to opposing Portugal's colonial war. Moral considerations aside, the costs of preserving white minority rule in Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole were expected to grow increasingly over time and to eventually become untenable. To support in principle accession to independence would have also been useful in order to cultivate the EC countries' relations with their partners in Africa and in the developing world more in general, which were becoming more and more influential, both at the UN and in economic terms. In this perspective, in March 1971 French officials were expressing "the concern to remove the Portuguese from the tenacious illusion that, at the end of the day, we were in agreement with them" and "the concern to prevent the Portuguese authorities from succumbing to the temptation of adventure".<sup>12</sup> Despite their preoccupation with stability and gradual change, the biggest EC countries did think that the very preservation of Western European influence overseas "goes necessarily through the independence"<sup>13</sup> of the Portuguese territories.

Within the EC, the approach adopted by Britain, France and Germany did not go unchallenged. Other members of the group were much more vocal in their demands for opposing the Portuguese colonial war. Indeed, governments and diplomats of countries like Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland argued that the EC definitely needed to adopt visible public initiatives in favour of decolonization. To this end, they envisaged initiatives spanning from the exertion of public pressures upon Portugal to the adoption of a more confrontational voting behaviour at the UN, as well as the provision of support to the African liberation movements and even the expulsion of Portugal from NATO.<sup>14</sup>

The main rationale behind these countries' position had less to do with achieving real change than with indicating to the Western European public and to the other countries that the EC member states were attentive to the fundamental rights of individuals and peoples around the world. If this was the main goal, the mere reliance on confidential dialogue with Portugal was clearly insufficient. Concerns with the EC appearing too



mild towards Portugal's colonial war were closely linked to the increasing politicization of that issue at the UN. In the early 1970s the UN General Assembly along with other UN bodies started to pay more and more attention to Portuguese colonialism, and the Western countries came under increasing scrutiny and criticism for their alleged support to it. For many different countries, it was clear that "[Portugal's] allies, and especially those providing it with weapons and military equipment, should be regarded as its accomplices, and they should be held responsible of its criminal operations just as much as Portugal itself".<sup>15</sup> Diplomats from the EC countries repeatedly complained about the "increasing embarrassment" which "the obstinacy of Lisbon" caused them.<sup>16</sup> On top of that, public opinion in the EC countries themselves was increasingly attuned to Portuguese colonialism. Dutch public opinion was particularly critical of it, being described as "extremely sensitive to anything related to the Portuguese colonial issues".<sup>17</sup> Not by chance, it was the Dutch government that first raised the subject of Portugal's colonial war in the context of the EPC. Media in the Netherlands devoted considerable attention to the issue, citizens' demonstrations were held in front of the Portuguese embassy, and some organizations promoted even boycotts against imports from the Portuguese colonies, such as the coffee coming from Angola, that was boycotted by the Angola Committee (Ponte Vieira Lopes 2011: 62-63).<sup>18</sup> The mobilization of public opinion in the country was mirrored by the positions adopted by the trade unions and the left-wing parties, which pressed for the adoption of a more critical position towards Portugal. Similarly, parties and civil society organizations in Denmark and in the other Nordic countries were actively engaged against Portuguese colonialism – not to mention Ireland, which was not a fellow member of Portugal in NATO and which regarded itself as a former colony which had struggled to gain national independence. In the UK, the Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola and Guine (CFGAM) was founded in 1968.

Specific calls on the EC not to deepen relations with Portugal on the ground of its colonial war were not only made by civil society organizations within single states of Western Europe, but also at the EC level, for instance by the European Confederation of Free Trade Unions.<sup>19</sup> Some African liberation movements themselves reached out to the Western European authorities, even including the EC Commission and the EC Council of Ministers – a move that had few if any precedent in the history of the Community. This was the case of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique's (FRELIMO) message to the EC institutions of April 1972. In those months, the association of Portugal and other European countries to the Common Market was being discussed. It was largely a technical negotiation, but it carried a potential political meaning, both in terms of expansion of the EC's regional influence and of its legitimization of the Portuguese government. In the message, FRELIMO asked the EC institutions not to "conclude agreements with Portugal as long as it pursues its colonial war policy." The movement warned that it would consider "any agreement with Portugal as an explicit endorsement

of Portuguese colonialism and as an attack by the EEC on Africa".<sup>20</sup>

The EC partners of Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland often argued that their vocal and progressive positions on Portuguese colonialism were more meant to improve their own image and international standing than to effectively bring about real change in Africa. While this was partly true (but it should be noted that any government is guided by its domestic agenda and interests), it was also true that those countries could enjoy a relatively wide room of manoeuvre. Indeed, they did not have significant material interests in Sub-Saharan Africa, which could be threatened by a disordered process of access to independence. Moreover, their geopolitical position and profile made them relatively less sensitive to Cold War considerations compared to the biggest Western European countries. On top of that, well-rooted cultural and political traditions underlined the Danish, Dutch and Irish attention to the role that democratic and liberal values should play on the international stage (Baehr, Castermans-Holleman, Grünfeld 2002).

Despite their critical stance, the governments of the Netherlands and of the other countries close to it did not endorse the radical demands made by developing countries or by the liberation movements themselves. While they did tend to signal their concern with their situation at the UN, they did not always align their voting decisions with the Third World countries. For instance, speaking to its colleagues in February 1974, the political director of the Dutch Foreign Ministry was clear in envisaging a negotiated process of decolonization, perhaps to unfold in gradual steps, which would grant Portugal with "a honorable retreat"<sup>21</sup> and with the possible establishment of a sort of Commonwealth organization. Two days later, a delegation of the PAIGC liberation movement met with the Dutch government, but they came out from the meetings with "disappointment", deeming their counterparts' positions "too cautious".<sup>22</sup>

### **What the EC countries did (and did not do) about Portugal**

Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland found it hard to convince the other EC countries to collectively adopt vocal initiatives against the Portuguese colonial war. Pressures coming from other foreign governments and movements as well as from Western European media, social movements and civil society organizations were not decisive either. Britain, France and Germany consistently opposed the adoption of a confrontational stance, arguing that the Portuguese government should be fully involved in – and responsible for – the eventual accession of its colonies to independence.<sup>23</sup> They opposed the adoption of joint public initiatives by the EC countries, and they made clear that they were ready to give only limited support to the African liberation movements. The different positions by the EC countries were mirrored by their voting behaviour at the United Nations. Starting from 1962, every year a resolution on the Portuguese territories was presented at the UN General Assembly, on the initiative of the Third World countries. Year after year, the EC member states tended to follow a similar

voting pattern: among them, France and Britain were the countries that opposed the resolution the most often, while Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands supported it the most often. The other member states tended to adopt an intermediate position (see Tab. 1).

**Tab. 1: Voting behaviour of the EC countries<sup>24</sup> on the annual resolution for the independence of the Portuguese territories at the UN General Assembly, 1970–73**

Year	For	Abstain	Against
1970	Ireland	Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands	United Kingdom
1971	Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands	Belgium, Italy	France, United Kingdom
1972	Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands	Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg	United Kingdom
1973	Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands	France, United Kingdom	-

Source: the author.

A tension existed between the need not to alienate the Portuguese government and to preserve Western influence in its territories in Africa on the one hand, and the need to establish the EC as a clear critic of Portugal's colonial policy on the other hand, in order to respond to pressures and to highlight the liberal orientation of the EC as an international actor. This tension made it quite hard for the EC member states to agree on common initiatives targeting the Portuguese government or reaching out to its opponents. In the context of the EPC, agreement could be found only for the exertion of discreet bilateral pressures upon the Portuguese government, along with the adoption of some mild public position intended as a "display of 'good will' that could be used for the national public opinion and for the African governments".<sup>25</sup>

As the EC member states had adopted different approaches on the Portuguese colonial issues, it was difficult for them to deploy a coherent and comprehensive collective strategy. To be sure, those were very complex issues and even single states struggled to define effective policies towards them, thus the attempt at coordinating EC member states' policies was possibly over-ambitious. Accordingly, most of the efforts made in the context of the EPC were directed at achieving a minimum of divergence. However, even when common initiatives could be agreed upon – such as the release of a joint declaration or the performance of a common *démarche* –, they tended to be rather

weak and to lack the broad political support that was vital to nurture them. No member state was ready to strongly defend such initiatives from the criticisms that they could receive from the Third World countries and the opposers of colonialism on the one side and from the Portuguese government on the other side. In order to cover their differences, the EC member states tried to make use of some rhetorical devices, failing to convey a clear common position however – even if a general orientation in favour of the independence of the Portuguese territories could be discerned.

Even when the EC countries were able or about to agree on common positions and initiatives on the Portuguese colonial war, single member states sometimes broke with them, either by adopting more assertive bilateral initiatives or by withdrawing from the common initiatives themselves. For instance, Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland unilaterally adopted some of the more vocal initiatives that they had advocated. In the first place, their governments and diplomats repeatedly expressed criticism against the Portuguese colonial war in public. Secondly, they provided support to the liberation movements fighting against the Portuguese. To be sure, their support was not military but political and humanitarian in kind: for instance, the Netherlands allocated 12.5 million guilders (about 4.5 million dollars of the time) for African liberation movements in its budget for 1974. Finally, Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland tended to vote against Portugal at the UN, together with the developing countries and the Soviet bloc, and sometimes apart from the other EC countries.<sup>26</sup> As one more instance of unilateral initiative, in August 1974 the Netherlands broke the agreement reached by the EC countries for a joint recognition of the independence of Guinea-Bissau, in order to recognize it slightly in advance of its partners.<sup>27</sup>

To some extent, also the French government was wary of cooperating too closely with its EC partners, and it took advantage of some opportunities to defend and stress the autonomy of its policies towards Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, it opposed the release of some joint declarations on the Portuguese colonial issues, the joint recognition of Angola, the deployment of common missions to Southern African countries, and so on.<sup>28</sup> Even when all the EC partners were finally ready to launch a common *démarche* to the Portuguese government in spring 1974, France successfully blocked it. Among other concerns, the French were afraid that the definition of common EC positions on major African crises could play into the hands of those among its partners who wanted to elaborate common EC policies on Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, which was not regarded as a desirable development in Paris.<sup>29</sup> While the French policies in the region were certainly not as violent and repressive as the Portuguese ones, they were often labelled "neo-colonial" by critics both inside and outside Western Europe, including intellectuals, social movements and left-wing parties.

The initiative for the common *démarche* to the Portuguese government of spring 1974 was characteristic of the timidity of the EC countries' coordinated policies in favour of decolonization. The initiative started to be discussed late, only when international



pressure and the deterioration of Portugal's position had become too serious to be ignored further. The UN and Western European public opinion and civil society were paying more and more attention to it, and the impression of inactivity had become harder and harder for the EC to justify. Not very surprisingly, the initiative for a common *démarche* was launched by the Dutch government at the beginning of February 1974. Negotiations and discussions between the EC countries continued for weeks, occasionally becoming heated and reportedly unfolding in an "emotional atmosphere".<sup>30</sup> At the end, while all the other EC member states had found an agreement for a common *démarche*, France could only consent to a set of separate national *démarches* so as not to exert "collective pressure by the Nine",<sup>31</sup> which could reportedly upset the Portuguese counterparts.

As it was often the case with the making of the EC policies, collective discussions on the initiatives to be taken towards Portugal and its opposers could not keep the pace with the unfolding of external events. On 18-19 April 1974, the political directors of the EC member states were still estimating that "it would be difficult to reach a common position on this issue very quickly".<sup>32</sup> One week later, the Portuguese revolution broke out. The revolution made it much easier for the EC countries to agree on a common approach to the Portuguese colonial issues, since the new democratic government itself was overall in favour of decolonization. Indeed, the decolonization law of July 1974 opened the way for a fast accession of the colonies to independence. While the EC governments did continue to exert discreet pressures on this issue, they largely aligned themselves with the decisions of the new Portuguese authorities – the priority having shifted to ensuring a smooth transition in Lisbon and emboldening the democratic government. The EC provided support to Portugal both in political and economic terms, so that endorsement of the new policy of decolonization was complemented by the provision of financial and commercial assistance to the country.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, EC aid was granted to the former Portuguese colonies, most of which joined the Lomé system of development cooperation in a matter of years.

### Conclusions: a blueprint for the future

To a large extent, the Portuguese colonial war and decolonization process constituted the first case where the member states of the European Community collectively discussed about colonial policies and fundamental rights violations taking place outside Europe, and agreed on some joint initiatives to deploy against them. The EC debates and negotiations specifically concerned the Portuguese issue, but possessed most of the traits that would characterize the EC's position on many other cases of human rights violations abroad in the following decades, starting from South Africa and apartheid for instance.

As for the other cases of mobilization against the violation of fundamental rights in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Ferrari 2015, 2018), the EC debates on the Portuguese

colonial war were sparked by the pressures exerted by different actors, not by the governments' own initiative. The Western European governments decided to address the problems of Portuguese decolonization only because they were increasingly criticised and challenged by the Third World and Soviet countries, and by civil society actors within their own borders. However, skewed towards fundamental rights violations committed by Western governments, UN scrutiny was instrumental in putting decolonization and human rights issues on the international and European agenda. In its absence, the EC governments would have likely devoted less attention to them.

External pressures on governments are particularly effective when they combine with pressures coming from below. This was the case with the EC countries and Portuguese decolonization: EC governments were incited to act by the increasing attention that their public opinion was devoting to the colonial war, and by the specific mobilization of some civil society actors in some countries. To be sure, in the second half of the 1970s the EC member states took initiatives for the promotion of fundamental rights abroad even in the absence of a specific mobilization of their civil society – but the manifestation of citizens' increasing sensibility on these issues remained a key factor behind those policies (Ferrari 2016: 188–196). Despite the importance of the pressures coming from below, governments were still free to decide how to respond to them: as the case of the Netherlands showed, the sensitivity of parties and government members themselves was crucial in this respect.

With regard to the Portuguese colonial war, the EC governments found it hard to agree on common measures because they were divided between advocates of a prudent approach and advocates of a vocal approach. This was by no means a problem specific to this issue, but rather a lasting feature of the EC as a promoter of fundamental rights in foreign countries. Because of their different positions, in many cases the EC member states could reach agreement only on a limited number of joint initiatives, often requiring long negotiations. While an increasing concern with fundamental rights violations could be detected in the EC countries' collective discourse in the 1970s, the shift was more blurred at the level of actual policies. A clear cleavage existed between rhetoric and deeds, and the joint initiatives tended to be too timid and prudent to be effective, as the case of Portuguese decolonization clearly showed.

In fact, it could be argued that the struggle against colonialism and the violation of fundamental rights abroad was not the primary target of the initiatives of the EC countries. The origins of the EC countries' statements and policies suggest that the EC's engagement with individual and peoples' rights had quite an instrumental character. Two of the goals that prompted the EC governments to act were to respond to other actors' pressures and to contribute to the assertion of the EC as an international actor of its own, which had become one important political objective for them in the first half of the 1970s. Indeed, the EC started to express serious concerns with colonialism and human rights at the same time as it was trying to assert itself as a distinctive

international actor through the EPC system. In order to stress its novel profile, it was useful to take a distance from obsolete European empires.

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## NOTES:

1 - The European Coal and Steel Community was established in 1950, the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community in 1957. Their member states were France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, and starting from 1973 the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark. In 1993 the European Community was included in the new European Union.

2 - See for instance Archives Centrales de la Commission Européenne (ACCE), BAC 39/1986 535, European Council, *Declaration on democracy*, 8 April 1978.

3 - To be sure, Britain, France and the Netherlands did retain some colonial possessions at the time, but the large majority of their colonial empires had already obtained the independence.

4 - Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (AMAEF), Aff. politiques, Portugal 3519, de Guiringaud, *Note sur l'occupation illégale de la Guinée-Bissau par le Portugal*, La Courneuve, 12 November 1973.

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