

# Europe and the European Union: History, Present, Future

A Brief Lecture on Europe and the Notion of  
European Integration

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# **Europe and the European Union: History, Present, Future**

A Brief Lecture on Europe and the Notion of European Integration\*

*(with a List of Recommended Readings that Inspired this Lecture)*

by  
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\*\* I am a former European Commission official. The views expressed in this text are solely my own and are written in a personal capacity. They do not necessarily reflect the position or views of the European Commission or any of its institutions or bodies.

## 1. Introduction

Europe is in crisis; the European Union is in crisis. Difficult relations with neighbours close or further afield, war on our borders or further afield, economic crisis, concerns re competitiveness and energy prices, political crisis of trust within or between MS or toward the EU, fears of loss of sovereignty, cultural identity and immigration, scepticism or suspicion toward any further integration and enlarging the EU, advocating to leave or undermine the EU altogether.

This description has been largely a typical portrayal of the situation of the EU or EEC ever since its inception in 1957. I consider such narratives in fact an inherent part of European culture and history. As former Commission President Jacques Delors once said, "*Europe has always been a continent of questioning and doubt*". In that sense, the current crises we are facing (incl. Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, difficult relations with China and US, competitiveness and energy security issues, climate change, political shifts toward the hard-right and nationalism, questioning of the EU and democracy as a fundamental core of Member State values & EU integration, immigration debates and social media wars) are all par for the course. The names might change over time, many of the discussions do not.

This is not to say these crises are not real or minor. But from a long career in the European Commission, I cannot recall a time when there were no crises. In fact, the EU itself was created out of crisis: Traumas and devastation of war, fear of US, DE, or Soviet domination, discredited nationalism, decline of French and British power and loss of empire, economic worries, as well as the genuine desire to create a united Europe of peace and stability, all played a role in its creation, in order to leave behind, or confront, crises together. To quote one of the EU's founding fathers, Jean Monnet, in 1978: "*Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum*

*of the solutions adopted for those crises.”* And today, almost 50 years later, the EU still exists, larger and deeper integrated than ever before: not despite crisis but because of crisis. The EU could even be viewed as a crisis-management system to jointly cooperate, lessen conflicts, save efforts and create solidarity, and therefore better and more effectively deal with crisis that need to be faced by the Member States one way or another.

Anybody who has suffered memory loss can no longer remember who he or she is. It is the same for Member States and for Europe: Memory of the past, our history, of how things became, is crucial to our identity, values, and future. And I think in times of crisis it can be particularly useful to remember this history, for the hard-learned lessons and experience in the European context, to remember where it all came from, what it was that so many fought so hard for. We probably all need regular reminding & back to basics as we, all too easily and humanly, often tend to forget, take things for granted and lose perspective, hope and determination in this creeping process.

Many of these anxieties within and toward the EU seem to be based on a perceived loss of sovereignty as a Member State, often linked to concerns that integration is an attempt to eradicate or ‘harmonise’ social, political, historical, and/or cultural identity and nationhood. Although I’d argue that joining the EU increases sovereignty in any real sense of the word, these fears are based on an understandable and historically based misconception on what constitutes modern European integration. Above all this focuses on economic integration through the Internal Market and EMU, based on common values. What it is not, is any kind of imposed and enforced attempt to eradicate historical cultural, religious or social identities: ‘Old’ European integration. This fear of forced loss of diversity is a very

typical -and paradoxical- European anxiety, always eagerly abused by populists who noticed it never fails to touch a nerve.

## **2. The European Paradox: Unifying Europe**

Visions of a united Europe have a long history behind them. The roots of this idea can be found already in the political unity of the Roman Empire and in the ideological solidarity, at least in theory, of early and medieval Christianity. The dissolution of the (West) Roman Empire over the 4th-6th centuries left Europe with a legacy of Greek and Roman foundations, the Church as only surviving institute of the Roman Empire, and the myth of unity, all still with us today.

The longest long-term attempt to unify Europe following Rome was through Christianity, itself not of European origin but a Western Asian cultural invasion as one of many Judaic sects in a rather obscure part of the Roman Empire. From small beginnings, Christianity rose to conquer Europe through a long, complicated and often bloody process. The concept of Europe as one Christian Commonwealth under one supreme temporal leader, the (Roman) Emperor, and one supreme spiritual leader, the Pope, dates back at least as far as the 9th century Carolingian Renaissance, and certainly the 'Holy emperors of the Romans', 13th century Frederick II and 16th century Charles V, saw eye to eye with 9<sup>th</sup> century Charlemagne on an agenda of -forced- unification through conquest. Subsequent major military attempts for unification include Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Hitler and Stalin, all under the banner of various other very European ideologies of nationalism, fascism, antisemitism and communism, all claiming superiority with the right to forcibly conquer and impose unification.

In one sense, European history can be regarded as a continuous attempt to re-create the dream of Roman Empire unity, and seen that way the EU is merely the latest

such effort. There is a good deal of idealism here with a serious attempt to overcome the deep devastation nation-states had wrought on Europe and its citizens, an old dream expressed in new ways, this time through voluntary and democratic means to create enduring and sustainable peace and prosperity in a context of '*ever closer union*'. This is the stated political objective of the EU in the Treaties. It is deliberately set as a process with no clear or obvious ending point like a federal Europe (although that might well have been the hope of many at the time). Despite, or because of this, the EU could then start, and continue, a unique democratic experiment in deep regional integration, considerably more successful than originally hoped for.

Over time, Europe mixed Greek, Roman, Germanic and Christian notions of freedom; Freedom to equal participation in political decisions; Freedom from abuse by the govt.; Freedom of aristocratic warriors to decide to action for their tribe or nation; Freedom from the world in humble service to God. Further intermingling with mostly Christian concepts of the individual (all are equal before God) and ideas of solidarity and service to community left a complex and powerful legacy of ideas constantly created, repressed, and revived. They were further developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation, then Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Many of the concepts developed over this time constitute the deep historical roots of modern Western liberalism and values. This includes the notions of a pluralistic and secular democratic nation-state based on rule-of-law, and an emphasis on individual rights, equality, human dignity and social justice. These were fundamental notions of what came to be considered as '*European values*', all usually set in MS constitutional law and in the EU Treaties.

These values were however not mainly developed because so many Europeans were particularly enlightened! On the one hand, any deviation of the law, secular

or divine, was considered deeply threatening and undermining social order, if not endangering your soul. It hence had to be repressed. Yet at the same time people in Europe kept insisting on developing own ideas on community, religion, and individuality, thereby constantly questioning established authority. This in turn almost forcibly introduced or reinforced notions of political, national, social and religious pluralism and tolerance, simply to achieve a workable coming to terms with diversity, to survive as a nation or society. This difficult lesson came mostly only after first exhausting all -usually long and violent- efforts at forced repression and domination, showing the ultimate futility, costs, and impossibility of such attempts in Europe; Europe cannot be united by force. A good example is the 1648 Peace of Westphalia to end the 30-Year War, the most deadly of the European wars of religion, and which established the concepts of religious toleration and territorial sovereignty among European nations, the foundation for the modern state system. But WWs I&II, the Cold War, the wars in Yugoslavia and many others in Europe could also be viewed in such a light.

Although deeply historically rooted, the term "European values" itself only arose in the 1980s-90s context of Eur. integration and successful EU Enlargement eastwards. They were reflected e.g. in the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria for EU Membership on democracy, market economy and committing to EU law, and are a fundamental part of the EU Treaties. These values have been much discussed, not only for EU pre-accession countries but now also increasingly for MS themselves in the context of extremist right-wing nationalistic political shifts in several MS and EP. In the face of this, it is all the more important to unflinchingly remember our past and then what has been achieved in Europe since the 1958 Treaty of Rome. It has become clear that these core values cannot ever be taken for granted: Dangers are never far away of being overtaken once again by other European ideologies and based on sheer size, might, and fear of the other.

As I noted earlier, this strong emphasis on law has always been a particularly European feature and leads right into today's insistence on EU levels on legal procedures and foundations, and the formalistic and legal institutional settings in which EU governance and EU integration takes place. The *acquis communautaire*, or body of EU law, is considered the legal cornerstone of European integration. This in turn is directly related to the fundamental notion that the same rules should apply equally to all members of a community, a 'level playing field' founded on the notion of equality under the law and further reinforced by traumatic real-life experiences of most if not all current MS in a long European history of attempted domination of some over all others.

### **3. The European Paradox: Fragmenting Europe/Diversity**

It should be clear by now that striving for European unity is only half the story. In a just as typical European fashion, direct countervailing forces would inevitably arise, pushing toward separation: Resisting any perceived forced unity through domination was similarly part&parcel of European culture.

This continuous struggle between opposing ideas with mixed roots is what gives European history such a special flavour. It is at the heart of what I call the 'European paradox': the never-ending confrontation between opposing ideas of unity and diversity. Despite visions and attempts of one unified European commonwealth, Europe also always showed a stubborn resistance to political, cultural, social, intellectual and religious centralisation.

A hallmark or defining quality of Europe, then, is diversity with many centres. This would at first sight seem a weakness leading to chaos, divisiveness, indecision and breakdown, and making it harder to create unified power. However, in the



European context it encouraged economic and political competition, liberty and critical thinking, which would prevent lasting domination or dictatorship by any group. It was diversity that pushed Europe to become the only traditional society that modernised itself from within, intellectually no less than technologically and economically. One reason European rulers found it useful to encourage innovation and niches of liberty was that they had to make do with less; powerful, but not that powerful.

This is not to say diversity can only be found in Europe, but competition on efficient use of resources and labour might have acted as a stronger incentive than elsewhere, like in the vast empires in Asia and Middle East. Economic and historical research confirms diversity as a common denominator of factors creating growth, innovation and societal resilience. For Europe it proved fertile ground for astounding economic development, also early on rooted in the scientific and technical revolution of the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century and achieving world economic domination from the 15<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, until the WWII self-destruct.

Attempts to deal with diversity other than by repression start already with an early Medieval monastic insight by St Benedict that *unity does not require uniformity*, a concept to respect diversity within orthodox consensus. Similarly, there is the 12<sup>th</sup> century university motto "*In varietate concordia*" or "*United in diversity*" - also the official motto of the EU. These concepts can be found again in the current-day EU Single Market principle of mutual recognition of rules, the crucial political and judicial breakthrough that allowed successful opening of MS markets from the mid-1980s onward, addressing diversity and pluralism yet at the same time built on trust, shared values and unification. Another example is the concept of subsidiarity, enshrined in the EU Treaties, once again a very European concept introduced

against ‘too much’ centralisation in that decisions should only be taken on EU level if objectives of proposed actions cannot be sufficiently achieved by the MS.

#### **4. Modern European Integration**

In post-war Europe crises have so far tended to push toward deeper EU integration rather than disintegration. This is perhaps surprising but is in fact solidly based on a compelling and dynamic logic through strong MS interdependence created through the Internal Market (albeit still unfinished business). Cross-border crisis each time in the end pushed toward creating new joint EU-level action, shifting away from the politically unthinkable to the necessary. There are dozens of examples on this, just to name for instance increasing cooperation on the back of energy- , economic- and exchange rate crisis in the 1970s and 80s; MS homeland security cooperation after 09/11; Financial market- and govt deficit & debt oversight rules following the 2008 financial crisis; Cooperation on health care in the 2020 COVID crisis and on defence, energy and sustainable development following the energy- and security crisis after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Looking at European integration and the MS is a bit like watching a flock of birds swirling and swirling over a winding country road in apparently aimless movement. An hour later, they're still swirling – but they are half a mile down that road. There is no doubt about the enormous historical, economic, political and social benefits of peace and prosperity that modern European integration has brought, with EU Enlargement as very successful and powerful instrument, still unfinished. This process is sometimes called the 'transformative power of Europe' and gave the EU the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize for “*advancing peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe*” after CEEC countries joined the EU, lifting the east-west division and settling many ethnically based national conflicts.

But what about the present and future? As I noted in the beginning, the EU, we, are facing multiple crisis: existential-threat climate change, economic and political crisis, a humanitarian refugee crisis and immigration used by populists to instil cultural and nationalistic fears, the Russian war in the Ukraine, difficult relations with the US and China, threats to democracy both within and from outside the EU. To respond to this, the question, as ever, is which idea in the European paradox will take the upper hand: Increasing unity to deal with these challenges in constructive ways, or fragmentation leading to breakdown?

Some have stated that radical US policies under a populist, and potential dictator president, will pose a direct threat to EU prosperity, security, sustainability and democracy, and Europe's emphasis on multilateralism and diplomacy. The war in Ukraine and antagonistic relations with Russia and China, and the other crises I just mentioned, further compound those dangers. I would agree that a united front to defend and invest in Europe should be a core EU strategic objective, with European values as a compass. To do so, national capitals indeed need to understand they really need to intensify their level of cooperation. If pro-European forces do not do this, countervailing political fringes will continue to grow, and endanger what the EU achieved and stands for. I understand suggestions that, if need be, this is done among a sub-group of MS, and then for others to follow, or not. But moving towards a more differentiated EU will be difficult politically, goes against the grain of EU philosophy, and bring legal and institutional risks. At the same time, it is argued that these risks might well be outweighed by the urgent need to overcome internal blockades and enhance the EU's capacity to act, and it is perhaps difficult to disagree.

## **5. Future with Remembrance of the Past**

So far, however, in the face of a long series of crisis, both deep integration with cooperation as well EU Enlargement have proven to be successful. So far, again, as a crisis-management system and confidence-building measure it performed far beyond earlier expectations, and this was perhaps not against the odds. I still see no compelling reason why this process should falter now or in the future.

However, if we do not want our common futures to disintegrate into our fragmented pasts, we do need to get away from the current '*age of forgetting*,' as the great British historian Tony Judt called it. In debates on dark or bright futures of European integration, our difficult shared past seems often forgotten; perhaps a sign of success, but also a danger.

Like life itself, European integration is both strong and fragile, and always under threat, especially when taken for granted. Therefore, in order to keep creating sustainable futures linked to our common deeply rooted values, we need to be to be regularly reminded of our past: the stories of our identities, of how we became.

## List of Recommended Readings that Inspired this Lecture

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