

The Double Death of Europe

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

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Introduction: the broken promise of peace and prosperity

The continual crisis in the Eurozone and in Ukraine poses the most serious danger to Europe since the darkest days of the Cold War. Economic devastation in the south and war in the east cast a long shadow over the European Union and the wider Europe. Arguably the post-1945 promise of peace and prosperity no longer holds. The 28 EU member-states are home to high standards of living for many and the biggest single market with over 550 million consumers, but the 2008 crash exposed the sheer precariousness of the much-vaunted European social models and ways of life. Without a radically different settlement, the Union faces the paradox of a richer economy with poorer people. Amid rising inequality and persistently high youth unemployment, there is a very real prospect that this generation of 18-25 year olds and their children's generation will be worse off than their parents' generation.



Moreover, the 'peace dividend' after 1989 was largely squandered. Old divisions between the West and Russia are more entrenched while new conflicts threaten the whole of Europe, starting with the forces of Islamic State who are radicalising European-born Muslims. Both NATO and the EU currently lack the strategic vision to deal with these threats and build a security architecture that can pacify the European space and its wider orbit. Of course, the Brussels-centric process of European integration and enlargement will continue, but the transformative dynamic of uniting the whole of Europe after the end of the Cold War has ground to a halt.

Europe's strategic void

Both the EU and the European non-West (especially Russia and Turkey) face three threats for which they seem ill prepared:

1. geopolitical instability in relation to Ukraine, the so-called 'frozen conflicts' (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia), and the growing influence of Islamic State in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA);
2. economic uncertainty in terms of the Eurozone, the dangers of 'Grexit' and 'Brexit' as well as secular stagnation and regression (including slow growth, debt overhang, insufficient investment in R&D and persistently low productivity levels);
3. cultural insecurity for growing numbers of citizens for whom the financial precariousness that was exposed by the economic crash combines with long-standing feelings of social dislocation and cultural disorientation to produce a dread of abandonment.

All this fuels the insurgent forces on the radical left and the radical right that seek to mobilise populations against the technocratic establishment in Brussels and most national capitals. Neither the EU nor its competitors and adversaries in Moscow and Ankara have a strategic vision to confront these threats.

Crucially, across the whole of Europe we are seeing tactical positioning and reactive improvisation rather than strategic thinking and long-term planning. First of all, all sides show signs of 'strategic autism', blaming others for conflict and refusing to take responsibility (e.g. Ukraine). Second, Europe's great powers suffer from the 'strategic deficiency' syndrome, lacking in social intelligence to put themselves in other people's shoes and finding common

ground, such as shared self-interest (e.g. fighting Islamic State). Third, both 'hard' and 'soft' power approaches have failed to create a pan-European security architecture that can pacify Europe and the surrounding regions which are among the most volatile areas of the globe, especially the countries of MENA.

Europe's strategic void bodes ill for peace and prosperity. As the USA shifts its geostrategic focus towards Asia-Pacific, Europe seems increasingly split between pro-Atlantic and pro-Eurasian countries – with Germany stuck in some 'Middle-European' grey zone. Without a shared strategic outlook or overarching political narrative, Europe's great powers are drifting apart. Moreover, the old ideological confrontation of left vs. right and East vs. West has largely given way to a new cultural clash between liberal-cosmopolitan and conservative-communitarian values – as exemplified by the increasing antagonism between the EU and Russia. Indeed, there is a growing gap between a cosmopolitan EU and a reactionary Russia. Whereas the Union seeks to pursue Rousseau's and Kant's Enlightenment project of a post-national federation of states, Russia seems to follow the counter-Enlightenment of de Maistre and Fichte: strengthening the national community against both foreign influence and minority demands.

For all its attempts to become a global actor, the EU struggles to create stability in its shared neighbourhood with Russia and Turkey. By syndicating its values across Europe and beyond, the Union tries to project normative power but it now faces the most serious identity crisis since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. The EU's own normative basis is becoming the instrument of contestation and conflict, as the language of Western liberal democracy and individual human rights contributes to civilisational tensions with Russia and other countries. At its worst, Brussels claims a monopoly on universal values that it dictates to others – along with homogenous standards that undermine genuine cultural diversity. All this reduces the space for particularity and political subjectivity, which enables peoples and countries to recover a sense of agency and the ability to shape the future, not follow it.

The EU's crisis of legitimacy

The turmoil within the Eurozone and on the EU's eastern border has exacerbated a growing crisis of legitimacy that is most clearly evinced by the sharp decline in popular support for the European project. The Union's crisis of legitimacy goes far beyond the well-known (but often poorly understood) 'democratic deficit'. Every system of representation is in 'deficit' compared with the strict standards of democracy and representative government, as elected representatives can neither have an all-encompassing mandate nor be fully accountable for all the decisions they have to make as part of the executive or the legislature. In this sense, the 'democratic deficit' is an inherent feature of political representation, but it is quite different from a crisis of legitimacy, which concerns the lack of public trust and popular assent. Legitimate rule transcends formal arrangements and procedures because it involves at least three core capacities: first, to make a political system intelligible to its members; second, to mobilise civic consent; third, to engage citizens. The EU falls well short on all three accounts.

This has to do with the Union's political set-up. National parliaments and the European Parliament unwittingly succeed in discrediting each other. For the increased powers of the EP are not counterbalanced by its enhanced authority. By contrast, national parliaments retain authority but have less and less power. The widening discrepancy between power and authority constitutes a very dangerous dialectic that is gradually eroding the remaining popular support for European integration. Under pressure from political parties and the media to defend the national interest, governments who make decisions behind closed doors in all-night EU ministerial meetings in Brussels seem increasingly unable to command consent. In turn, this creates a growing gap between Europe's ruling elites and its citizens.

This, coupled with the triumph of a vacuously centrist pragmatism embraced by the mainstream parties that are variously more left- or more right-wing but liberal all the same, helps account for the recent upsurge in support for the extreme left and right that seek to fill the ideological vacuum. Thus the Union needs a political project that can shape political debate and reconnect political classes to popular sentiment and public opinion. The EU used to have a shared 'political narrative' that rested on mutual market interest, state welfare and European social models. But this post-war settlement no longer captures the reality that most European citizens face on a daily basis. Moreover, the Union confronts the double danger of deconstructing both the nation-state and national identity while so far

failing in the attempt to build the first transnational political community in modern history.

Herein lies the reason for political extremism and popular alienation from the European project. The breakdown of national social imaginaries is the source for radicalisation on both the left and the right, chief of all the excesses of multiculturalism and post-national citizenship whereby foreign minority claims seem to take precedence over indigenous majority interests. As a result, growing numbers of citizens across Europe question representative democracy and the institutions of both state and market that collude with special interests at the expense of ordinary people. But since there is no widely shared European narrative or European citizenship, people end up rallying around the nation-state and national myths (or populist versions that are filling the void). Without a proper democratic mandate, neither national governments nor the supranational decision-making bodies of the EU will be able to command popular assent and address the legitimacy crisis that threatens the post-war European project as a whole.

Conclusion: multi-speed EU and multi-polar Europe

The twin crisis in the eurozone and in Ukraine has shifted the dynamic from the centripetal forces that unified the Union between 1957 and the early 1990s to the centrifugal forces that divide it along three lines: first, the euro-area core and periphery; second, Eurozone members (and candidates such as Poland) and the rest of the EU; third, EU member-states (and accession countries) and the 'European non-West' (especially Russia and Turkey). The dominant models and methods of cooperation within the EU continue to fuel the centrifugal forces that exacerbate both integration fatigue and risk breaking the Union asunder.

Amid these deepening divisions, Europe requires a new political narrative and a shared strategic outlook, starting with the EU. It needs to abandon procedure as a substitute for politics and policy, and revert to first principles – solidarity (providing mutual assistance to the most needy among Europe's peoples and nations) and subsidiarity (self-government at the most appropriate level in accordance with the dignity of the person and human flourishing). The Union is neither a federal super-state in the making nor a glorified free-trade area but rather a neo-medieval 'empire', which pools national sovereignty and views states more like 'super-regions' in a wider subsidiary association of nations and peoples. In such a polity with overlapping jurisdictions and multiple levels of membership, states are key because they balance the rightful claims of localities and regions with the rightful claims of Europe as a whole. Paradoxically, a Europe that applies the principles of mutuality, reciprocity and solidarity will speak to its local needs and global responsibility.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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