

The European Union: Still a Global Player?

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European Union Flag

A sense of gloom and doom pervades current analysis of the European Union. Among the union's commentators, Charles Kupchan [recently announced that the EU is dying a slow death](#); Timothy Garton Ash [warned that the EU is sleepwalking to decline](#); and George Soros wrote [a detailed analysis of the fatal deficiencies of the euro setup](#).

The pessimists hint at the possibility of actual disintegration, while the most charitable accounts point to the rejuvenating potential of this "wake-up moment." The heart of the problem is not so much the battered European economies or the Greek or Italian indebtedness, but the uncomfortable family secrets that have come in the open: the tenuous links of solidarity among member states, the fact that Germany can no longer be counted on to underwrite the integration project, the rising nationalistic

rhetoric, and the shaky foundations of one of the union's major achievements and symbols, the euro. To the casual observer, it may be hard to see what holds EU member states together. It is no surprise then that the EU, this bold experiment in integration of like-minded democracies, has lost some of its credibility as an international leader. Can it gain it back?

There have been several challenges to the EU's international stature over the last year. First, and most serious, the eurozone crisis has severely damaged its reputation and its self-confidence. Second, a series of international embarrassments seem to suggest a diminished international position. For example, while the EU rightfully prides itself on being a global environmental leader (its environmental standards are among the strictest in the world and its emissions cuts commitments are by far the most ambitious), it was effectively sidelined in the final Copenhagen talks in December 2009: there were no representatives from Europe in the room when the final accord was signed between the United States, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. A few months later, Obama's decision to skip the annual EU-U.S. summit was interpreted as another U.S. slight—despite the fact that these summits are little more than a photo-op opportunity. And, when EU members fretted over the lack of "visibility" of the union's aid effort in Haiti they were giving voice to a general sense of frustration with the lack of recognition for the EU's contribution to global challenges. Most recently, the EU failed to secure speaking rights at the UN, mainly because it didn't manage to build the necessary support among UN member states.

Are these isolated incidents or signs of a more permanent shift in the EU's global standing? The high-level 2010 report to the European Council by the Reflection Group on the Future of the EU draws a dark picture of long-term trends. It warns that the EU risks international marginalization if it does not assert its interests and values abroad, becoming an "increasingly irrelevant western peninsula of the Asian continent." The report lists well-known structural problems: aging populations, hostility to immigration, relatively low levels of investment in research and development, and a foreign policy that is feeble and non-coherent. Taken together, these faults amount to an inability to respond to a rapidly changing world—that, according to the authors, constitutes the greatest danger to the EU as we know it. The economic and currency crisis has compounded the problem, making Europeans more likely to turn their

backs to the outside world, more distrustful of each other, and less confident in the union's capacities.

Muddling Through

The demise of the EU has been forecast, wrongly, in the past. After all, it was not long after *The Economist* featured its tombstone on its cover in 1982 that the then European Economic Community embarked on its most ambitious program to date: the creation of the single market. The union has mastered the art of "muddling through:" it is a slow-moving beast, it often adopts lower-common-denominator policies, it changes incrementally, yet nevertheless one of its biggest strengths is its adaptability and flexibility. Since there's no agreement on the final shape of the European Union project, Europeans have the freedom to innovate with institutional design, accommodating changing circumstances and diverse national interests. The flip side of this is, of course, that what may be a virtue at home is not so in foreign affairs where the ability to speak with one voice, to plan strategically, and to act decisively is key.

As Andrew Moravcsik [argued recently in *Newsweek*](#), there is very little likelihood that the EU will fall apart—simply because it is in the self-interest of its members to sustain it. As he writes, "European countries consistently find common solutions not because they are sentimental believers in the European ideal but because they inhabit the world's most economically interdependent continent. They have no choice but to cooperate." For Moravcsik, the durability of the European project is due precisely to the fact that at its heart the project is about the "hard calculation of self-interest."

Moravcsik's analysis is consistent with the concept of the union as a "manager of globalization." In this view, the EU shields the population from the worst effects of globalization while allowing the member states to compete more effectively on the world stage. It is the size of the market of 500 million (relatively) well-off consumers that determines the Union's international standing and the reason why its regulatory standards—on mobile technology, chemicals safety, or data protection among others—dominate globally.

Yet, critics contend, if pragmatic interest means the EU is here to stay, muddling through may no longer be adequate in a world where others are surging ahead; and the EU has yet solve the perennial problem of translating economic weight into political clout abroad.

Losing the Plot

The benefits of the EU as a "manager of globalization" may be evident to trade economists, but the concept holds little emotional appeal for European publics, who have become increasingly disengaged and distanced from EU politics and for many of whom the EU stands for the exact same dangers of globalization that it's supposed to protect them from. Many EU citizens don't know what their union is for and what it aspires to be. The tacit consensus upon which the EU was built was officially over by the time the French and the Dutch rejected the proposed EU constitution in 2005. In the 2010 Eurobarometer survey, 49 percent of EU citizens did not see membership as a "good thing," the lowest result in seven years. Their leaders often play to and feed this disaffection, conveniently pointing fingers at Brussels when politically expedient at home.

The lack of a shared vision may be more harmful to the project than is commonly acknowledged. As an imagined community, the EU does not rely, as a state does, on common language, common history, or ethnic bonds to ensure its legitimacy and continuity—instead, it's a self-willed project of values and shared goals.

In this sense, as Timothy Garton Ash has argued extensively, the EU sorely needs a new narrative for the 21st century. The EU project held much idealistic promise in the wake of WWII; it was an inspiring example of a peaceful community built upon the ashes of the war. It also meant standing together against an external threat. Against the expectations of many, when the Berlin Wall fell and the threat disappeared, the union, under the leadership of Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterrand, proceeded with political integration, paving the way for expansion to the East. The eastern enlargement, while certainly

controversial, rejuvenated the integration project and brought it economic and geopolitical gains; it had high symbolic power in that it was portrayed as righting historical wrongs and "bringing Europe together"—a long-due rescue of (in Milan Kundera's expression) "the kidnapped Europe."

These two animating ideals, however, are no longer driving the EU project—enlargement has led to disillusionment, while peace is simply taken for granted, as are the numerous practical benefits of integration. Today, for the first time since the establishment of the Steel and Coal Community in the 1950s, there's no obvious grand project ahead for the EU, no new treaty reforms on the horizon, and no apparent goals with symbolic value to pursue. The negotiation process with the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey is highly controversial, while the borders to the east have solidified. This lull is alarming to federalists who argue for more political integration and welcome to those who prefer a looser union and the status quo. While the lack of activity does seem to accentuate the sense of loss of direction, the real question for the EU should not be "What's next?" but "What do we want to achieve in the new century?"

Taking the Global Seriously

For a brief optimistic moment before the economic downturn, it was believed that the EU could forge a new identity by taking up a more active global role. If its first 50 years were spent building internal institutions and policies, the argument went, now it was time to take up its external responsibilities. Projecting power simply by serving as an example was no longer enough: an "ethical power Europe" would be able to act as a force for good in the world, including, if necessary, through military means. Today, as [Richard Gowan](#) of the European Council on Foreign Relations points out, these heady days are over: the idea of ethical power Europe has been shelved, while the EU (not unlike the U.S.) has taken to emphasizing its weakness rather than its strength.

There is, however, reason to believe that the idea will survive the present crisis and perhaps provide some of the glue that will hold the union together. For one, a rapidly changing global environment, and the eroding boundaries between internal and external affairs, demand that the EU continue to define its place in the world. The union has no choice but to resolve the inevitable tensions between economic challenges, military cutbacks, and loss of social protections at home, on one hand, and the need to articulate a strategic global vision, on the other. The member states have at their disposal a great supply of economic, diplomatic, and military means to play an active global role, while the EU platform multiplies their individual strengths. Despite the current difficulties, for the foreseeable future, the EU will remain the world's main economic power and its second military power. Foreign and defense policy cooperation is a relative latecomer to EU policy-making, but real strides have been made since the 1990s with more than 20 civilian and military missions launched. The Lisbon treaty adopted in December 2009 has created the institutional framework for a more coherent external representation and a new, beefed-up diplomatic service is in the works. The union's neighborhood policy contains much untapped potential for improving governance and sustaining reform in the countries of the Mediterranean and the union's eastern neighbors. The recent sanctions against Iran show that the EU is no less determined to apply the tools at its disposal to pursue its objectives abroad. Over the years, the EU has developed a distinctive EU "soft power" approach to external affairs, based on its power of attraction to trade partners and potential members and on the promotion of the rule of law, multilateralism, and human rights. Agreeing on defense matters has been more controversial. At the same time, the need for military cooperation to achieve efficiency is becoming more evident and receiving increasing attention, prompted by concern over national military budget cuts.

The EU has had a hard time convincing outsiders that it should be taken seriously as a unitary global actor, but that doesn't mean that its attempts to solve the puzzle of how to represent 27 nations externally are not serious in their intent. Rising euroscepticism notwithstanding, foreign policy is one area where Europeans would be willing to give more power to the European institutions. According to Eurobarometer data,¹ a majority of Europeans would prefer decision-making in the following areas to be made jointly at the EU level: defense and external relations, the fight against terrorism, scientific and technological research, environmental protection, energy, immigration, and the economy. Moreover, the aspirational aspects of the concept of "ethical power" have a strong emotional appeal and are in line with

Europeans' support for a broadly defined global cosmopolitan agenda. For example, Europeans' support for strong social protections at home is matched by their concern for poverty abroad. Europeans have ranked global poverty and climate change as the two most serious problems facing the world today. Young Europeans in particular are committed to the environmental agenda, and we can expect that the EU will continue to drive global efforts on climate change. In addition, 79 percent of Europeans say that it is important for the EU institutions to fund humanitarian activities outside the EU.

In short, EU citizens already expect the European Union to act in the world on their behalf and they expect it to do so in socially responsible ways. The missing link seems to be leadership and vision, in particular on behalf of national leaders who are in charge of defining the EU's external stance. To escape the current crisis of confidence, they need to tap into the potential of these broadly shared beliefs and goals to further build up the capacity of the EU to deliver them.

NOTES

1 Eurobarometers, surveys conducted by the European Commission, monitor public opinion in the EU. The data below is from Standard Eurobarometer 73, EB 72, Special EB 322 Europeans' Attitudes towards Climate Change, and Special EB 343 Humanitarian Aid.

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