

# Europe in Turmoil

## Lessons from the History of European Integration

*Festvortrag von Kiran Klaus Patel von der Universität Maastricht auf der Jahresversammlung  
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It is a great honor to speak to you today.

Dear Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues! We Europeans, we have a problem with the European Union: We do not find a middle ground. Brexit is a good example for this. How do we speak about the EU? Basically, there is only two versions. Either, the EU is seen as the magic bullet, solving all our imminent problems, and hence we should finally bring it to full fruition. Alternatively, the EU is seen as the worst thing possible: a bureaucratic, undemocratic juggernaut, destabilizing our country economically and culturally. Similarly, we might wonder about the EU's future, for which there are also two irreconcilable versions: is it on the verge of collapse, or weathering the storm rather well? **(Slide 1)** Street artist Banksy's 2017 mural can be read in either way: Either as an image of an EU in lethal crisis, on the verge of being torn down. **(Slide 1.1)** Or as a story of a lonely man on a wobbly ladder who might destroy the star while

leaving little mark on the wall. This is the reason why Banksy's work is such a pointed comment on our times.

We Europeans – and many others – have problems finding a middle ground with regard to the European Union, an EU that often looks like a land without a past. Who is able to name three or four of its major turning points? Where, and how, do we teach its history in a way that is scholarly rigorous but also exciting?

We have problems finding a middle ground and a balanced view, even if that is more needed than ever. For such a view, a critical analysis of the past is indispensable, and this is exactly what I will try to do in this presentation. So, I would like to invite you to look at the history of European union with fresh eyes – and to think about the lessons that this past holds for us today. I would like to exemplify this by quickly discussing the most obvious example – the question of whether European integration contributed to peace. The website of the European Commission's representation in Germany offers a succinct answer: "For 70 years, the EU has been guaranteeing peace" – not very surprisingly, one does not find the same line on the Commission's representation in the UK. And others are much more critical. Brexiteers such as Boris Johnson argue that the EU did not contribute to peace at all, that only NATO played such a role at the international level. Today, I would like to offer you a short historical analysis which offers a different view. Taking it from there, I would like to draw a few more general lessons from the history of European union for today.

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So, let's start by asking: to what extent did the EU's predecessors contribute to creating or guaranteeing peace? A question that seems obvious, even if some of the answers might be surprising, particularly if one does not just look at motives, but also at effects.

At the level of motives, peace was certainly a central reason why postwar politicians and citizens aimed to create something like European union. **(Slide 2)** On 9 May 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed the founding of a European community of coal and steel – in many ways the first step that led to the EU of today. On that day, he argued that such a community would ensure that “any war between France and Germany becomes not only unthinkable, but materially impossible”. As such Schuman tied cooperation in this sector, central to modern warfare, directly to the question of peace. And Schuman knew what he was talking about. He had been born in 1886, having his father's then German nationality. During World War One, Schuman worked in the German administration, during World War Two, he joined the French *résistance*. He knew from own experience about the fragility of peace. The idea of overcoming Europe's bloody past clearly drove his policies.

Having said this, peace was never the only motive for European integration – to stick to the level of motives for another moment. The Schuman Declaration supplies a good example: The French government only resorted to the proposal after all other initiatives to contain Germany politically had failed, and plans for close cooperation with the United Kingdom had also been derailed. Economic interests frequently mingled with geostrategic considerations. Schuman was certainly interested in preventing war, above all another war with Germany. But integration also represented

an attractive and innovative instrument for securing French predominance in Western Europe's emerging post-war order. National interests also shaped the motives of the other founding fathers of today's EU, such as Paul-Henri Spaak, Konrad Adenauer or Alcide De Gasperi.

And, more importantly: Public discourse and also research have so far mostly focused on motives, not on effects – though ultimately, effects should count as more important. The European Coal and Steel Community of 1952, resulting from Schuman's Declaration, had a very mixed record on securing peace. It became dysfunctional in important respects within just a few years. And, more importantly: The predecessors of the EU emerged too late to contribute to peace through any real influence on the shape of the post-war order in Europe. The decisive actors in that process were the nation states, and at the international level a long series of negotiations and treaties that began while the Second World War was still in progress. The establishment of this international arrangement, too, was well under way by the time the precursors of today's EU emerged onto the scene with the European Coal and Steel Community of 1951 and the Treaties of Rome of 1957, i.e. the organizations that formed the EC and later the EU (**Slide 3**).

The EU was not only established too late to create peace in postwar Europe. In the era of the Cold War, it even deepened the confrontation between East and West. When for instance the Treatises of Rome were concluded in 1957, the Soviet Foreign Ministry stressed that this would lead to “further deepening of the division of Europe and heightening of tensions within Europe.” This Czechoslovak caricature from the same year saw things very similarly (**Slide 4**).

Even if one takes the Cold War as given and ask if the EU's predecessors strengthened the western camp vis-à-vis the East, the result is mixed. The EC was only one international organization in Western Europe among many. One of the others was the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). **(Slide 5)** Founded in 1960 explicitly as a rival economic and above all trade formation, it brought together most of the Western European states that did not join the EC. Western Europe split into two camps, and found itself unable to address the Eastern Bloc with a single voice. This applied in the first place to the economic realm, but also had security implications. In 1955, with the division of Western Europe already becoming apparent, Washington pressed for unity. Secretary of State John F. Dulles appealed to London, as the prime mover behind the EFTA project: Washington wished to avoid fragmentation, he said, and hoped "that we can count upon your Government's support." The cajoling went largely unheeded.

To summarize: During its first two decades, the EU's role in creating or guaranteeing peace was rather low. It profited more from the brutal, fragile peace of the early Cold War than it contributed practically.

But this is not the full story. The political leaders of postwar Western Europe never put all their eggs in one basket. Under the benevolent hegemony of the United States, they created a whole host of international organizations and security systems, and hence several "Europes" **(Slide 6)**. Among these, the EC did not stand out. NATO was more important with regard to security concerns; the Council of Europe took care of human rights issues, but e.g. also of educational and cultural policies. The EC had a strong focus on economic matters, but so did the OECD or the little known UNECE. It is easy to get confused by this alphabet soup of organizations, Indeed, post-war

cooperation in Western Europe become a maze of partly overlapping, partly competing organizations, along with bilateral agreements, so that it is easy to lose track. Against this backdrop, the EC was not THE alternative to nation-centered forms of policy-making but a rather fragile, latecomer in an already densely-populated field of international organizations.

This system was complex, but it had clear advantages, despite its overlaps and rivalries. It allowed political elites to see which of these organizations did particularly well. Moreover, there was another positive effect. Conflicts between member states were often restricted to just one of the forums, and as such contained. When President de Gaulle paralyzed the EC for six months in 1965 with the crisis of the empty chair (one of the many crises of the organization), France still continued to fulfil its obligations in the Council of Europe, OECD and elsewhere. The multiplicity of organizations gave rise to a division of labor and informal balance that over time proved to be remarkably robust.

But let's return to the question of peace. I now need to qualify my earlier argument that the early EC did not contribute much to creating or guaranteeing peace, and I need to do so in four ways. Firstly, the EC did stabilize peace since the 1960s within the EC by creating a culture of compromise and cooperation; through the establishment of trust between elites within the Community. This was fundamentally different to the nationalistic and self-centered policies that had characterized politics in interwar Europe. Former Wehrmacht officers, resistance fighters and collaborators now worked side by side, trying to solve the economic and social problems of their time. Let's take this picture of the first EC Commission, taken in 1964 (**Slide 7**), as an example. The Commission's president was Walter Hallstein, a Christian Democrat and former Wehrmacht

officer. The bald man in the front, who smiles so charmingly, is Dutch socialist Sicco Mansholt, who had joined the resistance against Nazism during the war. The man in the background is Lambert Schaus from Luxemburg, a civil servant during the war, then a slave laborer in Nazi Germany. Twenty years later, all these men were sitting around a table, trying to build a new, a peaceful Europe. Such encounters also happened in other international organizations and at a bilateral level, but nowhere were they as intense as in the EC.

Secondly, there is the EC's symbolic role, which clearly mattered. The European Community claimed a very special aura, as *the* European solution for the most important questions of the age. Even the most trivial technical decisions, such as setting export duties for wheat, were celebrated as manifestations of a peace-building cooperative system. **(Slide 8)** For example in 1963 the French philosopher Raymond Aron lauded one such minor success as “La victoire de l'idée européenne” – the victory of the European idea. Not that he was especially interested in market and trade issues; instead he saw the agreement in Brussels as one small step towards building a grand Europe. The EC became a symbol of Western Europe's political rebirth; it was a specific project, but one directed towards a much larger reality, and this gave it huge amounts of symbolic as well as political importance.

The third and fourth reasons have more to do with the second half of the Cold War, with the 1970s and 1980s. Thirdly, the EC massively contributed to creating social peace – which, obviously, is a very different to peace in the world, as the form of peace I was referring to so far. This was mostly because of its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) **(Slide 9)**. Most people associate the CAP with useless surplus production and high prices, and that is certainly true. But there is also a positive

side that it much less well known. The CAP helped to ensure that the historic transformation of the primary sector progressed largely free of major conflict in the second half of the twentieth century, whereas in the first half of the century it led to enormous political destabilisation. On paper the CAP pursued a whole spectrum of objectives, especially increasing production. In reality, however, it served primarily as a hidden form of social policy, introducing political measures to cushion the dramatic shrinking of the agricultural workforce. The CAP thus helped to stabilize West European societies and to produce social peace, and similar things can be said about the EC's regional policy.

Fourthly and finally, the EC stabilized the interior of its member states and secured social peace also in another way, although it should be noted that the "interior" was now very different from the early days. **(Slide 10)** What I am referring to here are the three states that joined the EC during the final decade of the Cold War, after a period of ever closer relations since the second half of the 1970s. Greece, Spain and Portugal were all emerging from periods of political turmoil. When they applied for EC membership in the mid or late 1970s, all three were young democracies newly emerging from right-wing dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. In terms of peace and security, accession to the EC helped them to stabilize their societies both external and internal.

This experience proved to be crucial when the Iron Curtain crumbled and fell. At the end of the 1980s, the EC became one of the key forums to create a peaceful post-Cold War Europe **(Slide 11)**. In 1990, it integrated the former GDR as part of unified Germany into the Community – without a prior accession process or special reservations. German unification thus went in hand in

hand with the Community for the first time expanding outside the Western Europe of the Cold War.

Above and beyond the German question too, the EC played a role in Europe's rapid and largely peaceful transition into the post-Cold War era. The EC became one of the key vehicles of the peaceful transformation in Eastern Central Europe, though the question of causality is particularly interesting here. The EC did add to this process of stabilizing peace in Europe, but obviously it did not cause it (**Slide 12**). The peacefulness of the transformation, which was mainly the work of Eastern Europeans themselves, ultimately gave further support to the EC. In that sense, the European project owes a lot to the bravery of people in places like Gdansk, Prague and Leipzig. In the end, and as a result of these complex processes, the EC/EU became the symbolic expression for a new, peaceful Europe, at least for a certain number of years, so its symbolic and its practical roles are again difficult to separate from each other.

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Let's stop the historical assessment of the EU's role regarding peace here, step back, and ask what we can learn from it. Firstly: Later than we tend to think – this is how I would like to summarize the EU's role for peace during the Cold War. Yes, building a peaceful future was one of the motives for integration, but we should also look at the tangible effects. For a long time, the EC hardly contributed to peace in the world; it was mostly busy with other, more mundane issues, mostly in the economic sphere. Today, it sometimes tries to play a role on these issues, but seen from a historical perspective, this is a rather recent phenomenon, and the EU's results in these initiatives

are rather mixed, be it in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s or more recently in Ukraine or North Africa. History can teach us that the EU's efforts in this respect are surprisingly recent. That should teach us humility, but perhaps also forbearance.

Secondly, the EU did contribute to peace, but often in less visible ways than we think, for instance by helping to create a culture of compromise between its member states (**Slide 13**), but also by adding to social peace through its covert social policy programs, most importantly the Common Agricultural Policy. This has caught little attention so far, and these achievements deserve more recognition. This also contradicts the widely shared view that the peace idea does not work anymore, that it only appealed to the generation that had experienced the war and drew the lessons from it. If, however, we focus on effects and less on motives and if – against this backdrop – we acknowledge that the EU's contribution has always been bigger on issues of social peace than on world peace, the picture looks different. So with regard to peace, the EU did not just start to play a role much later than we tend to think, but also in other forms.

This brings me directly to my third point: Today, the EU cannot claim a role comparable to the one it had in France and Germany during the 1960s, later on also in Spain and Portugal, in Poland and Slovakia in contributing to social peace. Which perspectives does it offer to the losers of globalisation and the digital revolution in our own times? Which tangible forms of support? So at this level a look back at history is certainly instructive. I fear that in future, we could pay a high price if the EU will not become more meaningful for people and their worries. This is an issue that would deserve much more space on the EU's agenda – and for this reason, it is so sad that so many

intellectual and material resources are absorbed by endless Brexit negotiations and other things which ultimately are side shows.

Fourthly, this reminds us that ultimately, the EU continues to be an economic creature. Its DNA is less defined by common values than by a focus on economic issues. Seeing the world through the lens of economic questions and solutions has shaped European union since its inception and continues to do so until today – for better and for worse. At the same time, the attitude towards the economic was often instrumental. The underlying premise of the post-war years was that the overarching political objective of European integration was a matter worth spending money on. That was doable as long as the historically unique economic boom persisted and the economic effects of integration remained secondary. Even the expensive CAP ultimately represented an annoyance but not a threat to the economic foundations of the member states. The history of the euro since the 1990s offers an example of how dangerous the primacy of the political over the economic can be when questions of systemic importance come into play. One example would be the risky inclusion of Greece in the euro on the basis of dubious statistics – the repercussions of this decision being largely borne by the Greeks themselves. Another would be the general structural defects of the euro, which created a common currency without common bank regulation or common political structures.

The instrumental tendency in the treatment of economic issues has a long history. In view of the stakes today, this is now more dangerous than it ever was during the Cold War. The structural instability of the Economic and Monetary Union has the potential to lead to a fundamental crisis. The euro is at particular risk if crisis strikes a large member state like France or Italy. Beyond this,

the opportunities and risks of economic and monetary decisions must be thought through more consistently and placed more strongly in the centre of public interest. Misrepresentations like the Brexit camp's claims about savings to the national budget would be harder to disseminate if the achievements and failures of European integration were presented more transparently and discussed more intensely. But we also need to ask ourselves questions such as the following two: Is prosperity really the best indicator of the success of the integration project, given the ecological costs? How about solidarity?

Fifthly, some of you might have wondered why so far, I have mainly shown you pictures of elderly men in grey suits. This points to another characteristic in the history of the EU: For the longest time, it was a creature of the élites with a strongly technocratic dimension. It did not reach people's hearts and minds. This is interesting because in the very first years of this process, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, enthusiasm for the European project had been somewhat bigger. **(Slide 14)** At the time, youth activists protested for a borderless Europe and demolished barriers along the German-French and other Western European borders. While over the past few years, people have again campaigned passionately, both for and against the EU, this had been much less the case in the decades before, when most Europeans simply did not care very much about the EU. Citizens put up with technocratic aspects and were happy as long as they were otherwise left in peace; their attitude towards the EC was consumptive rather than active. And also today, the EU continues to have problems reaching many people.

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To conclude: Where do we stand today? Obviously, the EU is facing serious challenges, both from outside as well as from within. The multilateral, liberal parts of the international system are under ever more pressure, and so is the EU. From within, it is haunted by some of its own construction faults, for instance with regard to the Euro, for which we still have not found a robust solution. Moreover, neonationalist and sovereignist movements are trying to change the European Union from within, threatening to challenge and erode its core principles and ideas.

But I do not want to end on too negative a note. European integration has made progress particularly in difficult times – the 1950s, when the Cold War consolidated, the 1970s, when the postwar boom was over and established forms of internationalism were challenged, or the late 1980s, when the Eastern Bloc crumbled and collapsed. It was by no means inevitable that the EC would emerge strengthened from crises, and yet these phases did turn out to be opportunities and were used productively. The European Union has become astonishingly resilient, in the sense that it is in a position to turn externally-driven change to its advantage rather than merely rebuffing it. This stems less from the idealism of the participants than the enormous inertia of established institutions, the diverse interests contained within them, and the general momentum of the integration process.

Architecture might help us to see this more clearly: **(Slide 15)** Today, we associate the EU with “Brussels” and with modern buildings such as the Berlaymont, built in the 1960s as the seat of the European Commission. Its modern, rational, future-oriented style summarizes a good part of what the EU is – but only a good part, and not all of it. The EU reminds me more of this old crooked house **(Slide 15.1 + 15.2.)** It is an edifice that reflects its history, with some windows bricked up

and new ones broken through elsewhere, with extensions and conversions, ruins and follies, which have weathered storms and other crises surprising well. Maybe the European house is not very smooth and elegant, but it is surprisingly durable, and it has history and character.

So what does this history teach us at the most general level? It teaches us how improbable and fragile our own time is; from the perspective of the past, the present was but one of many futures (and potentially an unlikely one). That is the case for European integration too. Rather than proceeding as the implementation of a masterplan, the EU we have today appeared in fits and starts.

Above the level of detail European integration set out to make the future more predictable. It was this hope that shines through all the treaties and directives, summits and compromises, plans and proposals. While many saw precisely that as a value in its own right, the idea of Project Europe as an attempt to contain the future is less certain again today.

Nobody knows what the future will bring for the EU and for Europe. But one thing is certain: It will depend not least on the conclusions Europeans derive from the history of European integration.