

This economic crisis cries out to be transformed into the founding of a new Europe

There can be no return to the national idyll. It is in all our interests for states to now abandon their nostalgic self-delusion



- [Ulrich Beck](#)
- [The Guardian](#), Monday 13 April 2009
- [Article history](#)

Standing amid the debris of a [Europe](#) morally, politically and physically devastated by the second world war, Winston Churchill enthused in 1946: "If Europe were once united ... there would be no limit to the happiness, to the prosperity and the glory which its 400 million people would enjoy." Today the opposite is threatening: if Europe were to be shattered by the global economic crisis, there would be no limits to the unhappiness, poverty and shame of its politicians and its 500 million people.

Twenty years ago, the Berlin Wall collapsed unexpectedly, followed by the socialist Soviet Union, and the cold war bipolar global order. Now the capitalist model - the idea that the free market is the solution - whose triumph was celebrated at the time, is threatening to collapse, and drag the EU down with it. Where can we find the passionate European rebelliousness of a Churchill today, a visionary voice to bring home to Europeans that the national provincialism that is proliferating in the global crisis is not only jeopardising the European miracle - namely, the transformation of enemies into neighbours - but is destroying itself? No one wants that, of course. But nobody wanted the state socialism for the rich and the neoliberalism for the poor that we suddenly have, either.

Last autumn, the banking crash finally jolted the EU out of its narcissistic self-absorption. I thought: my God, what an opportunity! Who, if not the EU, has the necessary experience to invoke a supranational common good? The European model of co-operation among states aimed at mutual empowerment seemed finally to be gaining a new historical justification.

Given the tenor of squabbling between President Sarkozy, Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Brown in the lead-up to the G20, the package agreed at the summit was a tiny miracle. Yet it was not nearly enough, and risks being remembered as merely a papering over the European cracks.

Last week the European Central Bank warned that ongoing signs of "retrenchment within national borders" continued to inhibit European integration. If the Great Depression of the 1930s taught us anything, it was that a retreat into the national idyll is fatal because it turns the threatened catastrophe into a reality - the collapse of the [global economy](#).

Unemployment is increasing exponentially across the globe. The waves of social unrest and anti-immigrant sentiment are already washing over Europe too. And now, suddenly, the ghost of failed states is haunting the EU's paradise of prosperity and security. The crisis has caught the periphery of the EU - the new eastern European members - on the wrong foot. After the betrayal of the communist system, the moderates in these countries who supported the EU reforms now feel betrayed and left in the lurch by the capitalist system. Not so long ago they were being urged to follow "best practice", which has turned out to be the worst.

If the EU did not exist, we would have to invent it today. Far from being a threat to national sovereignty at the beginning of the 21st century, the EU first makes it possible. In the world risk society, faced with the menacing aggregation of global problems that resist national solutions, nation-states left to their own devices are powerless, incapable of exercising sovereignty. The pooled sovereignty of the EU provides the only hope for every nation and every citizen to live in freedom and peace. Those who harm the union harm themselves. If the members renounce their European responsibility and solidarity in a frenzy of national reflexes, everyone loses. Each nation on its own is condemned to global insignificance. Those who want to regain sovereignty in our corner of the world risk society must will Europe, think Europe and work towards its realisation. The unit of political action in the cosmopolitan era is no longer the nation but the region.

Is a form of reciprocal nationalism the solution, as pragmatic Europeans seem to think? In this view, each state has the autonomy and duty to regulate its own financial problems. At the same time, every nation must recognise the sovereignty of the other European nations, so that each ensures it avoids economic policies that have negative impacts on the others. This view rests on three principles: equal rights, a co-ordinated packages of measures, and mutual responsibility. To these is added a fourth: the categorical rejection of the extension of the EU's competence in economic policy.

This model of reciprocal nationalism may work well in fair-weather conditions, but is condemned to failure in times of crisis. No country is powerful enough to drag the others out of the quagmire. At the same time, it is becoming apparent how interconnected they all are: when one country goes "bankrupt", it drags others down with it.

Europe does not need less Europe - it needs more Europe. The global crisis shows that monetary union cannot be achieved without political union. However, until now there has been no joint financial policy, no joint industrial policy, no joint social policy - which, through the sovereignty of the EU, could be pooled into an effective response to the crisis. The person rejecting this historically necessary piece of more Europe, and putting everyone and everything at risk, is the German chancellor, Merkel. Her models, the former chancellors and German pro-Europeans Adenauer and Kohl, would have turned the crisis into Europe's finest hour. And they would have won elections with this because investing in Europe's future today, given the unimaginable costs of its disintegration, promises incredible returns and signifies hope in dark times.

What is paralysing Europe is the national self-delusion of its intellectual elites. They bewail the faceless European bureaucracy, or the suppression of democracy, while tacitly relying on the completely unrealistic assumption that there could be a return to the national idyll. The faith in the nation-state is blind towards its own historicity; it falls prey to the stubborn and disconcerting

naivety that views as eternal or natural things regarded as unnatural and absurd two or three centuries ago. This intellectual protectionism, this nostalgic self-delusion, is not confined to Europe's sleazy rightwing enclaves. It is dominant even within the most educated and cultivated circles, right across the political spectrum.

The crisis cries out to be transformed into a long overdue new founding of the EU. Europe would then stand for a new realpolitik of political action in a world at risk. In the interconnected world, the circular maxim of national realpolitik - that national interests have to be pursued at the national level - must be replaced by the maxim of cosmopolitan realpolitik: the more European, the more cosmopolitan our politics becomes, the more nationally successful it will be.

The choice is between more Europe and no Europe. This imperative of possible failure justifies hope in a falling market: only an EU rejuvenated by the crisis - hand-in-hand with the US openness to the world under Obama - can build on the seeds of a united global solution that were sown at the start of this month.

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