

# EUROPE: THE NEXT ACT

---

The last 10 years of political crises in the European Union take the form of a play in Luuk van Middelaar's *De nieuwe politiek van Europa*. Through the dramas of recent years, this interview with the Dutch historian carries us from the EU's postwar foundation to the year 2049, sketching out what the return of European politics could mean for the decades to come.

**LAURENT STANDAERT:** In contrast to the dominant views of Europe as either a federalist or an intergovernmental project, you distinguish three approaches to the EU's construction. What are these approaches and how do they relate to today's EU institutions?

**LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR:** Three approaches to how a future Europe should be built have been around ever since 1945 and each is reflected in its favourite institutions. One could be described as a functionalist and technocratic approach which forms to some extent the DNA of the European Commission, the Court of Justice, and even the Council of Ministers. This was the Jean Monnet method and it laid the foundations of what became the European Economic Community. This approach claims that we need to take the political out of politics

and transform conflicts into technical problems to be solved. The second, federalist approach has been rather centred around the European Parliament. It bet on a European Parliament to create a European public sphere and saw it as a step towards more supranational competences. The third, more confederal approach is embodied by the European Council – which I clearly distinguish from the Council of Ministers – involving national leaders and governments. This approach Europeanises national spheres and brings a different sort of authority to European affairs. The European Council has taken on a more prominent role in the past 10 years, not because of personalities or any kind of conspiracy, but because Europe had to deal with certain existential shocks and crisis moments. These moments required a different kind of political action.

---

<sup>1</sup> Luuk van Middelaar (2017). *De nieuwe politiek van Europa*. The Netherlands: Historische Uitgeverij. Also available in French (*Quand l'Europe improvise. Dix ans de crises politiques*, Gallimard 2018) and coming soon in English (*Alarums and Excursions. Improvising Politics on the European Stage*, Agenda Publishing 2019)

**In your book you designate the period from 1945 to 1989 as a sort of slumber, if not coma, from which European politics only really reawakens in 2008 to 2018.<sup>1</sup> Why did it take so long?**

---

**LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR:** I really consider 1989, or the period from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 until the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, as a turning point or even as a second foundation of the European project. Many of the metamorphoses we have seen in the past 10 years were ‘being prepared’ back then. It was the first time that member states realised they would also have to deal, perhaps not immediately but at some point, with security and questions of sovereignty and that the American Cold War umbrella would not last forever. Some back then, and not only the French, even called for European defence. Today we see this shift with Donald Trump and the US government no longer giving security guarantees to Europe. Of course, it was also when the creation of the euro was decided.

None of this was really acted upon in 1989 because the end of the Cold War was for the European continent a moment of politicisation that was immediately captured by Francis Fukuyama’s idea of the “end of history”, which became dominant in the West and to some extent paralysed Brussels for years. This idea that the world would follow the path of capitalist liberal democracies to the end stage of world history, with transitions in Eastern

Europe, China joining the World Trade Organization, and the US fighting for democracy in the rest of the world, was a political sleeping pill and a delusion.

**The last 10 years of crises have brought what you term “events politics” back to the European scene. Why has the European Council been at the heart of these events and which moments stand out?**

---

**LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR:** What the EU has been faced with required events politics, the political art of improvisation, as a way of taking quick and controversial decisions. For this, the European Council is the locus of power and authority. Its members do not pretend to be experts in everything but they are elected and have a relatively close link with their voters and the press, so with national public opinions.

One such moment was expressed in May 2010, with the famous Angela Merkel line that “When the euro fails, Europe fails.” This was when the pressure of the markets was high and when then US President Barack Obama made phone calls saying, “For Christ’s sake, save the euro.” Another moment would be at the end of 2015 and early 2016, during the refugee crisis, with dramatic images and a sense that member states were losing control with hundreds of thousands of people entering the EU through the Balkan route. Another core European project – Schengen and free movement within the EU – was at stake. My third moment

would be the day after the Brexit referendum, 24 June 2016. There was a moment of panic that other member states would follow the same path and that the UK's departure would be the beginning of the end.

### Where do you think the European Union will be in 2049?

---

**LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR:** I'm a historian and 30 years is a long time. Looking at 2049 requires looking at which world Europe could find itself in. It will be the centenary of communist China and the current Chinese president, Xi Jinping, has made it China's objective to be the number one country in the world in precisely 2049. An important question for Europe as a continent is where to stand between China and America. It is a key question which should underpin our policies and political decisions. Stakes are high as to whether Europe can become one of the poles in a multipolar world or whether it becomes a battleground for America and China, at least economically and not to mention – dread the thought – militarily. When Chancellor Merkel says, "We, Europeans, have to take our fate into our own hands" and President Emmanuel Macron talks about "European sovereignty", what they are really referring to is exactly that: how Europe is to become capable of defending its own interests within 30 years' time. Whether it's regarding digital economy, climate change, defence, or the

euro as a global reserve currency, they are talking about Europe's capacity to act and shape its own future.

### What could that mean for the EU's institutions and structure?

---

**LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR:** The executive power of the EU should evolve towards an improved and clearer understanding between the European Commission and the European Council. The European Council is the body you need for some of these far-reaching and controversial long-term decisions, and the European Commission brings the thinking power and executive follow up, together with its capacity to think for Europe as a whole.

From the legislative side, the European Parliament is of course an important player. It is more powerful than many national parliaments in the sense that it has a strong say as a co-legislator. But its weak spot is its link with the voters and public opinion, which one would have hoped to have improved over time. The Parliament's problem is that it has not really allowed opposition to emerge. For too long, it has been divided between a very large alliance expressing the Brussels consensus on what Europe and a more federal and supranational approach should be, and a few anti-European MEPs such as Marine Le Pen or Nigel Farage. But that is not a healthy democratic situation because it doesn't reflect the variety of views held across Europe.

**Could the 2019 European elections be a turning point, with those who oppose the way things are run but that do not want to destroy Europe getting their say in Parliament?**

---

**LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR:** Maybe. I think that what political leaders like Matteo Salvini of Italy's Northern League or Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland's Law and Justice party want to do is not to kill or leave Europe, but to change it. As an analyst, I can only say that on Schengen or migration it's good that such parties and politicians bring a different and (also) representative view that nourishes the debates and the public sphere both at the European and national levels. During the refugee crisis, it is clear that the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán played an important role by opposing the EU approach driven by Brussels and Berlin. Without excusing his undermining of democracy at home, proposing policy alternatives on migration and identity was important, whether I like it or not. A genuine opposition within the theatre of European politics had never existed in the past.

**Values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law underpin the foundation of the EU. Could the EU disintegrate or split over such values in the next 30 years?**

---

**LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR:** Yes, I think it could. What you describe as values are part and parcel of Europe's identity and image of itself.

A club of democracies. These days you can see a potential division between the Union as a space of values such as democracy, rule of law, and freedom, and as the political expression of the European continent. Imagine the exit of Hungary or Poland. It would be as disruptive as Brexit and it would go against the post-1989 European vocation to heal the wounds of the Cold War and bring the continent together. I think these kinds of tragic dilemmas will arise in the coming decades and cause many political headaches. Looking 30 years ahead is about talking about these dilemmas and choices frankly in the public debate because the 440 million Europeans remaining in the EU are not crazy or stupid – they're voters. They know the world is changing, they know about climate change, about China, about migration, about welfare state reforms. People are ready for the choices, provided they are set out in this wider geopolitical landscape. That requires a real politicisation of Europe and political courage and energy.



**LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR** is a political theorist and historian. The author of the prizewinning *The Passage to Europe* (2013), he will next publish *Alarums and Excursions* (2019), a groundbreaking account of the EU crisis politics.