

# The Future of the EU: Soldiers, Barbed Wire and Surveillance

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An arms build-up, barriers at the borders, and spurious climate policy measures will dominate EU policy over the next few years. The far right failed to make the gains many expected at the European elections, but their influence on the direction of travel is pervasive. Progressives supporting today's EU irrespective of its policy agenda are playing on terrain that favours only the far right and the neoliberal establishment, argue activists linked to Attac Austria. Progressives need to rethink their relationship to the EU as it stands and make sure that they are ready to oppose and resist.

The day after the European elections of May 2019, relief prevailed in the editorial offices of liberal newspapers. "The Eurosceptics are growing ever stronger," reported *De Morgen* from Brussels, "but the big coup hasn't happened." The Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza* read the results the same way: "The defenders of a united Europe have bought the EU five years' more time," and, according to the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, "fended off the big attack by the right-wing nationalists."

## A misleading story

These commentaries all tell the same story: the EU was facing an existential threat, but the pro-European forces managed to see it off. The "destiny-defining election", as it was called in German-speaking countries, was won. The peace project was saved. The extreme right's gains were not as big as had been feared and, instead, Liberals and Greens were the main winners on the day.

But this story only tells half the truth and relies on a superficial reading of the extreme right's results. Considering the European elections to be "destiny-defining" is inaccurate and plays into the narrative that pits a good European Union against evil nationalists.

The next few years of European politics will be difficult for progressive forces. Analysing current developments, it is clear that the dominant agenda has been set by the Right. That is not to say that there are no options open to emancipatory forces, today made up of the Greens, the Left, and some of the Social Democrats.

## A shift to the Right

The new parliamentary group of the extreme right, Identity and Democracy, holds almost 10 per cent of seats in the European Parliament. But this share understates the influence of their policies. Several parties that have shaped EU policy from the Right in recent years operate outside the grouping, such as the Hungarian Fidesz party, the Polish Law and Justice party, and the British Brexit Party (as the successor to Ukip).

Many members of other political groups have moved significantly to the right. Merkel's allies the Bavarian Christian Social Union would like to reject all asylum seekers at the border. The Austrian People's Party, clear

winner at the general election in September, wants to intern refugees on island detention sites. The Danish Social Democrats came to power in June and are persisting with the asylum policies of their right-wing predecessors, involving, among other things, the confiscation of personal valuables from refugees. Electoral victories for the extreme right are only the superficial manifestation of a wider authoritarian turn.

The balance of power at the national level is more important in determining the political agenda of the EU than that within the European institutions. Should Matteo Salvini become Italian Prime Minister or the Greens enter the German government, it will have far greater implications than a new majority in the EU Parliament.

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A quick glance at the make-up of the new European Parliament also fails to reveal even bigger fluctuations at the national level. The extreme right has grown considerably in Italy and retained its longer-term strength in France. Elsewhere, after finishing third in the Netherlands in 2014, Geert Wilder's Party for Freedom failed to get in this time. The Social Democrats collapsed in countries such as Germany and Great Britain, while in Spain and the Netherlands they were able to celebrate their resurrection. Although growing political instability is felt across Europe, it is only reflected to a limited degree in the EU election results.

This instability is an expression of the desire for change that has gripped many people since the financial and economic crisis of 2008. They are increasingly losing faith in the promise that neoliberal economic policies will bring greater prosperity. Privatisation, deregulation, and unbridled competition have made a few people rich, but most people poorer. Neoliberal capitalism and the political system that supports it can claim no longer to enjoy public trust. This is true for the European Union as well. The EU is one of the strongest drivers of austerity and competition between its member states, which together are reducing the standard of living for millions, exacerbating the climate crisis, and limiting the scope of democratic decision-making.

## **Internal enforcement, external expansion**

The EU has undergone constant change in recent decades, from treaty change to crisis management to many smaller political decisions. Neoliberal economic integration is now at the heart of the EU and is firmly embedded in the Treaties and institutions. It exercises a decisive influence on all other areas and extending the reach of this economic regime represents the most important element of EU policy. Measures such as the Fiscal Compact budgetary requirements, the European Semester economic reform process, and the European Stability Mechanism bailout fund have forced states to cut social benefits, wages, and labour rights. These policies have deepened the economic crisis, and eroded public support.

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EU economic policy for the coming years will focus on implementing the existing treaty framework and will entail stricter enforcement of neoliberal budget regulations, as well as the completion of the Banking Union and the Single Market. The EU Commission's first unsuccessful attempt to obtain a veto against further extension of the regulation of services at the municipal level in April 2019 is evidence of this direction.

Looking outwards, the EU's drive to expand trade with the rest of world is set to continue. Since 2018, the EU Commission has been negotiating the establishment of a [multilateral investment court](#) on behalf of the EU Council and is pushing more trade agreements along the lines of EU-Canada CETA deal, such as the [EU-Mercosur agreement](#) and [TTIP 2.0](#). At the same time, the Commission is drawing up a [more protectionist industrial policy](#). Amended competition rules, public investment, and protective tariffs will look to develop European industrial champions and support them internationally.

## **From hope to fear**

While progressive parties do criticise some aspects of this agenda, they do not raise fundamental questions about the economic system and the European Union. The extreme right takes advantage of this by diverting popular dissatisfaction onto migration and security. The parties of the political centre – Conservatives, Liberals, and large parts of the Social Democrats – do not question the neoliberal economic system wired into the EU Treaties. After all, they have spent a long time portraying it as beneficial. Instead, they ape the extreme right. Their long-standing narrative of hope, based on the idea that the EU would bring prosperity, freedom, and democracy, is gradually being replaced by a politics of fear.

Lukas Oberndorfer, a researcher working on EU integration and law, describes the emerging '[European security regime](#)' as the EU's new *raison d'être*. Political elites are taking up the calls emanating from the extreme right and arguing that they can only be realised at the European level. "We need the EU not only to guarantee peace and democracy but also the security of our people," European heads of government stated in their [Bratislava Declaration of 2016](#). They then announced measures to keep refugees out of Europe, tighten surveillance, and expand military cooperation.

Three priorities will guide EU policy for the years to come.

### **Focus 1: The EU army**

The new favourite project of the political elites is the creation of an EU army. The coalition behind this aim ranges from Conservatives like [Angela Merkel](#) to Liberals like [Emmanuel Macron](#) and Social Democrats like [Pedro Sánchez](#). The new Commission President [Ursula von der Leyen](#) supports an EU army. The United Kingdom, a long-standing opponent of military integration, is leaving the EU.

Significant steps have already been taken in this direction. The [European Defence Fund](#), launched in 2017, makes billions available for new weapon systems and military infrastructure – in part from the EU budget, even though Article 41(2) of the EU Treaty prohibits it. Military expenditure is [exempt from the austerity rules of the Stability and Growth Pact](#), though restrictions remain on public infrastructure and welfare spending. Since 2017, 25 of the 28 EU states have committed under the military alliance [PESCO](#) (Permanent Structured Cooperation) to regular spending increases for weapons and research and to participation in EU combat forces. What the EU army might one day be used for can be surmised from the [New Strategic Agenda 2019-2024](#). This document states that the EU should exercise its influence "more assertively and effectively" and give "clearer priority to European economic, political and security interests." Only thus can the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate "engage with other global powers on an equal footing."

### **Focus 2: Barbed wire outside, surveillance inside**

Nowhere is the strategy to appropriate the demands of the extreme right more apparent than regarding refugees and migration. The 2016 deal with Turkey is regarded as "best practice". In exchange for payments, the agreement ensures that refugees from Syria and other crisis areas are prevented from entering the EU. The consequences, in

addition to deportations to war zones, are “arbitrary arrests, inhuman and degrading living conditions and violations of the Refugee Convention,” as Amnesty notes in a report. The EU regards the agreement as the model for migration pacts with countries of origin and transit.

The EU already finances a militia coastguard in Libya to prevent crossings and take intercepted refugees to camps. According to a UN report, executions, torture and slavery are frequent and EU-funded militias are directly involved. In June 2018, heads of government decided to set up their own camps outside the EU in future, which they euphemistically call “disembarkation platforms”. The EU border agency, Frontex, is to be expanded from 1500 to 10 000 employees by 2024 and its budget quintupled. The agency, which both covers up and commits serious human rights violations, will become many times more powerful in the years ahead.

At the same time, surveillance of people inside the EU will grow. As early as 2017, heads of government decided to establish an electronic entry-exit system. According to the Commissioner responsible, this system will collect biometric data on everyone in the EU and make them identifiable by camera. Immediately after the EU elections, the EU Ministers of the Interior and Justice asked the Commission to work on the storage and retention of data, something the European Court of Justice has rejected several times, and to negotiate reciprocal data access with the United States. Intensified internet surveillance is another goal.

### **Focus 3: Climate – symbolic politics in a genuine crisis**

Climate is the issue of the day. The evermore dramatic impacts of climate crisis and pressure from social movements such as Fridays for Future are forcing it onto the political agenda. Ursula von der Leyen promised a ‘Green Deal for Europe’ in her speech to the EU Parliament. The key elements made public so far suggest that it will likely consist of spurious measures and empty promises. The targets are not ambitious enough to halt climate collapse, and cannot be achieved anyway with the measures announced. Serious climate policy would necessarily overturn the pillars of the neoliberal EU: austerity, which restricts government investment; agricultural policy, which promotes industrial rather than sustainable agriculture; trade policy, which promotes the maximum flow of goods regardless of ecological costs; and transport and energy policy, which puts corporate interests before climate goals.

Opposition from civil society and the real effects of climate collapse will however appreciably increase the political pressure, shaking the foundations of this economic order.

### **‘More Europe’ is dangerous**

The shift to the right, political instability, and the crisis in public confidence now determine the EU’s agenda, which finds itself in transition from a cosmopolitan to an authoritarian neoliberalism.

In the hope of a new direction, many progressives continue to rely on the formulaic phrase ‘more Europe’. The assumption is that deeper integration and a strengthened EU Parliament could make the EU more social and democratic. The reality is different: the possibility of reforming the EU treaties in a progressive direction can be virtually discounted for both legal and political reasons. A clear majority in both the EU institutions and the member states supports neoliberal economic policy, militarisation, and an inhumane border regime. Under these circumstances, anyone calling for more Europe effectively facilitates these policies. The plans for deeper integration that have been discussed, such as the 2015 Five Presidents’ Report, also seek to intensify the existing economic regime.

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Progressives like to argue that the EU Parliament could be the engine of a fundamental change of course. This proves time and again to be illusory. The most recent evidence was the appointment of the new President of the Commission, in the course of which governments disregarded directly elected representatives and their lead candidates. The Parliament does not have the political power required to fulfil this role, and will always be constrained by the Treaties' neoliberal cornerstones.

## **Overcoming false dichotomies**

Alarmist terms such as destiny-defining election and last-ditch battles ignore this reality. The extreme right has been on the rise for a long time and the EU's economic regime is its ideal breeding ground. The closer the extreme right comes to power, the more its alleged animosity towards the EU fades into the background. Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, and Norbert Hofer do not want to destroy the EU, but to take it over and rebuild it along their own preferred lines.

Progressive forces should break with their ideological identification with the EU and treat it for what it is: a level of political power. The EU can pass laws and has the means and the institutions to enforce them. In times of crisis, its means become increasingly authoritarian, as seen in Greece and in EU refugee policy. Like any other political institution, the EU is the historical product of interests and power relations. These have usually been on the side of capital. The underlying construction of the EU benefits the interest of capital first, and restricts that of the general population. The four fundamental freedoms, for example, represent for the most part freedoms for capital but a "restriction for regulation" for member states and their citizens. Just as the UN, the OECD, the G7 or the nation state are not idealised, European integration and the EU should not be goals in and of themselves.

The most important step for progressive forces – inside and outside parliaments – would be to stop putting the EU on a pedestal. Unfortunately, many progressives subscribe to the dichotomy between 'pro-Europeans' and 'anti-Europeans'. Instead of criticising the neoliberal establishment, progressives align themselves with the 'pro-European' camp and defend the EU. In doing so, they strengthen the Right by handing it a monopoly on fundamental critiques of the status quo.

This kind of mobilisation may work in the short term and has certainly contributed to the good results enjoyed by the Greens. In the long run, however, it only benefits the neoliberal establishment and the extreme right. Pro-European means the existing rules and policies of the EU. Anti-European, currently occupied by the Right, stands for nationalism and particularism. These false front lines leave no room for progressive forces and should be broken. This dichotomy can be questioned by being explicit about the goals one is fighting for, be them humane asylum policies, cross-cultural exchange or harmonised tax policies.

Progressives must focus on what they want to achieve, not rescuing the EU. Each policy field will require a different political level as its starting point. The European path can be the right one for some things, but not all. The EU is opposed to many progressive goals. That is not going to change any time soon, because the EU will not allow itself to be fundamentally reformed.

## **Strategic disobedience and new forms of cooperation**

In concrete terms, two strategies hold much promise for progressive forces: first, they can improve their resistance strategies and, second, they can develop new forms of international cooperation.

One form of resistance available to municipalities, cities, regions and states is strategic disobedience. Progressives should circumvent and break misguided EU rules instead of grudgingly complying with them. It is easier to politicise budget restrictions and their consequences through targeted confrontation than with a communication campaign.

At the same time, it is important to dispel the idea that the EU is the only possible vehicle for international cooperation. Municipalities, cities, and regions are already showing that a different kind of politics is possible. These developments can be made more visible by cross-border cooperation, whether in opposition to the EU or bypassing it. Inspiration may be found in the Italian mayors who, together with maritime rescue personnel, refused to implement Salvini's refugee policy when he was in office.

The fundamental workings of the EU, its rightward turn, and its priorities for the future are sufficient grounds for taking a critical approach to it. This approach means progressive forces detaching themselves ideologically from the EU and focusing on their own narratives and goals.

With a sober view of the EU and the possible strategies that this implies, progressive forces can advance emancipatory solutions to the great challenges of our time. Only then will their ideas dominate the front pages once more.

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Alexandra Strickner, Kai J. Lingnau and Valentin Schwarz are co-authors of the book The European Illusion, available free online.

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