

Not About Treaties: EU Integration Needs a Cultural Shift

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The multiple crises of recent years, conservative forces reviving visions of a Europe of nations, and the renewed momentum for EU enlargement raise the question of whether European democracy is equipped to face the challenges of today. According to Green MEP Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield, what the Union needs most is not institutional reform but a cultural change, including among progressives.

Green European Journal: Brexit, the pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the ensuing energy crisis, the climate crisis: the EU has not had it easy in the past few years. Are the EU and its institutions really set up to handle these uncertain times?

Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield: The EU and its institutions are up to the task, on paper at least. The problem is more about how decisions are made in practice. The EU often does not use the tools that it has at its disposal; meanwhile, the European institutions often do not embody the sovereignty that they would claim to or offer real European leadership when it is needed. More and more people are recognising that this needs to change.

In the European Parliament, but also among member states, there is an appetite for EU treaty change. Unanimity-based decisions are recognised as a problem, especially after five years of bargaining with Viktor Orbán. We are not talking about some grand new set of treaties but proposals to make the current set-up work more effectively. The most important would be introducing qualified majority voting in the Council for all policy areas.

More than any reform, we need a cultural shift that recognises Europe as a level of political power. Today, even when the Council does not necessarily need unanimity, it still ends up working based on consensus. Elsewhere, we see European Commissioners or MEPs putting their country's interests over the European interest. It is too easy to say that we need new institutions, texts, or tools: what we need are people who embrace a way of thinking that puts European sovereignty and democracy at the centre of the big challenges of our time.

The EU often finds itself in a sort of Catch-22. Its members can't reach a decision, so the EU responds to an event poorly. The EU is then blamed, and populist forces win more support. In turn, these forces turn out to be even less likely to compromise, and the whole situation gets worse.

We need people to be much more engaged in Europe's young democracy and ready to fight for it. I come from France, and I can tell you that the focus of the French political elites, journalists, and civil society is on France as the number one priority with Europe as an afterthought.

I spent years going to civil society groups in France telling them that the criminalisation of NGOs in countries like Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Croatia was their problem too, and that they should work on it. They had no interest in reaching out or building networks around these issues, but then NGOs in

France began facing the same issues around criminalisation. Suddenly, these organisations realised that they were now going through the same thing that their counterparts had experienced just a few years before. This holds less true for German civil society, but is certainly the case in the Benelux and Nordic countries. We need to learn to think about our national and European democracies as being connected because that is the only way to protect and fix them.

We also need a strong narrative on Europe that progressive forces are ready to fight for. A few months out from the European elections, some social democrats are already talking about defeat and acting like there is nothing that can prevent a huge far-right force from taking over the European institutions. The Greens, too, should be fighting hard; we can't just leave space for the far right to take up.

Look at the Polish election: it shows that when progressives and democrats mobilise, they can beat the far right, whereas when progressives don't mobilise, you get Giorgia Meloni in Italy. The far-right vote is big but it's not that big. Progressives can still beat it when they fight and mobilise.

Unfortunately, the far right is increasingly organised on the European level. In the past, the stereotype of the far-right MEP who never shows up was more or less true. Today, the far right in the European Parliament works hard and is deploying a real counternarrative. On issues like gender and economic policy, they are building a coherent profile that is winning support. The far right learnt the lesson from Brexit: it no longer wants to leave the EU but destroy it from the inside.

The war in Ukraine has brought the debate on EU enlargement back. Very concretely, which of the candidate countries do you think should join the EU and when?

It is hard to give a good answer to a question that asks for a clear date. First, because I think that all the candidate countries in the Balkans should join in a short space of time. It would be an unhappy situation to let some in now and make another wait for 10 years. Second, and building on that, because it is evident today that letting Serbia into the EU would not be a good idea with the country's current politics. Aleksandar Vučić in the European Union would be a second Viktor Orbán.

The EU needs to urgently rethink the way it goes about enlargement.

Because of this, the EU needs to urgently rethink the way it goes about enlargement. The accession process should make much more room for contact with civil society and be less focused on bilateral discussions with national governments. I also think that we can't enter a serious discussion with Ukraine and Moldova about accession while we continue to kick the can down the road for the Balkan countries.

The EU should consider designing a new status for these countries, some lighter form of accession. If we only offer full membership, we either say, "Yes, you can join, but in 30 years," or we say, "You can join now," but it's a false promise that we don't really mean. The truth is that the EU as it currently functions is not ready to take on that volume of population: the financial demands of accession would be huge, and the EU's voting system couldn't cope. The only country that is ready to join and that would be manageable is Montenegro because of its size. When it comes to the others, we don't have a solution...

How concerned should the EU be about "accession fatigue" among populations frustrated at these seemingly never-ending and highly technocratic accession processes?

The war in Ukraine has changed the situation somewhat, even in Serbia where there is generally more support for Russia. Before the war, people were increasingly beginning to wonder what was the point of joining the EU after all. Now there is a reason, but people nevertheless find themselves stuck. On the one side, there is Russia, which is not an attractive option. On the other, there is Europe, which makes false promises that never materialise.

More than accession fatigue, it is emigration that I am concerned about. Across the Balkans, but also in Central Europe, entire generations of young people are moving to Western Europe and the United States. The EU was meant to be about staying in your country and your life improving over time, but you can't aspire for a better future or democratic change when there is little hope for your generation or the next. Saying that, whenever I am in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, or Montenegro, I see a strong and highly educated civil society fighting hard in very difficult autocratic atmospheres. I come back from my visits energised. The people fighting there aren't so much fatigued as trapped.

So you would like to see Europe moving towards what is sometimes called a “multispeed Europe” to accommodate these new members?

If “multispeed Europe” means that countries pick and choose what European integration looks like for them, then I would not advocate that. Nor would I advocate allowing current EU members to diverge, which is the direction that some Franco-German proposals go in.

However, we should consider two levels of EU membership to facilitate the enlargement process. A second circle could work to bring in quite a number of new countries with a clear timeline for full membership. It is also important that any new arrangement doesn't become a way for new members to take the benefits of the single market or the EU budget but forgo democracy and European values. These proposals are just ideas, and I'm sure that academics and experts could also help us approach this problem. The situation I want Europe to avoid is having one country joining every four years with no real reform and no solution for those that are left waiting.

The EU also needs to ask itself why it takes such strong positions with some countries and then is much more lenient with others. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania, two countries with significant Muslim populations, not incidentally, are dealt with much more stringently than Serbia, for example. It is another reason why I think that a global solution, even if it means a second level of EU membership, is necessary and would be much more coherent.

What about the European Political Community? Does that have a role to play?

No, I don't think so. We already have the Council of Europe, so what new elements does it bring? The European Political Community has no parliamentary scrutiny or citizen engagement. It is a summit for heads of state like the G7 or the G20. There's a bunch of decisions taken behind closed doors and then there's a photo opportunity. That is no way of organising a democracy, and it could be dangerous. Crucial foreign policy choices should not be made with no oversight.

Doesn't the EU need to deepen its own integration before thinking about new members?

The EU is already deeply integrated. A large and ever-growing part of national legislation in EU member states is linked to the implementation of EU law. EU frameworks are already key for facing the big challenges: think climate change or macroeconomic governance. Remember also that the EU scrutinises every member state's rule of law situation, and that there is extensive cooperation on judicial matters and policing.

The integration of the EU is also advancing due to the pace of events. During the pandemic, EU countries worked together on key health decisions even though health is not an EU competence. With the war in Ukraine, European countries have acted as one on foreign policy and even military support despite the differences between member states around neutrality and NATO membership. When faced with challenges, the EU is taking on responsibility without texts and treaties, so I don't think that integration needs to go significantly further.

Foreign and tax policy are two areas where deeper integration is needed.

That said, health cooperation should certainly be strengthened. Not the everyday management of hospitals but frameworks and legislation to guarantee access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive healthcare. In other areas we need more scrutiny of existing cooperation, such as police and judicial cooperation or certain EU agencies. Foreign and tax policy are two areas where deeper integration is needed. Once the EU has its own revenue through certain taxation streams, it will no longer need to plead with member states for more money every few years. In some other areas, integration is just not necessary. Primary education is fine as a national or regional competence and does not stand in contradiction to a framework to give space to European citizenship education in schools, for example.

The most important next step for integration remains the cultural shift that I mentioned earlier. We need a debate about what is happening on the European level in each European country. People need to recognise that the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights means that the EU level is essential for protecting basic freedoms.

What do you think is at the core of the European project? Is it history? Democracy? Values? Or is it simply geography?

It's a mix of those things. New Zealand's political system is very close to what you could consider a European democracy, but it's on the other side of the world, so you can't say that geography is not a factor. History is an important aspect: much of that history is that of war, competition, and rivalry, but it nevertheless shaped treaties and the idea of Europe itself. European democracy is also distinct from democracy in the abstract. Democracy in America has freedom of speech at its absolute centre in a way that we do not in Europe, where hate speech or speech that glorifies Nazi or fascist crimes is commonly banned.

What I understand as the European way of life is about self-determination.

What distinguishes Europe for me is its way of life. When the European Commission introduced a Commissioner for Protecting Our European Way of Life [since renamed the Commissioner for Promoting our European Way of Life] we recognised that this new portfolio was really about protecting a certain Christian way of life, and we opposed it on that basis. What I understand as the European way of life is about self-determination: not being defined and put in a box based on your social class, the colour of your skin, your religion, or who your parents are. While Viktor Orbán would argue that the individual cannot decide who or what they are, the European Union should be a space that welcomes and protects

the right of the individual to define themselves.

If the European way of life means self-emancipation, then that is wonderful, but the European Commissioner for Promoting our European Way of Life is responsible for keeping migrants out.

Yes, I agree that how they have used that phrase is awful, but we need our own. In French, we say “On n’est pas assigné à résidence”, which means that we are not restricted or bound to one place or role. That is the spirit that I want to get at.

How we address migration could mark the end of European values. We cannot continue to allow thousands to die at our borders to supposedly protect our way of life. The very idea of doing so is a paradox. Europe cannot flourish while this injustice goes on; we will become more and more resented around the world as we asphyxiate ourselves with walls and fences.

The migration issue remains a fundamental challenge, but Europe did, in the end at least, navigate moments such as the pandemic with some success. Is the European Union stronger than it has been in a long time?

At the height of the Covid-19 emergency, the first instinct of member states was to shut their borders, but then European countries chose solidarity. From Greece to the frugal countries, they all agreed on shared borrowing to fund the recovery, even if there was some moaning along the way. The same is true for the response to the war in Ukraine and the Green Deal. Over the past five years, the EU has existed by doing, so there is no need for pro-Europeans to be gloomy.

Europe is also not as divided as some people like to think. Surveys show that even when Poland had a homophobic government that restricted the right to abortion, its population was far more progressive. The same is true for Hungary. Compared to 50 years ago, people across Europe are far less racist and homophobic and much more in favour of gender equality. If the racist minority is winning elections, we progressives need to mobilise harder and more effectively. We shouldn’t be gloomy: we should be angry and ready to fight.

It’s 2035. The progressives fought and won. What does Europe look like?

Europe has enacted strong and ambitious climate legislation, and it has paid off. Our energy is clean and affordable, and we are not wasting huge amounts of energy either. Globally, Europe is credible on the international stage and is recognised as a place that welcomes migrants. People trying to enter Europe no longer have to risk their lives and health but receive care, shelter, and proper, fair processes. We still have borders, but not hard borders.

The European Union itself has much clearer and more efficient decision-making processes, such as qualified majority voting. In part because European decision-making is finally readable, European citizens are engaged in EU politics and discuss European politics on the radio, TV and online. People of all backgrounds see themselves not only as citizens of their nations, but of Europe as well.

Most importantly of all, fundamental rights are respected across the EU and people know the true meaning of the European way of life: to live free from discrimination in all its forms.



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