

Roads to Pursue

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The adage that Europe is “forged in crises” has come back into vogue over the past few years. While the eurozone crisis sharpened divisions between EU member states and fuelled stereotypes, the European project has navigated successive global upheavals with remarkable unity – at least until recently.

If the aftermath of Brexit in the UK illustrated the deleterious consequences of withdrawing from the Union for people, businesses, and political stability, the response to other crises – including the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate emergency, and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine – has highlighted more assertive and future-oriented aspects of European integration. The reaction to the pandemic offered a taste of health cooperation and strengthened social protection and public investment based on shared commitment. The Green Deal emphasises the EU’s role in coordinating transformative policies in member states and provides evidence of the power of democratic contestation: the demands of the climate movement played a crucial role in shaping a central pillar of the European project for the years ahead. And the war in Ukraine, as well as sparking spontaneous solidarity with refugees in EU countries, has revived the enlargement process, which seemed to have lost momentum in previous years.

However, these examples of unity also have a darker side, and the steps forward they represent are not irreversible. Executive decision-making highlighted the EU’s longstanding democratic deficit, while intra-European solidarity has become increasingly exclusionary, reflecting a political shift to the Right in several member states. The flipside of health protection in the pandemic, for example, was vaccine hoarding to the detriment of both less-wealthy countries and democratic transparency, and once the health emergency had subsided, the austerity mantra made its comeback to EU policy-making. Climate policies are the source of new divisions in European societies, which we explored in the summer 2023 edition. And as Putin’s war in Ukraine gave rise to a clash-of-civilisations rhetoric in Europe, the energy crisis laid bare the opportunistic ties cultivated with the Russian autocrat. Almost two years into the conflict, support for Ukraine is showing signs of faltering.

Perhaps most glaringly, hardline positions on immigration – previously the preserve of far-right forces – have become mainstream since the 2015 migrant crisis. While the dire demographic reality of EU countries dictates openness to migration flows behind the scenes, the public discourse on the issue has taken on identitarian tones. In the EU lexicon, “promoting our European way of life” is semantically close to keeping migrants out of “Fortress Europe”.

All this paints a picture of the simultaneous advancement and fraying of the European project. Pro Europeans have too often considered resilience to crises a sufficient prerequisite for its strengthening, neglecting the importance of political vision and democratic engagement. Today, the inadequacy of that reactive understanding of integration is being exposed. Without a shared vision for the future, the EU risks finding itself buffeted by the winds of crisis in both its internal direction and its posture towards prospective members and the rest of the world.

For this reason, this edition sets out to explore different routes for Europe and what they tell us about the past, present, and future of the Union. With crucial EU elections just a few months away, more than just necessary to understand where Europe is heading, this exercise is urgent to politicise its choices.

A key question is the relationship between a geographical and a political Europe. Past attempts to solve

the EU's democratic deficit foundered on the failure of institutional reforms, while efforts to create a European public sphere have remained largely elitist projects. As the long stalemate of enlargement is reversed, how to ensure democratic representation and effective decision-making remains an open question. Talk of a multi-speed Europe has gained ground in recent months in order to ensure that the promise of EU membership is not postponed indefinitely. This is not least because attitudes towards the EU in aspiring member states are not immune to fatigue and disappointment, as the "[Meanings of Europe](#)" series explores in this edition.

On migration, a truly progressive Europe needs to reject the dominant framing of the issue, which has turned the bloc's external borders into a graveyard. To bring Europe closer to its stated values of freedom of movement, inclusion, and community, Aleksandra Savanović proposes looking at migration [through a utopian lens](#).

Fighting dominant narratives is no easy task, not only on migration. Even when they are not (yet) in power, conservative forces exert ever-greater influence on the political agenda. Above all, though they envision a "Europe of nations", they are more transnationally organised than ever before. The growing backlash against women and gender rights, for instance, is Europe-wide and well-resourced. A different Europe will need to build alliances and enhance support for democratic movements, explains Ségolène Pruvot [in her contribution](#).

Finally, in the fight against climate change, a progressive vision entails pursuing true social and climate justice instead of regressive policies and a new green colonialism. In the [opening interview of this edition](#), Spain's labour minister Yolanda Díaz says that Europe needs to build on the positive sparks seen during the pandemic to make solidarity a structural element of the European project, especially when it comes to climate politics. Only a shared vision for a desirable future can tackle the growing backlash against the green transition. Focusing on concrete policies such as local renewable energy, public transport, and universal childcare can help bring the Green Deal home.

Today, positive scenarios may seem a far cry from the reality of European politics. Internally, the Union is increasingly entrenched in cultural battles – a domain that favours the Right – while on the international stage it looks divided and irrelevant, as shown most recently in the turmoil in the Middle East. However, the rise of conservatives and global realignment suggest that stalling is not an option.

History may offer progressives some comfort: visionary thinking and necessity have coexisted since the very origins of the European project in the ashes of World War II. Federalist thinking, born under Nazi-fascist oppression to imagine a post-national democracy in a peaceful continent, bears vivid witness to this. Today, that distinctive characteristic – visionary, but firmly grounded in social and environmental reality – is embodied by the Europe of democratic movements, cultural and ethnic diversity, and transnational grassroots solidarity. It is this Europe that political ecology stands for.

Examples of progressive mobilisation and positive electoral outcomes in Spain and Poland show that a right-wing surge is not inevitable, but the challenge ahead runs deeper than a compelling campaign. More than a destination to be reached, a progressive Europe is an ongoing and collective effort towards a sustainable, inclusive future. Not the solo of a charismatic leader, but a polyphony of voices able to speak as one.

The Green European Journal has gone through many changes in recent months. If it can navigate them with confidence, it is thanks to the outstanding work of editor-in-chief Jamie Kendrick and editorial and project officer Jennifer Kwao. The journal team and the editorial board express their gratitude to both

and wish them the very best in their professional journey.



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