

# The European model: A progressive alternative

*Over the last fifteen years, the European Union has experienced multiple crises and the first withdrawal of a member state from the Union. But is Europe now destined for terminal decline? Drawing on a new book, **Konrad H. Jarausch** argues that far from collapsing, Europe has emerged from this period as an attractive alternative for progressive politics.*

Is Europe on the verge of collapsing? This negative perception of imminent decline informs much media reporting and academic commentary on the old continent. During the last Anglo-American elections, the populist right engaged in vicious Eurobashing, conjuring up threatening visions of socialism and trade rivalry. At the same time leftist Europhile intellectuals have produced an opposite doom and gloom literature that berates the European Union for its shortcomings in meeting its own democratic objectives.

Seeking to correct these partisan distortions with essential information, my recent book [Embattled Europe](#) continues my twentieth century synthesis [Out of Ashes](#) with a “history of the present,” that charts the development of the continent during the last three decades. My thesis is that Europe has not only survived its recent challenges but also developed a progressive model from which the United States could learn something in order to reform its own political system.

With the lifting of the Iron Curtain in 1989/90, the European future looked quite bright, supporting an optimistic assessment. Facilitated by détente, the overthrow of Communism in Eastern Europe ended the Cold War, and made the Red Army withdraw, leading to the implosion of the Soviet Union. This “peaceful revolution” from below opened the door to a post-Communist transformation among the former satellite states, the erstwhile Soviet Empire and even in the Russian motherland, initiating an exciting transition to democracy and capitalism. Concurrent with this unforeseen upheaval, the process of Western European integration picked up speed and eventually included most of Eastern Europe in NATO and the EU. After half a century of cold warfare, the reunification of Germany and the entire continent finally offered all Europeans a chance to live in peace, freedom, and prosperity.

Just when everything seemed to be going well, an avalanche of crises descended that threw the viability of the European Union into doubt by highlighting its unresolved problems. Starting with the default of Lehman Brothers in the United States, the sovereign debt debacle spilled over to Europe through the collapse of financial lending, endangering the solvency of heavily indebted Mediterranean countries as well as the survival of the euro as a transnational currency.

A few years later, a tidal wave of desperate refugees washed up on the continental shores, straining the European capacity and willingness to help since fears of losing cultural identity and exaggerated claims of terrorism sparked xenophobic resentment. Finally, the shocking exit of a previously ambivalent United Kingdom from the European Union after a contested referendum weakened the EU by demonstrating the resurgence of nationalism. Taken together these crises seemed to prove the Eurosceptics right.

In spite of all predictions of doom, Europe is still functioning quite well in many respects – perhaps even better than the United States. Most Europeans, for instance, can enjoy high-speed train services, low-cost higher education, or long vacations while many Americans are stuck in traffic jams and have to pay high tuition or work lengthy hours. Contrary to neoliberal complaints, countries like Germany are highly competitive and have a huge trade surplus.

Criticisms of social service fraud notwithstanding, states like Sweden enjoy a reinvigorated welfare system, including ample childcare, that creates more equal life opportunities. And in contrast to Republican denials of global warming, some societies like Denmark have abandoned nuclear power and switched almost exclusively to renewable energy. It appears surprising that such Europeans are more fortunate in issues such as gun control or life expectancy, indicating that Americans might even be able to learn something from the continent.

The liberal democracies will only be able to master the unprecedented challenges around the globe if they once again work more closely together. Hamstrung by an unpredictable ex-president, American leadership had been faltering while the Europeans have not always overcome their national divisions with resolute action. The Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine as well as the continuation of Islamic terrorism have revived the need for NATO, though its mission remains unclear in a post-Cold War environment.

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Similarly, an ugly wave of populism has threatened democratic self-government on both sides of the Atlantic, pushing politics to right-wing or left-wing extremism. Finally, Europe's role in the world remains unclear since the transatlantic relationship has moved ever closer toward divorce while the rise of China is transforming the international order. The EU and the United States therefore need to put aside their quarrels and seize the opportunity for a "reset" of relations in order to address the global problems.

While in the post-war period the US led the world's democracies, during the last generation a European model has emerged from common values that provides a progressive alternative to the American way of life. Without distortions of gerrymandering and corporate financing, elections are more democratic on the continent, since coalitions inhibit polarisation. Having learned from the World Wars and the Holocaust, the foreign policy of European countries has become more peaceful than the frequent military interventions of the United States. And in contrast to the increasing inequality of neoliberal capitalism, European countries have shown more social solidarity in their enabling welfare states.

This does not mean that there are no problems of racial prejudice or religious diversity on the continent, but rather that in some essential aspects of life such as public transport, health insurance, childcare and environmental protection most Europeans are better off than their Anglo-American cousins. Far from collapsing, Europe has not only survived but rather emerged as an attractive alternative for progressive politics.

**For more information, see the author's accompanying book, [Embattled Europe: A Progressive Alternative](#) (Princeton University Press, 2021)**

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)*

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