

## An EU without the UK would be one step closer to a genuine political union.

by Blog Admin

**Bart Cammaerts** writes that if the EU is to survive in the years to come it must start making a genuine difference for its citizens and become not only a champion for free markets and peace, but also for solidarity, social justice and welfare. He argues that this may not be achievable with the UK continuing as a currently unwilling member of the club.



With much pomp and circumstance the European Union received the Nobel peace prize last week in Oslo; UK Prime Minister David Cameron was one of the few European political leaders not present at the highly symbolic ceremony. For the European project to succeed in these turbulent and very conflictual times, social solidarity across Europe and social responsibility from companies and employers has to be democratically enforced and guaranteed. This is only possible without the UK as an EU member.

Norway is paradoxically a country that has for a variety of – mainly nationalistic and economic – reasons always remained outside of the EU. Polls indicate that today more than 70 per cent of the Norwegian population is **against** Norway joining the EU. At the same time, inside the EU or should I say the eurozone, the European institutions and even Europe as a political project have never been challenged so fundamentally as in recent years, from the right and the left alike. The right sees European institutions as big government, subsidised and subsidising too much, infringing national sovereignty by imposing over-protective social policies, too open immigration rules and many other progressive policies that challenge ‘our’ way of doing things. The left critiques Europe because the EU lacks a social conscience or soul. They argue that it is too much of a neo-liberal project geared towards protecting free trade and free markets, as witnessed in its emphasis on liberalisation and privatisation over many decades, or in its handling of the eurozone crisis which is currently imposing social havoc on Southern Europe.

The EU as an idea, as well as institutionally, has always embodied a duality from its very inception. Back then it was about the fixing of fundamental political (post-WW2) conflicts through neutralising economic conflicts (steel and coal production and consumption). Over the years, the European Commission and the many policies emanating from it have had to navigate and balance out two very distinct and in many ways competing visions of Europe. First, we have those that see Europe primarily as a free trade area, devoid of a social chapter, solidarity principles and merely instrumental in supporting the market economy, protecting capitalist interests and driving consumption. Second, there are those that cherish a vision of a strong Europe that sets social standards, protects its citizens/workers, places limits onto the market, regulates and protects solidarity mechanisms, and intervenes when markets fail. EU policy is and always has been a compromise between these two radically different paradigms of what



the EU is about.

In media and communication policy this played out as follows: for many years the European Commission's mantra in this area has been that liberalisation and privatisation is essentially a good thing for costumers. But operators still need to insure a universal service, which refers back to communication as a public good. This means that in many EU member states postal services are still state-owned because the market will not serve rural and remote areas. EU regulation in terms of broadcasting exhibits a similar schizophrenic attitude. Besides enabling a commercial television landscape to emerge, and breaking broadcasting monopolies, the EU has also explicitly protected public service broadcasting, which in turn elicits accusations by commercial broadcasters of unfair competition. In other areas we can see similar seemingly contradictory policies that are the result of the clash between these two competing conceptions of what the EU is there for.

There are of course also those that completely reject Europe as an idea and as a legitimate power in shaping national politics. Also at this level we see a mix of reactionary rightwing reasons (e.g. the arguments against Europe formulated by UKIP and Conservative Eurosceptics in the UK, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, or the True Finns in Finland) and leftwing populist aspirations of sovereign independence (e.g. anti-European discourses prevalent in the political discourses of Syriza in Greece or the Socialistische Partij in the Netherlands).

A broader and more important critique directed at the EU as an idea and as a political project is that of its weak democratic legitimacy. The EU will always be a complex power matrix incorporating a wide variety of interests and approaches. These include small and large countries, market oriented and social/socialist oriented ideologies, pro-European and anti-European perspectives, and arguments in favour of more/less European integration. The question is how European decision making can be seen as being in the interest of all its citizens, democratically legitimated by its citizens.

This is certainly problematic as the EU's *demos* is highly fragmented and at times deeply conflictual when it comes to European versus national/regional/local identities. While one growing part rejects the European project, those in favour of it tend to use 'Europe' instrumentally to either foster market-led solutions to problems, formulate state-regulatory answers, or to blame it for unpopular, but supposedly necessary measures. This impedes a coherent and long-term vision of what Europe is about and how it can and should serve us collectively as European citizens. Some espouse the need for a genuine political and social union that matches the economic and monetary union, with proper democratic legitimacy to keep markets in check, rather than protecting their interests, and also to ensure mutual solidarity within the union and beyond. I think such a vision for Europe is what it ought be, not what it is today (to paraphrase Gramsci).

Many progressive voices are critical of Europe in its current form, but still adhere to its ideals, and think that in order to reach what it 'ought to be' the UK has to effectively leave the union. Indeed, many pro-European observers across Europe would actually be quite happy if the UK were to leave voluntarily. Why? It would open the appealing prospect of not having to negotiate collective solutions with the obstructive 'navel staring' Brits at the table. From this perspective many pro-European elites across the EU are quite happy that the public debate in the UK is ever-faster moving towards a 'Brixit'. Bring on the 'in or out' referendum as fast as possible, they ask, now that public opinion has been willfully massaged into believing it is in their interest to leave the EU altogether.

While I do not think that this is a particularly healthy attitude and the British population should know better, an EU without the UK as a member would obviously make more radical, and some would argue more effective/necessary, solutions to the current eurozone crisis a more genuine political possibility. Proposed solutions such as the Europeanisation of national public debts, a minimum standard of employee rights and employer obligations across the EU, the implementation of more stringent taxation laws for multi-national companies active in the EU, a 'Tobin tax' on financial transactions in the EU, a stricter and more robust regulatory oversight on the financial institutions (and exuberant bonuses) have clearly not made it onto the negotiating table, despite more than four years of financial mayhem. The loss in standard of life experienced by European citizens is the inevitable price we seem to have to pay for the systemic failure of capitalism.

Germany and the UK, supported by some Nordic and some rightwing led countries, have been very effective in blocking many of the ideas formulated above. In many European countries where pronounced right-wing coalitions are in power, the UK is often a useful and instrumental actor to stop more left-wing and EU-wide solutions to come onto the EU policy agenda for concerted action. Hence Merkel supporting Cameron in rejecting the EU budget at the European Council summit in November. It goes without saying that not having the UK in the equation in this regard would fundamentally shift the power-balance in terms of achieving the necessary (qualified) votes needed to stop certain proposals and decisions from becoming EU law in a vast amounts of areas of economic and social life where qualified majorities are sufficient to push through decisions.

However, this is not merely about a social and citizen oriented agenda, it goes way beyond this and reaches an epistemological level beyond left or right. This is because there is also a very powerful European elite at play here, one that still passionately believes in the European dream: 'Ich bin ein Europäer'. It relates to the visionary political project with a historical legacy of over 60 years (not all of which the UK shares), of political leaders as well as large parts of the population subscribing to the dream and long-term vision of a democratic, politically/economically united and thus peaceful Europe – precisely what the Nobel committee celebrated. From this pro-European perspective the UK leaving the EU is also a good prospect, as it would empower those that want to use this current crisis as an opportunity, as a crow bar in a sense, to make the long-standing dream of a genuine political European Union a reality.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the Author

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Bart Cammaerts is Senior Lecturer and director of the PhD programme in the Media and Communications Department at LSE. His most recent books include; [Mediation and Protest Movements](#) (eds with A. Matoni and P. McCurdy, Intellect), [Internet-Mediated Participation beyond the Nation State](#) (Manchester University Press/Transaction books, 2008) and [Understanding Alternative Media](#) (with Olga Bailey and Nico Carpentier, Open University Press, 2008). Bart Cammaerts is former chair of the Communication and Democracy Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and vice-chair of the Communication Policy and Technology section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).



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