

## The EU's Nobel Prize means that it must do even more to overcome its current crises, and increase its role as a force for peace and prosperity.

by Blog Admin

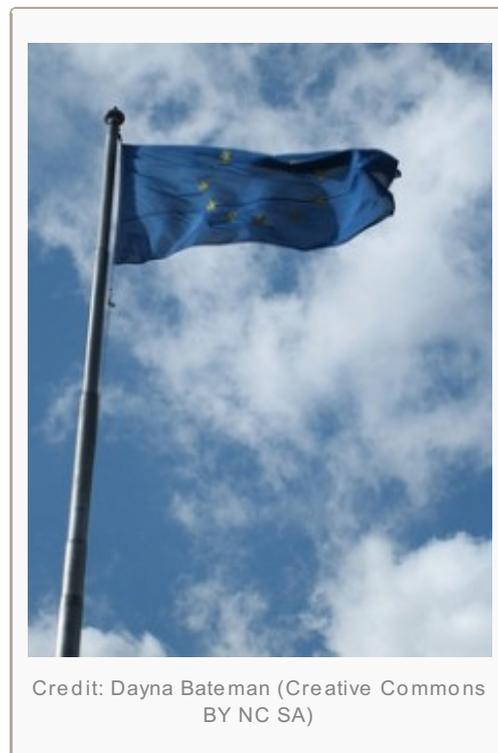
*This morning the Nobel Prize Committee announced that they had awarded its annual peace prize to the European Union in recognition for its efforts in promoting peace and reconciliation in Europe over the past 60 years. **Maurice Fraser** argues that it would be a pity if the award goes down in the history books as belated recognition of a job well done. Now, the EU must recover the sense of self-belief that first drove it by restoring its economic competitiveness, promoting free trade, increasing its role in conflict prevention and resolution, and making a greater effort towards sharing defence responsibilities with its partners.*



The Nobel committee's decision to award the Peace Prize to the European Union is already attracting predictable brickbats: political correctness, woolly idealism, smug complacency in a crisis – the tropes are familiar ones. But the committee has history on its side, because the facts speak for themselves. The EU's predecessor, the EEC, was born in the still pock-marked terrain of a shattered continent. It was conceived as an experiment in peace, but it was a remarkably grounded one – one which bore no resemblance to the many previous thought-experiments since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. All of these had been built on an overlay of voluntary cooperation resting, ultimately, on a balance of power. It was a precarious logic, repeatedly tested (if not continent-wide) during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; existentially challenged in 1914; and definitively laid to rest in 1939.

It took, to coin a phrase, a man with a mission, Jean Monnet, to chart a better way, this time marrying idealism with raw national interest and, terrier-like, persuading European leaders, notably those of France and Germany, to will the means as well as the ends – namely the partial pooling of sovereignty in common institutions and a system of law, binding on all. The experiment was altogether unique: for the first time in history, proud and sometimes ancient nation states with competing and intermittently conflicting interests, agreed to resolve their differences without recourse to threats, blackmail and war. At the same time, through economic cooperation, first with a customs union and then a single market (even if the latter is still work in progress), Europeans were able to enjoy the fruits of trade and the pleasures of peace. Trade, in turn, helped peace to put down deep roots, increasingly entwined in economic interdependence.

The Americans liked the experiment and they encouraged it. It was a tangible and reassuring return on the investment they had made in the continent in World War 2, and then through the Marshall Plan and NATO. So successful was the experiment that the EU's 'soft power' and 'normative power' were to enter the language, sometimes used alongside the hard power of the US, sometimes (if perversely) used in apparently approving contrast to it. What was not in question was the EU's magnetism and power of example, with a vocation to extend stability and prosperity to its east, through enlargement, and even to its south, through trade, aid and cooperation. It was a vision of peace writ large, upon a broader canvas than any of the founding fathers thought imaginable, let alone desirable. For all the accusations of fantasy and hubris (and



the EU's impotence faced with the Arab Spring is a painful reality-check), there is still something valuable to salvage from the draft of this next chapter in the EU's 'peace narrative'. Can 27 nation states be wrong?

But the obstacles are huge. First, there is the all-consuming nature of the Euro crisis, monopolising the attentions of EU leaders, and sapping the faith of citizens and taxpayers alike. Second, the enlargement fatigue of the policy elites, and public disquiet about national identity and cohesion. Third, the suspicion of foreign entanglements and the associated costs: abroad looks just 'too complicated'. Finally, doubts about the ability of the EU to use its aid, trade and diplomatic tools in ways which can really make a difference in the wider world. How, precisely, can the EU be a serious force for peace, let alone become a '[Kantian power](#)' spreading the rule of law and multilateral governance across an unruly world? To say nothing of the inexorable shift in economic power from West to East, sapping the credibility of the EU's political and economic model, and, by extension, its voice in the world.

For the EU to play a credible role as a force for peace both in its immediate neighbourhood and well beyond its own borders, it will have to grasp a number of nettles. First, it has to recover its credibility as an economic actor and a force for prosperity. That doesn't just mean solving the euro crisis which has already inflicted so much damage on its profile: it means revisiting its entire economic model to restore its competitiveness through structural reforms, however painful, at the level of its nation states. Second, it means finding a clear and insistent voice in global forums, in support of free trade, openness and competition. Third, it means raising its game in conflict prevention and resolution, alongside its traditional development aid programmes. Fourth, it should not lose sight of that elusive ambition (so earnestly shared by the Americans) to take on a bigger share of the collective defence effort within NATO. If that burden is initially shouldered mostly by France and The UK, so be it; others should follow suit, and not hide behind economic austerity as an excuse for inaction.

It would be a pity if the Nobel committee's award goes down in the history books as belated recognition of a job well done. We live in a dangerous and unpredictable world, and there is much to learn from that curious experiment which is the EU, located on the small western peninsula of the Asian continent. But imitation will not be enough. If the EU is to be a useful actor in the service of a better world, it should not be distracted or overawed by the fashionable narratives of decline: it needs to recover not just its self-belief but the keen sense of self-interest which drove its mission of peace in the first place.

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*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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