

The EU at 60: Why there is hope the future will be brighter than many expect

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*The European Union is marking the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, which was signed on 25 March 1957. But given the UK's decision to leave the EU and rising scepticism in many European countries, is there a bleak future for the integration process? **Roland Benedikter** and **Ireneusz Paweł Karolewski** argue that the EU is in a significantly healthier position than it appears, and that far from grinding to a halt, European integration will continue to be relevant in the coming decades.*



The signing of the Rome Treaty, 1957. Credits:[Poma \(Public domain\)](#)

On 24-26 March, the EU [marked](#) the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, with the 27 member states solemnly renewing their commitment to the European Union as a project of peace and shared prosperity. The original treaty was signed on 25 March 1957 giving birth to the European Economic Community (EEC), which through various intermediate steps led to the creation of the European Union in 1993.

The birthday celebrations were nevertheless accompanied by many critical voices. As the 27 EU leaders met in Rome with Pope Francis, who received the member state representatives with only British premier Theresa May absent from the event after the Brexit decision, several newspapers seized on the opportunity to talk of the Pope presiding over the EU's 'funeral', at the place where it was born.

Yet these cheap shots aside, the European Union is likely to continue not only to exist, but to meet new challenges in

the coming decades. In the past 60 years, the EU has been a successful economic, political and cultural unifying space; a social laboratory setting examples of pluralisation, civil society, a publicly regulated market economy, inclusive democracy and transnational integration; one of the biggest single economic spaces in the world with sometimes slower, but sustained growth; and one of the areas at the forefront of technological innovation and demographic change. Europe is bound to further transform and to grow on many levels in the years to come, and there are several reasons to believe its future could be brighter than many expect. Let us take a brief look at some of them.

1. The EU has been more successful than it's given credit for

During its 60 years of existence, the EU bloc has been more successful than is often depicted. Yet every time it has made a step forward towards more advanced patterns of integration – from the European Economic Community in 1957, to the European Community in the 1970s and 1980s, to the European Union in 1993 – many observers, arguing largely from the perspective of traditional nation-states construed and shaped by the 18th and 19th centuries, have [expected](#) its partial or total failure: that it would sooner or later fall apart.

This is a recurrent topic today, particularly in academic, economic and political circles of the United States. But the reality is that every time the European Union has been predicted to fail, it has gone on to become bigger and stronger. It remains the only converging meta-national continental arrangement of its kind in the world and, as such, is a child of the advanced second half of the 20th century. And over the years, the European integration model of polycentric and multilevel governance has proven successful against many outside its realm, since it was, and remains, a historically young and new experiment that many outside still do not understand due to its complexity. All signs indicate that it will continue to proceed against all odds.

2. The EU remains relevant

Even after Brexit (which in its concrete steps may take a decade to be finalised), the European Union will [remain](#) one of the biggest single markets and unified economic spaces in the world, with 27 nations, 450 million citizens and a combined GDP of \$16 trillion (PPP). This is despite being barely recognised as a united actor by global national players such as the United States and China, which still count Europe in nations.

Ironically, the EU, with its 60 years of life, is much younger than the U.S., founded in 1776 (240 years ago). Thus, today's EU faces the same deep (economic, monetary, political) scepticism from America and China that the United States itself faced from European nations after 60 years of its existence in the first half of the 19th century. Such scepticism is not unusual. It is perfectly normal – yet it says nothing about the actual quality of the project.

In social terms, the EU remains a relatively equal geopolitical space at a time of rapidly growing inequality which is threatening the socio-political systems of most societies around the globe. This is apparent in the new populism rising in the U.S. or the new authoritarianism at work in China, Russia and Turkey. In contrast, the EU, with its system of redistribution of funds (cohesion funds), is the counterpoint to British and American struggles with social inequality and populism.

Of course, there is a rise of populism and anti-cosmopolitanism throughout the Union, too, but the tide could soon be turning. The impact of populism has been successfully limited in Austria in the presidential elections of December 2016 and in the Dutch general election on 15 March. It is likely to be tamed also in other nations by a new generation of young European leaders determined to bring the middle and lower class voters back to voting for the centrist parties which were created by these classes after WWII. Voters of the middle and lower classes over the past years have increasingly tended to vote irrespective of class loyalties, thus paving the way for populism, but they may well re-align in the coming years by learning from example and experience.

The Europe of the coming years will rely on an emerging new generation of young, moderate, educated and inclusive politicians who have already started to construct a new centre against populism: Emmanuel Macron in

France, Matteo Renzi in Italy, Christian Kern in Austria, Ryszard Petru in Poland. Notably, there will be a new generation of politicians emerging in Eastern and Central Europe, free from the burdens of communism and the post-communist transformation years. Europe's young and moderate leaders are equipped to work better together to improve the cooperation between their states, while the anti-European populists may have a stronger hand to play in those countries disconnected from this development.

3. Europe's younger citizens are enthusiastic about the EU

The youth in the EU-27 now clings to Europe more than ever. It has been positively mobilised by the Brexit vote and the ascent of Trumpism. Its outlook has become more European at the same time as the situation in certain countries in southern Europe has become more bleak. The EU is pumping billions of solidarity funds into its crisis nations, which will be remembered in the long-term. In Central and Eastern Europe, Eurosceptic governments are facing pro-EU mobilisations, with [Poland and Hungary](#) leaders of this trend.

4. The EU is reforming the way it operates

The reforms of the free movement principle and of the cooperation procedures regarding timely core issues such as the refugee and security crises envisaged by the EU-27 in Rome may strengthen the Union towards a more just, differentiated and balanced framework. The post-Brexit principle that the EU of the coming years will address the "big picture" questions, among them the basic protection of rights and a stronger joint foreign and global policy, leaving detailed regulations and issues to the single member states, could become an important stabilising factor. This would be a [logical continuation](#) of the EU's principle of differentiated integration that the bloc has been applying for decades already.

A solid debate on the future of the EU has started. Jean-Claude Juncker's [five future scenarios](#) presented on 1 March were broadly sensible and they can form the basis for constructive debate about feasible models of concrete cooperation. The EU of the coming years needs to be open to dialogue on alternative paths of development. In addition, it must avoid all 'TINA discourse' (There Is No Alternative), as such reasoning puts pressure on the EU's diversity and weakens its legitimacy even further. Under the conditions of a new dialogue, Juncker is right to expect the EU to grow again after 2018, driven by a new generation of optimism.

In the end, Brexit may be good news for both the United Kingdom and Europe. As Juncker pointed out immediately after the Brexit vote, Britain was never fully part of the European Union, not to speak of the fact that many English citizens barely feel European at all. The way forward can be mutually beneficial. With a consensual, clear and clean separation, negotiated as [Juncker announced](#) "in a friendly and fair way", a better partnership and progress for both Britain and the EU may be achieved, setting Britain free while in turn dissolving its decades long blockade against integration among the other member states. Now serious progress on the idea and reality of a European Union can be made.

The continent's institutions and infrastructure will be strengthened by taking EU institutions back to its founding members from Britain, together with parts of the banking and financial services sector, the headquarters of enterprises active mainly in the EU and a whole generation of start-ups and talented individuals. During the UK's membership, a disproportionate number of European organisations and headquarters have been moved to the country, which have now an incentive to move back to the continent. The associated '[brain influx](#)' will help modernise the Union.

5. The EU is learning from its mistakes

The EU is learning from its mistakes and will continue to do so. It has realised, for example, that its role as a global bringer of civil and human rights is not in tune with the cracks in its own normative credibility. For instance, despite the important role of human rights in the political discourse of the EU, it is [well documented](#) that third countries with poor human rights records are still frequent recipients of European weapons and military technology.

New self-limitation may come with new global self-assertion and the expansion of influence. The proposal from former EU Commission chief Romano Prodi that France should transfer its UN security council seat to the EU, thus sharing responsibility and duties with its European partners and strengthening Europe's global role as a bloc, is a good one. Whether this is realistic in the short-term is of secondary importance, the key is it will ignite a debate on the issue and Europe's role in the world.

A joint European army as a response to external and internal threats, as proposed by a considerable number of the member states, is good news for European integration. The debate on the issue has already begun. Interestingly, one of the more EU-critical governments – Poland – has suggested that the EU should become a nuclear power. The authoritarianism at Europe's borders in Turkey and Russia, as well as the election of Donald Trump, are paradoxical motors of European integration, which will bolster the EU's identity and its novel type of governance in the mid-term. Simultaneously, the reasonable voices within Europe's outer partners will return.

A brighter future?

As Austria's chancellor Christian Kern put it at the Rome festivities, the European Union today is mainly two things: First, a project to better represent European interests in the world; second, on a higher level, a peace project. Yet new institutional steps need to be undertaken, new integration initiatives implemented and existing institutions revamped.

Even though the EU has always been work in progress, the time has come for the direction of the process to be recalibrated. If this is done properly, and if sufficient will is found to cross the bridges between European nations and establish genuine “unity in diversity”, the future of a more conscious, more balanced and more united post-Brexit EU may be much brighter than expected.

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