

OUT OF CONCERN FOR EUROPE

(BOOK BY HELMUT KOHL)

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This Synthesis summarises the main arguments presented by former German chancellor (1982-1998), Helmut Kohl, in his book *Aus Sorge um Europa* (Out of concern for Europe). Kohl puts the challenges posed by the euro crisis in a historical context and argues that only a unified Europe, not a loose association of states, can ensure peace and prosperity for the continent.

Introduction

Why Europe? Years of crisis have led many commentators to question the benefits of integration. In *Aus Sorge um Europa*¹ (Out of concern for Europe), former German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, makes a passionate case against renationalisation. He calls on Europe's leaders to show courage and leadership in face of the euro crisis and to complete the "European House".

Kohl takes on two perspectives, one focused on the long term and one on the short term. In view of Europe's belligerent past and the great wars of the 20th century, he describes the history of European integration as a remarkable success. At the same time, he admits that Europe faces daunting challenges today, but stresses that integration "has never been easy" (p. 111) and that earlier deep crises have been overcome by a common European effort.

1. The crisis and the need for Europe

Since the outbreak of the euro crisis, media coverage on the euro, but also on European integration in general, has become more and more unfavourable. Some critics point out weaknesses in the architecture of the euro, while others depict the EU as an elite project or are sceptical whether peace is still a valid argument for more integration.

Kohl denounces this debate as irresponsible and "forgetful of history" (p. 10). For him, Europe is primarily "a question of war and peace" (p. 15). Only European integration guarantees peace and freedom, which in turn provide the basis for the rule of law, prosperity and stability. He stresses that especially Germany must not forget that its economic success after 1945

was not just a result of its own efforts, but of a close cooperation between the European nations, supported by the United States.

Kohl cautions against the contemporary tendency to take peace for granted and points out Europe's responsibility for maintaining and defending its achievements, which ultimately means advancing on the path towards a unified Europe. He warns that the economic possibilities Europe offers should not be over-emphasised in an effort to cater to the taste of the younger generation. In Kohl's view, the essential justification for the integration process remains the need for peace and prosperity.

2. The lessons of history: the post-war period and "Eurosclerosis"

Kohl repeatedly emphasises that the magnitude of the challenges Europe faces today can be no excuse for inaction. He illustrates this claim by pointing to two episodes in Europe's post-war history: the beginnings of European integration after the Second World War and the period of "Eurosclerosis".

For Kohl, the success of the initial steps towards European integration depended crucially on a number of exceptional individuals. The European founding fathers (he names Alcide de Gasperi, Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Winston Churchill) shared a common vision of a unified Europe and pursued it with the support of the United States. The fact that Germany could be part of this integration project is, in Kohl's view, one of the great achievements of former German chancellor Konrad Adenauer's policy of alignment with the West ("*Westbindung*"). It enabled Germany to regain the

trust of the international community and ultimately facilitated a peaceful German reunification in 1990.

Kohl's second example of bold action in the face of crisis is the European response to "Eurosclerosis". He contrasts the pessimism that prevailed in the late 1970s and the early 1980s with the achievements of the following years, including the decisions to introduce a single market and a single currency. Kohl depicts the French-German friendship as the main driver of progress. The shared conviction that political union was needed in spite of disagreements over details, he argues, was instrumental in pursuing a policy of small steps that ultimately contributed to renewed dynamism. He also points out the role of the Delors Plan, "a great achievement" by a man who showed "enormous passion" (p. 72).

Kohl defends the euro against criticism, stressing that it stabilised Europe during the turmoil of the financial crisis and that Europe had to exploit the unique window of opportunity that opened in the context of the end of the Cold War. He admits that a stronger political architecture would have been desirable, but maintains that, if Germany had insisted on a complete political union as a precondition for monetary union, it would have neither today.

3. The roots of crisis

Notwithstanding his support for the single currency, Kohl admits that "It is true: Europe is not in a good condition" (p. 53). But he is convinced that "a return to the nation state (...) [is] not the solution. On the contrary, this would be a problem" (ibid). Consequently, he attributes the euro crisis not to flaws in the architecture of the common currency, but to the pursuit of national interest without regard for the common good. He claims that two mistakes were crucial: The EU's decision to let Greece access the euro area and lacking respect for the EU's budgetary rules.

Concerning Greece, Kohl criticises that the country was admitted even though it did not comply with the Maastricht criteria. Had the EU insisted on further reforms, he claims, the country would have developed its competitiveness further and would not have to endure painful efforts to increase it today. In this reading, the euro is not the cause of crisis. It "merely highlights deficits in a country's competitiveness and stability" (p. 58).

Throughout the book, Kohl stresses the importance of joint French and German leadership in the European integration process. It is therefore unsurprising that he finds harsh words where he perceives the two countries to have betrayed the European project. He describes their transgressions against the Growth and Stability Pact in the early 2000s and their refusal to accept sanctions as a "disgrace" and "a breach of law and trust (...) that served as an invitation to borrow excessively" (p. 59f). He argues that bad fiscal policy, encouraged by the behaviour of the two countries that were expected to serve as role models, has contributed decisively to today's crisis.

Kohl elaborates on the paramount role that monetary stability plays for him and the broader German public and his efforts to ensure that the German preferences be safeguarded in the euro's legal framework. However, he finds that, ultimately, "rules and laws are of no use where the political will is lacking" (p. 84).

4. Guidelines of European policy

For Kohl, Europe is at a turning point today. Will it fall back into nation state-based thinking or will it undertake a renewed attempt at integration? He still believes that the euro made European unification "irreversible" (p. 77) and that is a precondition for political union. However, he worries that the EU and its member states have been too preoccupied with themselves in recent years and that as a consequence of earlier mistakes, much-needed trust and the courage to push for further progress are lacking.

Kohl regards this development as deeply worrying because a loose association of states unwilling to transfer sovereignty to the European level could fall prey to "ghosts from the past", namely nationalism and war (p. 95). At the same time, he admits that calls for a "United States of Europe" have stoked fears of excessive centralisation. He claims not to strive for a United States on European soil, but for diversity, subsidiarity and tolerance.

Concerning foreign policy, Kohl advocates an increased effort to improve relations with the Western Allies. At the same time, he warns Europe not to endanger the achievements of the 1990s, specifically the successful cooperation with its Eastern neighbours on a variety of topics. He describes a gradual estrangement between the EU and Russia

that has now culminated in the conflict over Ukraine. While being clear that he does not endorse the recent Russian behaviour, Kohl also points out that the EU's eastward expansion touches upon Russia's security interests and that mistakes were made on both sides.

5. The way ahead

For the immediate future, Kohl recommends a reduction in public debt and a shift away from shared liabilities. He underlines the importance of stability and trust and speaks against increasing budgetary flexibility, fearing that it could undermine reform efforts. Similarly, the solidarity he demands is limited to "help for self-help" (p. 112), while fiscal consolidation remains the responsibility of the member states themselves.

On a more general level, Kohl diagnoses an orientation crisis that Europe needs to overcome before it can make substantial progress on material issues. He calls for a return to the values and visions of the founding fathers of the European Union. In this context, he ascribes a crucial role to political leadership. In the face of the daunting challenges that stand in the way of European integration, Kohl offers some encouragement to policymakers: He points out that the impressive progress that Europe has made over the past 100 years provides ample reason for optimism and stresses that "history is not an unchangeable process, but the result of human action" (p. 118). He concludes by expressing his hope that people across Europe will someday speak of a "Europe of the fatherlands within a common fatherland Europe" (p. 119).



1. Helmut Kohl, *Aus Sorge um Europa: Ein Appell*, Verlag Droemer Knauer, Munich, November 2014, 120 p.

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