

# EUROPE: AN ODE TO FEAR?

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The climate of fear surrounding the European election campaign in many countries of the European Union calls for some salutary political clarifications three months prior to the May 25 verdict. A shorter version of this Tribune has been published on the French version of the *Huffington Post* and the Serbian version of *Euractiv*.

## 1. Many of its citizens are worried about the EU, which is not to blame for the current crisis

The European Union (EU) did not cause the economic, financial and social crisis affecting several member states, be they members of the euro area or not. The EU may not have taken every step needed to prevent such a crisis from happening: recent healthy measures to better regulate financial excess and prevent new bubbles prove this after the fact, as does the [reform and adoption of the stability and growth pact](#) and the fiscal compact respectively, intended to pre-empt excessive imbalances in national public and private debt, as well as competitiveness. In both cases, the EU has positioned itself to better fix the failures of financial markets and member states, which remain most to blame for the crisis.

The EU is all an easier scapegoat than it has had to take decisions which angered public opinions. By [acting with and like the International monetary fund \(IMF\)](#) in Ireland and Greece, it let itself become as unpopular as the IMF. The EU's image has been tarnished not only in countries where drastic reform has been traded for European aid (and where reform was needed even if the aid wasn't granted), but also in countries not keen on helping member states which either failed to supervise their banks and real estate sector, or properly manage state spending and their economies. Many Europeans now view the "Troika" as a source of painful or costly adjustments - and therefore a threat - even though the EU was previously associated with economic and social progress (particularly in periphery countries).

It is hardly surprising, then, that higher-than-normal popular support is going to political parties who slam the EU. Those wishing to destroy the European integration have no positive proposals to address the problems and fears they exploit and absolutely [no chance of obtaining a majority at the](#)

[European Parliament](#). The first key issue of the current campaign is then to see whether traditional political forces also adopt the populist diatribes, or instead provide citizens with alternative and constructive approaches to exiting the crisis and to EU policies. The second key question is [whether the left or right wins](#) what appears to be a close race, particularly as the order established between European people's party (EPP) conservatives and the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) will largely determine the directions and decisions taken by the EU over the next five years.

## 2. The European Union can be an answer to the major threats facing its citizens

The European construction began in response to a double threat: the prospect of killing one another and weakening the region once again, and the belligerence of the Soviet union. Decolonisation and the Suez crisis, which confirmed Europe's loss of influence, enabled the common market to take off. Similarly, monetary union was set in motion to ward off instability resulting from the fall of the Berlin wall and Germany's welcomed reunification. All things considered, it would then make more sense to celebrate the EU with Beethoven's "heroic" 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony instead of his 9<sup>th</sup> "ode to joy", including when we look to the future.

Europeans are indeed facing multiple challenges and threats: unhinged and deregulated finance; climate change and external energy dependence; dramatic population aging as an incentive for more immigration; instability in our neighbourhood; the growth of continent-states such as Russia, China and Brazil; the spectre of terrorism in the Sahel, in Syria and elsewhere.

These challenges feed fears but also [support reasons to unite](#), as member states are largely unequipped to face them alone. More cooperation and integration is the best way of doing so, regardless of the EU's many

faults, which are unavoidable in a union based on the compromises of 28 members, and which require unremitting effort to correct them.

In this context, many Europeans will admit better to Europe's utility if they see it protects them. Most often, however, Brussels refuses to invoke this line of reasoning, likening it to 'protectionism'. But EU tariff and non-tariff barriers in international trade, mentioned only when they could be removed, are protective measures indeed. So are European standards, which protect consumers and so is European competition, which protects people's purchasing power against monopoly profits. So is Europe's banking union project, which will protect taxpayers by better monitoring banks via the European central bank (ECB) and making the latter pay for their own failures...

### 3. The protection offered by European integration is under threat from a populist surge

Also emblematic of the protective approach of Europe is monetary union. As Jacques Delors has pointed out, the euro has protected member states - even from the fall-out of their own mistakes. Likewise, it is a safeguard against overzealous financial speculation on national currencies and the ravages of repeated competitive devaluation. This is why monetary union garners strong majority support from citizens in every euro area country: they prefer the rights and responsibilities that come with sharing a single currency, even grudgingly, as opposed to the risky idea of going back their national one. Few Europeans would write an ode to their love of the euro, but just as few

are willing to box themselves into the "euro area: love it or leave it" dilemma.

The European area of free movement elicits a more ambiguous response among citizens. While in principle widely supported, to the point of being perceived a key component of EU membership, some of its effects - unfair labour competition or foreign crime, for example - are often criticized. Such problems need to be addressed, by improving the monitoring of posted workers employment and by enhancing police and judicial cooperation, for example. But reneging on free movement, inspired by the Swiss vote, would have very negative consequences. What would then happen to the 300,000 French residents, of all levels, who go to work every day in another EU country (when only 11,000 foreign residents do the opposite)? As regards permanent border controls, they have not proven useful in Great Britain, another country where foreign crime is a problem: the only certainty is that day in, day out, such border controls weigh heavily on hundreds of thousands of travellers, lorry drivers and employees, who have nothing to declare but their wasted time.

The European election campaign must naturally draw positive attention to the opportunities and advantages of European integration, for example in terms of economic growth and employment or human exchanges. But it must not leave the fear being invoked only by "populists", whose increased popularity is both an ineffective solution and an additional threat to Europeans.

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