

## The Unfinished History of European Integration



# The Unfinished History of European Integration

*Second, Revised Edition*

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## Foreword

Over the past few months, my thoughts have often returned to a now famous speech that French President François Mitterrand delivered to the European Parliament on 17 January 1995. It was the year before his death. Mitterrand appeared fragile, but spoke passionately about the importance of European cooperation and the vital responsibility of his generation. Having witnessed in the 1920s and 1930s how the poison of resentment and revanchism infected the minds of many Europeans, his generation sought to pass on its experience to the next generation. ‘Le nationalisme, c’est la guerre’, nationalism is war, was the powerful and now very timely slogan for which his speech ultimately became famous.

That day in the European Parliament, Mitterrand pronounced his political testament and made an urgent appeal to his audience: do not forget this continent’s past and what it achieved after the First and Second World War on the long, winding path to European integration in all its forms, to an ‘ever closer union’ – as can also be read about in this handbook. The coming together of different nations based on fundamental freedoms, to prevent them from ever again going as horribly wrong as they did in the previous century, remains a unique feature in Europe’s conflict-ridden history.

This central notion has been the driving force behind European integration ever since: we still debate the direction our continent should take, but we do so not on the battlefield but at the conference table, in our national parliaments and in European institutions. We have exchanged naturally recurring conflicts between nation states over power, influence, and territory for a set of values that should provide every European with a solid foundation of peace, security, and prosperity: democracy, human rights, freedom of religion, individualism, albeit always embedded in an idea of solidarity. These values – call it a European spirit – originated on our continent. Just read the work of Erasmus, and you will find all those elements there.

This way of thinking and living characterizes Europe. Everywhere, European societies can be recognized by a combination of (constitutionally codified) freedoms, by democratic decision-making, and the rule of law, functioning to a greater or lesser extent, which serves to protect citizens against arbitrariness and the law of the jungle. Welfare states have been established everywhere to ensure that everyone can count on a reliable safety net in case of illness, misfortune, unemployment, or old age. Each European country differs in this regard, but on no other continent has that combination of achievements, that common roof over our houses as

the unsurpassed Václav Havel aptly described it, been as visible as on our European continent in the past seventy years.

With each generation – I feel this more strongly myself now I have grandchildren – the weight of history increasingly compels us to venture to understand it, imbue it with meaning and place it in the context of our own time. All the more so now that the European project finds itself at a crossroads. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia – with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 as its prelude – marks a watershed in recent history and once again puts the question how Europe can guarantee its security at the heart of public debate. It has been a brutal awakening and has made the *raison d'être* of the Union visible once more, just like it made clear that the responsibility for security on our continent can no longer be left to the Americans. Europe will have to take a leading, autonomous role here.

The history of the European project shows that division on major issues – such as migration, or the enormous challenge that climate change poses – leads to powerlessness and thereby puts the security and stability of member states at risk. The history of the European project also proves that it is an illusion to think that we can manage by ourselves. Even large countries such as Germany and France will hardly ever be able to do so.

Is 'ever closer union' a realistic prospect in our time? I think it is. Provided that the European nation states join forces and do not allow themselves to be paralysed by division, whether fuelled from outside or stirred up from within their own borders. Each generation anew faces the task of resisting the temptation to want to shut itself off from others or to maintain the pretence that it could withdraw from world politics behind literal or figurative walls. The European Union remains a voluntary, institutionally embedded alliance of countries and citizens born out of the desire to build a sustainable basis for peace and security on the ruins of two world wars. That mission still stands strong as ever, and is perhaps even more urgent than it has been for a long time.

Frans Timmermans,  
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First Vice-President of the EU Commission, 2014–2019



# Acknowledgements

This book has been over a decade in the making. Its origins lie in the decision of colleagues from the Radboud University Nijmegen and the University of Amsterdam to embark on an ambitious project: to write a history of European integration for university students from various academic backgrounds. They found that works on the European Union designed principally for politics students tended to discuss history in only a cursory manner. For their part, they felt that history handbooks ended *in medias res*, usually with the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht. Moreover, the authors wanted to convey to such students that the literature they read in their studies is itself expressive of thinking that has evolved with the history of European integration.

When this book appeared in the Dutch language, published as *Europa in alle Staten* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013), it was the first truly interdisciplinary handbook of European integration with a historical focus. To meet the demand of international European studies programmes, the original was updated and translated into the English language as *The Unfinished History of European Integration* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018). A German language version followed, titled *Die Unvollendete: Eine Geschichte der Europäischen Union* (Bonn: Dietz Verlag, 2018).

In the years since, several other volumes on the history of European integration have emerged. Each in their own way has served to deepen and broaden our understanding of the EU, past and present. They provide much-needed companions for various readerships. It remains the case, however, that relatively few of the volumes out there provide a comprehensive yet concise introduction to EU history to students, be they enrolled in history, political science, law, public administration, or European studies degrees. Scarce are the number of books that introduce students of history to the theory of European integration and, at the same time, students of the contemporary integration process to its history and historical thinking.

True to the English-language title, the original authors decided that much had happened since 2018 – both in Europe’s own development and in accompanying scholarship on European integration – to merit revision. They also felt that it was up to a new generation of scholars, each of whom have used the book in their own teaching, to bring the book up to date with the latest insights from European integration scholarship. By handing over the manuscript to this new generation, the original authors made manifest their commitment to academic teaching and the time-honoured tradition where

students eventually take over from their teachers. As this new generation, we are deeply indebted to their incredible generosity and grateful of their trust in our ability to do their original project justice. Our inestimable thanks therefore go out to Wim van Meurs, Robin de Bruin, Liesbeth van de Grift, Carla Hoetink, Karin van Leeuwen, and Carlos Reijnen. We can only hope to live up to the standards that they have set.

While paying homage to the original idea of the book – which has lost none of its relevance – this version is a fundamental revision of the English language version. For a start, it brings the story of European integration up to the modern day. It also includes references to new scholarly approaches and discussions that have entered the profession since 2018. Unlike the original book, which bundled the chronological chapters with a discussion of the theory and historiography of the respective period, this version presents a continuous narrative of six chronological chapters. The theory and historiography of European integration are now discussed in standalone chapters.

Over the years and different versions of this book, numerous colleagues have provided their expert comments, written reviews of it, and shared their experiences of teaching it. We thank them for their contributions and the solid basis they have provided for this book. For their very helpful comments on this revised edition, we particularly want to acknowledge Theresa Kuhn, Joris Melman, and Tijs Sikma. We further want to thank Amsterdam University Press – especially Jan-Peter Wissink, Evelien Witte-Van der Veer, Jasmijn Boonacker, and Floor Appelman – for their commitment to this project and their efforts to make this revised edition possible. Thanks, too, to Brian Heffernan for the language editing.

As Frans Timmermans conveys in the foreword to this edition, the big questions that European integration has sparked over the decades feel more prescient and urgent than ever. This latest attempt to understand the unfinished history of European integration therefore feels very timely.

Leiden, Maastricht, Nijmegen, and Utrecht

April 2024

# Introduction

Today's European Union (EU) is at a crossroads. On the one hand, the EU can easily be read as a remarkable success story. From its original six members, it has grown into a global force comprising 27 countries and some 450 million Europeans, with an external border that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Baltic and Black Seas. In the process, the EU has emerged as a major promoter of peace and democratization, enlargement having become a key instrument to push for political reforms in, and guarantee the stability of, the countries surrounding it. Yet this influence is not simply restricted to the EU's local neighbourhood. On the contrary, through a complex web of association and cooperation agreements, the EU has become one of the world's primary centres of economic gravity. The sheer size and reach of its internal market mean that the EU now helps to determine standards by which countries trade and cooperate. These standards in fact transcend the realm of trade to include human rights, consumer law, data privacy, and environmental protection – the so-called 'Brussels effect'. Combined with the significance of the euro as a leading reserve currency, this growing economic clout has thus translated into greater strategic influence. The EU's collective voice is heard in a range of important forums such as the United Nations (UN) and international climate conferences. Alongside this, the EU has become one of the single largest global donors of humanitarian aid. And in recent years, it has shown itself to be an ever more critical security actor as well.

At the same time, the EU faces an increasingly complex set of challenges. If anything, Brexit revealed a yearning among some voters to move away from, rather than towards, the EU. The British referendum of 2016 also served as a reminder that questions over the EU's apparent lack of democratic legitimacy have not faded. In fact, political parties sceptical of the EU are now a mainstream feature of national and European politics. Criticism of the pace, range, and depth of cooperation within the EU's existing structures has become widespread. Others go still further and openly question the EU's very existence, calling for completely new and much looser forms of collaboration among sovereign governments. The deteriorating status of democracy and the rule of law in Europe has only complicated this picture. Hungary and Poland stand among those EU countries accused (notably by the European Parliament) of eroding civil rights, weakening judicial independence, and curtailing the independence

of the media. If the EU has sometimes struggled to devise an adequate response to this threat, the consequences of this trend have become ever more profound: with the invasion of Ukraine once again bringing war to its doorstep, the EU is surely much less able to stand up for democracy abroad if it is unable to consolidate democracy at home. Internal divisions in other areas also undermine the EU's effectiveness. Matters such as the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the ensuing eurozone crisis, and, more recently, the uptick in migration, have at times exposed a serious lack of cohesion across the bloc. The irony of this is obvious. For at precisely the time when the EU itself is contested more than ever before, the scale and cross-border nature of some of the most pressing questions faced by political leaders – issues such as pandemics, technology, and artificial intelligence, the climate crisis, immigration, terrorism, trade disputes, and geopolitical instability – seem to make the European level the best forum for addressing them.

No one can truly hope to understand today's EU and how we got to this stage in its development without revisiting the past. Our aim as authors is to do precisely that. Over the course of eight chapters – six tracing the chronological evolution of the EU followed by two chapters discussing the theory and historiography of European integration – we provide a wide-ranging account that serves as a companion to newcomers to the topic of the EU: its institutions, politics, and history. At the same time, this book has much to offer those who have a more seasoned interest in the antecedents of contemporary European politics. After all, current debates about its size, shape, and influence serve as a reminder that the EU is not a 'finished' project: its future political, economic, and legal shape are all up in the air. Uncertain though the EU's current situation may seem, this book shows that hope and fear, ambitions and criticisms, have been constant throughout its existence. History to this end serves as an important tool in making sense of this 'unfinished' story. Hindsight, certainly, is the advantage of historians, who can reflect on strategic choices made in the past – including routes not taken – and their unintended consequences. In much the same way, history can signpost how similar issues today might have been dealt with in the past. History can, moreover, unpack previous divergences to better understand contemporary grievances. And, ultimately, a reading of the EU's past helps to capture its true complexity to better appreciate why it and its constituent parts act and behave in the way they do. A survey book of this type can therefore be an important companion for students

and scholars of subjects such as political science, law, economics, and international relations.

## Four questions

This book identifies four questions that have long been at the heart of European integration. On the face of it, they are deceptively simple and can be summarized in four words: *what*, *why*, *who*, and *how*. Yet, how they have been answered throughout history tells us much about the major issues facing the EU at critical moments in its recent and more remote past. The four questions run as a thread throughout this book, a reminder that the core questions of European integration have resurfaced time and again and that most of them have no definitive answer – indeed, they are unfinished. These questions are not mutually exclusive either. Historically, answers to one question have always had implications for others. Ideas of *what* the EU should do have, for instance, inevitably been tied up with questions about its membership – the *who* of European integration – as well as debates over *how* it should function.

## What is Europe?

The first question is: what is Europe? This is arguably the broadest of the four questions. It is also one that first requires some conceptual explanation, since the European Union as we know it today was technically only founded as part of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. But, of course, the EU's history is rooted in several earlier organizations. Formally the EU was born as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) founded in 1952, which as the name suggests was restricted to cooperation in two specific fields. By contrast, the European Economic Community (EEC), which emerged in 1957 alongside the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), reflected the wider ambitions of policymakers. But the ECSC did not simply cease to exist; these three legally separate bodies instead formed the European Communities. And even as both 'European Communities' and 'EEC' remained part of official European parlance for a long time afterwards, the Merger Treaty of 1965 consolidated their executives into a single European Commission, with the singular European Community (EC) becoming the name often used to describe the immediate ancestor of today's EU.