Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

Towards a Sovereign Europe

A Centre-Right Approach

Angelos Chryssogelos[1]

Summary

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As the debate on European sovereignty has gained traction in recent years, Europe's centre–right should develop its own distinct vision of European sovereignty, one that reflects its own priorities and values. This policy brief aims to develop a tentative theoretical and historical framework that can be used to work out what this conservative and Christian Democratic vision could look like. It argues that it is important for the centre–right to ensure that its vision stands apart from those of both the nationalist populists on its right and social-liberals on its left. Against populists the centre–right needs to show that conservatism and European integration can be compatible. As the historical overview in the paper shows, conservatives throughout history have supported processes of political and economic centralisation as long as these have taken place in piecemeal fashion and the resulting institutions have reproduced in their conduct and outlook the values conservatives stand for. Against the centralisers on the centre–left, who are currently monopolising the slogan 'more Europe', the centre–right must articulate more clearly how its own understanding of EU integration is a more pragmatic, effective and viable way forward. Contrary to progressives, who view European and international institutions as instruments of ideologically-driven social change, European conservatives see institutions as expressions and safeguards both of diversity inside the EU and of the distinctly European imprint on world politics externally. The paper offers a first outline of how a conservative perspective on EU sovereignty could be applied to a range of policy areas, from foreign policy to economic governance to migration.

Keywords Conservatism – Centralisation – Subsidiarity – Integration – Populism – Social-liberalism – Centre–right – European Sovereignty

Introduction

A decade of governance crises and the emergence of new external threats have given rise to a debate on the EU becoming a 'sovereign' actor in world politics. Despite their ostensible focus on foreign policy, however, debates about Europe's 'sovereignty' necessarily reflect rival views on the shape of European integration. The EU's ability to act internationally is intertwined with its nature as a political system, as the struggles to carve out a response to the Covid pandemic currently demonstrate.

This policy brief is a first attempt to develop a distinctly centre–right[2] perspective on how the EU should carry out integration at home and strategic action abroad. In essence, it tries to answer the questions of how a European conservative or Christian Democrat should think about European sovereignty and how the conservative view of a 'sovereign Europe' differs from other ideological perspectives on EU integration and foreign policy.

The paper first provides a historical overview of the role conservatives have played during times of contested centralisation. Historically, conservatives have more often been reluctant centralisers than principled anti-centralisers. Indeed, they have tended to oppose sweeping transfers of power from smaller political units to political centres above these units. But conservatives have accepted endowing political centres with authority if there was the practical need for this and if these powers reflected specific conservative value hierarchies.

The paper will then trace the tensions in EU integration of the past decade that have given rise to a polarisation between national populism and the centralising Europeanism of social-liberals. The former want to see a Europe that has been dissolved back into its national components, while the latter, under the banner of 'more Europe', hold to a vision of a progressively centralised EU. I will argue that both visions are impractical and dangerous for the EU's long-term survival.

The paper will subsequently contrast these visions of European sovereignty with a distinctly conservative vision of internal and external sovereignty that draws

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2   In the paper the terms 'centre–right' and 'conservative' are used to indicate all political forces and ideologies that see themselves as alternatives to both the left in its various articulations (progressive, socialist, etc.) and the populist and identitarian right. This includes not only certain properly 'conservative' parties but also many Christian Democratic and certain liberal parties. Although most of these parties are affiliated with the EPP, some of them might be found in other European-level political parties, such as the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe or the European Conservatives and Reformists party.

on historical examples of conservative centralism. It will be argued that this vision of conservative European statecraft is both an appropriate response to pertinent questions about European integration and a realistic blueprint for dealing with an increasingly challenging world.[3]

There follows a discussion of the policy implications of a conservative conception of European sovereignty, which takes into account recent developments linked to the Covid pandemic. European sovereignty along conservative lines builds significantly on existing achievements of integration. But it also calls upon the EU to alter its behaviour and assumptions in certain crucial ways.

Centralisation and the conservative dilemma

Centralising political authority means endowing the centre with more powers over the constituent parts of a political union. This has always presented a problem for conservatives, for whom proposals to transfer power to remote political authorities with the power to dictate changes may contradict society's pace of evolution or its constituent units' cultural traits and values.

The anti-centralising streak in conservatism is indeed a prominent one. It originated in the European aristocracy's opposition to the efforts of early modern monarchs to increase their powers and standardise their authority in their realms.[4] In more recent times suspicion towards political authority has been pronounced in the economic thought of conservatives, particularly with the emergence of pro-market ideas in the 1980s.

At the same time, conservatives have also bolstered political power if more important goals would be served or social arrangements safeguarded. In the late-nineteenth century, Bismarck in Germany and Disraeli in Britain enacted welfare measures to respond to the hardships of industrialisation. Christian Democracy was even more open than classical conservatism to using state power to alleviate the hardships of the industrial economy of the nineteenth century.[5]

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[3] For an earlier attempt to sketch a centre–right or conservative Europeanism as an alternative to both the EU centralism of the left and the nationalism of the populist right, see F. O. Reho, *For a New Europeanism*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2017).

[4] P. Kondylis, *Konservatismus: Geschichtlicher Gehalt und Untergang* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986).

[5] S. N. Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Christian Democrats also supported a united Europe as a guarantee of peace. In advocating the transfer of political authority above the nation-state, Christian Democrats also exhibited the core conservative traits of gradualism and moderation. The Christian Democratic principle of subsidiarity bridges this classical conservative instinct with an equally conservative pragmatism in the face of changing circumstances.[6]

To understand conservatives' embrace of political centralisation at various junctures, one has to grasp conservatism's contextual character. As an ideology of preservation and gradualism, conservatism opposes radical ideas that threaten to upend a society's organic values and existing institutional arrangements. Faced with ideas of these kinds, conservatives may well prioritise the role of political authority to safeguard these values and institutions.

An interesting example is provided by the Prussian aristocracy, which, in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, oscillated between opposition and support for centralising political authority. The landed aristocracy of the Junkers initially opposed the efforts of Prussian kings to encroach on their privileges, but closed ranks around the monarchy once liberal ideas challenged traditional social hierarchies. They became disenchanted again when Prussia unified Germany, as they feared that in an expanded Reich their influence would be diminished. But a new threat, socialism, led them to reconcile with German nationalism.[7]

English conservatives faced similar dilemmas in the long period of constitutional crises between the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth century. Efforts by the Stuart monarchs to centralise their authority were resisted by the lower-ranking gentry, and this led to radicalisation and revolution. Here centralisation could be understood as conservative because it reproduced an authoritarian ethos underpinned by the hierarchical authority of institutions such as the Anglican Church.[8]

In late–seventeenth-century English politics, what was at stake was the line of succession to the throne. 'Tories' did not simply support *institutions* but advocated specific *content* which authority should represent. Their support for the Stuart line was undergirded by a view of the monarchy as not simply an ideal

6   F. O. Reho, 'Subsidiarity in the EU: Reflections on a Centre–Right Agenda', *European View* 18/1 (2019), 6–15.

7   D. Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 193.

8   H. Trevor-Roper, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999 [1967]).

political institution but the embodiment of traditional social hierarchies.[9] Thus, by the eighteenth century, under a new dynasty allied with liberal elements of the aristocracy, the Tories came to be considered suspect and even a threat to the constitutional order.[10]

Similar considerations apply to the question of the role of the Republican party in the US in the decades after the Civil War. During this time, in a budding federal union, the Republicans became the party of central government, supporting its efforts to foster an industrial economy. In this sense they can be seen as the party of political authority—and, increasingly, of the emerging American industry—and therefore as positionally conservative, that is, defenders of the establishment.[11]

The height of Republican-led centralisation came at the turn of the twentieth century when, under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt, they espoused activist economic, social and environmental regulation over an industrial economy dominated by powerful interests ('trusts'). Interestingly, under presidential candidate and Roosevelt foe Woodrow Wilson, the Democrats also shed their suspicion of centralisation and accepted the principle of transferring more powers to the union level (through e.g. the institution of a national income tax).[12]

Roosevelt's New Nationalism and Wilson's New Freedom squared off in the 1912 presidential election, but both advocated the empowerment and modernisation of the central government. What distinguished them was their underlying values: Wilson's articulation of government activism was emancipatory in character, whereas Roosevelt sought to renew the values that had made the Republicans the party of political authority.

Interestingly, this difference played out as a markedly different sentiment in the two statesmen's understanding of foreign policy. Roosevelt long advocated that the US should enter the First World War, and Wilson ultimately led the country to war. However, for the former, America's participation was an affirmation of patriotism, duty and national glory, whereas the latter saw it as an opportunity to serve liberal–idealistic dreams of international institutionalisation.[13]

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[9]   T. J. G. Harris, *Politics Under the Later Stuarts: Party Conflict in a Divided Society* (London: Longman, 1993).

[10] L. Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party 1714–1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[11] L. L. Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[12] L. L. Gould, *Four Hats in the Ring: The 1912 Election and the Birth of Modern American Politics* (University Press of Kansas, 2012).

[13] J. M. Thompson, *Great Power Rising: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of US Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Thus, we can see that conservatives' relationship to centralisation is not always clear but appears to be defined by various considerations. First, conservatism opposes radical transfers of power to political centres. Contrary to totalitarian ideologies, conservatism is profoundly uncomfortable with the prospect of a government being vested with uncontrolled power. When conservatives support centralisation, they do so on the understanding that it will be a piecemeal process.

Second, conservatism's relationship to centralisation is contextual. Conservatives will support vesting more powers in political authority if this is done in a way that furthers their core values. And they can oppose centralisation if it serves purposes other than those they hold dear. In this sense, conservatism is not much different from other ideologies.

Third, conservative centralism differs both from the territorial absorption of smaller units by imperialist or nationalist centres, and from the sidelining of local particularities in the name of 'progressive' ideological goals such as economic redistribution or the imposition of social 'modernisation'. For conservatives, it is by respecting the local and the rooted that political authority is legitimated. On the other hand, both the authoritarian imposition of the centre on the periphery and the economic dependence of the periphery on the centre are seen as conditions that in the long run deprive the political centre of its legitimacy.

Finally, conservatism primarily embodies the sentiment that not all values and social arrangements are a priori equal.[14] This means that we can discern an ultimate criterion for when conservatives will support political centralisation: it is whether the ideas codified in and reproduced by the political centre conform to their own preferred hierarchy of political, cultural or religious values. If this criterion is not met, conservatives may very well, and indeed must, oppose further concentration of power.

Thus, the Prussian landed aristocracy's ambivalence towards political power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be explained by mundane considerations of political survival. But they nevertheless ended up supporting a unified German Reich that not only preserved their privileges but also reproduced to a very large degree their values—by adopting their militaristic ethos and instituting a welfare state that undercut support for socialism without upsetting socioeconomic hierarchies.

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[14]   J.-W. Müller, 'Comprehending Conservatism: A New Framework for Analysis', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11/3 (2006).

Similarly, in the early US, Hamiltonian Federalists did not advocate centralising economic policy simply in the name of efficiency or even in support of the economic interests of the commercial classes of the Northeast they represented. The Federalists of the late-eighteenth century also emphasised deference, the organic unity of society and strong institutional checks on the rule of the majority.[15] Centralisation was meant not only to serve these goals internally but also to equip the new union to face dangers from abroad arising from the diffusion of the subversive ideas of the French Revolution.[16]

In conclusion, conservatism cannot be equated with either opposition to centralisation or attachment to the official power of the day. It can support centralisation as long as this is not enacted in a radical way and care is taken not to encroach on the rights and distinctiveness of a political union's constituent units. At the same time, while conservatives recognise the practical need for centralisation when external circumstances demand it, they still expect the new political centre to reflect in its policies, rhetoric and outlook the value hierarchies they hold dear.

'Conserving' European integration before and during times of crisis

The governance crises of the 2010s posed challenges to EU integration. This was especially so for the 'transgovernmental' mode of integration, whereby integration was based on member states' sticking to commonly agreed rules but resisting massive transfers of power to EU institutions. This kept substantial power in the hands of national leaders, even though in the same period supranational institutions such as the European Parliament were also strengthened. This type of integration was considered the most pragmatic way to accommodate the diversity of the EU after it expanded to 28 member states.[17]

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[15] D. H. Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1965).

[16] M. Q. Dawson, *Partisanship and the Birth of America's Second Party, 1796–1800* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2000).

[17] C. J. Bickerton, D. Hodson and U. Puetter, 'The New Intergovernmentalism: European Integration in the Post-Maastricht Era', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 53/4 (2014).

Given the primacy of the EPP in the decade up to 2010, integration through intergovernmental action also came to be associated with a centre–right perspective. Indeed, in many ways the balance between European integration and national competences that has characterised the EU since Maastricht has a distinct conservative tinge.

First, this form of integration reflected a pragmatism and moderation which recognised that, in an ever-expanding union, rushing towards supranational integration in areas close to the core of national sovereignty would risk exacerbating differences among states and national societies. This arrangement was also quite close to the Christian Democratic principle of subsidiarity.

Second, the centre–right's defence of this kind of European integration also reflected the increasing identification of the fortunes of the EU with those of the EPP as its preeminent political family. The EPP became the strongest group in the European Parliament in 1999 and the strongest force in the Council in the early 2000s. And after the 2004 enlargement, the party became a pivotal actor in EU governance and policymaking.

Third, this mode of integration also reflected conservative principles. For example, the emphasis on fiscal discipline and responsibility in eurozone governance signalled a preference for fiscal frugality over redistribution. Resisting the wholesale transfer of authority to a supranational centre signalled an awareness that, in the EU, national identity is more important than a uniform and intrusive Europeanism.

The conservative imprint was even clearer in the EU's international presence, which is not surprising, given that the centre–right has been the political family with the most elaborated strategic and foreign-policy ideas.[18] EU foreign policy retained its essentially intergovernmental character. New common institutions (such as the EEAS) were created primarily with a view to facilitating and maximising the effects of common action. In this context, the EU's security needs continued to be met primarily via NATO, thus sustaining the idea of a united West in world politics, a core position of the European centre–right.[19]

While supporting the principle of a more united EU internationally, the centre–right was often concerned about whether centre–left positions on issues such as global environmental governance and trade protection might burden the transatlantic connection or spill back into the EU in the form of demands for more socioeconomic

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18 A. Chryssogelos, 'Patterns of Transnational Partisan Contestation of European Foreign Policy', *European Foreign Affairs* Review 20/2 (2015).

19 *The Future of the West, European View*, special issue 9/2 (2010).

regulation. At the same time, recognising the legitimacy of national interests in EU foreign policy dovetailed with the core value of European integration—and of conservatism—to respect and accommodate national particularities as much as possible.

The conservative nature of EU integration became apparent during the decade of governance crises after 2010. During the eurozone crisis the EU resisted calls for fiscal and debt centralisation, calling on governments to rectify their fiscal positions on their own. During the refugee crisis, border protection remained largely the responsibility of member states, with limited assistance from the EU, while asylum remained decentralised, despite efforts at burden sharing.

In the end the EU, the eurozone and Schengen survived, but the crises strengthened challengers on either flank of the EPP. On the right, nationalist populism portrayed EU integration as an assault on the sovereignty of member states. Depending on the country, populists blamed the EU for the austerity in the south, for forcing taxpayers in the north to foot the bill for bailouts,[20] for abandoning border states to deal with the refugee issue on their own or for imposing on member states burden sharing in connection with this same issue.

Right-wing populists, especially in the north, present European integration as having gone too far and demand a return to national sovereignty. Paradoxically, this sometimes ties in with the opposite complaint that the EU does not do enough to help member states. One sees this pattern especially among populists in the south and the east, who still demand economic transfers, while at the same time calling for more sovereignty.

On the left, the crises created new windows of opportunity for supporters of centralisation. They generally demanded the pooling of national debt, a redistributive eurozone budget, automatic refugee resettlement and a stronger role for supranational agencies in border protection. For socialists, social-liberals and Greens, the answer to the governance crises has always been 'more Europe', understood as the elevation to the supranational level of core national state prerogatives such as taxation, spending and border management.[21]

The combined effect of these trends has been significant. Older and newer centre–left forces—social democrats, Greens, social-liberals and the more recent

[20] H. Kriesi and T. S. Pappas (eds.), *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2016).

[21] J. Pisani-Ferry, 'Europe Could Miss Its Opportunity for Political Realignment', *Social Europe,* 10 September 2018.

'radical centrists'—offer a clear message of Europeanising all problems. They see in centralisation and 'more Europe' the blanket solution for economic imbalances, immigration burden sharing, the management of new challenges such as climate change and more. Right-wing populists, on the other hand, offer a message that stresses the protection of national sovereignty and a transactional view of the nation-state's participation in the EU. These clear-cut prescriptions are squeezing from both sides the centre–right as the political family most associated with the EU's mode of functioning, despite its success in safeguarding the integrity of the EU during the crises.

Visions of European sovereignty

The crises of the 2010s opened up a debate about the future of the EU. In recent years this debate has been heightened by the emergence of a range of external challenges. These developments have brought to the fore concepts such as 'European sovereignty' and 'strategic autonomy'.[22] But the precise meaning of these ideas remains contested, and their interpretation is guided by other political and ideological considerations.

The nationalist–populist vision

The emergence of the concept of 'European sovereignty' represents a victory of sorts for nationalists and populists since for a long time they were the political forces most associated with idea of 'sovereignty'. It is no coincidence that the word 'sovereignty', which earlier on was used mostly in the context of the nation-state and rarely by EU officials, emerged in official European discourse in the aftermath of the severe governance crises and the populist backlashes they provoked in the late 2010s.

EU elites have come to realise that in today's world a certain degree of strong political action is necessary. This is a break from the liberal the idea that governance and institutions are enough to manage global challenges and ensure order in the international system. However, this also means that, to some degree, the debate has shifted to an area where nationalists and populists have an advantage in using

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[22] J. Howorth, *Strategic Autonomy: Why It's Not About Europe Going it Alone,* Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2019).

the language of 'sovereignty'. Thus, it is important to explain how real European sovereignty differs from the sovereignty they advocate.

The populist vision of European sovereignty is a protectionist one. Right-wing populists see international affairs primarily through the lens of immigration and understand sovereignty in cultural terms.[23] The main problem with this vision is that it is narrow-minded. It seeks to defend national borders, cultures and economies, and sees the EU as one of the international threats rather than a tool to be used against them.

For nationalists and populists, the debate about European sovereignty is an opportunity to promote their vision of a radically decentralised EU. They oppose globalism and prefer intergovernmental negotiations conducted by strong national leaders as the most legitimate mode of conducting diplomacy. However, while they appear committed to the primacy of the nation, this principle is essentially vacuous. It flows from an anti-centralising disposition, but it cannot resolve deeper policy dilemmas or guide action.

Thus, right-wing populists appear open to an ad hoc transatlanticism based on a personal connection with Donald Trump, unmediated by more durable institutional structures and centred on shared opposition to immigration and multiculturalism. Yet some of these same populists engage in policies that contravene US priorities in key areas. Most of them are very positive towards Vladimir Putin's Russia.[24] Some appear to be enthusiastic for stronger Chinese influence in Europe as a counterbalance to EU power.[25]

While most populists emanate from the right, it is important to differentiate them from conservatives. Beyond their focus on the nation, they do not espouse any value hierarchy that could guide principled action. While they profess to defend sovereignty and the national interest, they often pursue policies visibly at odds with both.

Populists purport to be sovereignists, but many of them have few qualms about committing their countries to unbalanced deals with China. Some nationalists, like those in Poland, claim to fear Russia but at the same time do not hesitate to

23   C. Schori Liang (ed.), *Europe for the Europeans: The Foreign and Security Policy of the Populist Radical Right* (London: Routledge, 2007).

24   A. Chryssogelos, *Old Ghosts in New Sheets: European Populist Parties and Foreign Policy*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2011).

25   F. Esparraga, *Rhetoric of the Right: European Populists' View of China*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Policy brief no. 205 (Stockholm, 2017).

weaken EU unity in foreign policy. And nativist populists who complain that an unfair burden to deal with immigration has been placed on their countries are at the same time opposing EU collaboration on asylum that could result in a fairer distribution of this burden.

For nationalist populists the ultimate goal is to free the nation-state from international commitments, replacing them with ad hoc deals. However, this would result in an inability to serve the national interest they purport to defend. But they consider even this an acceptable price to pay for weakening and dismantling international institutions. In other words, they are not genuine conservatives but circumstantial reactionaries.

The populist vision of European sovereignty would turn Europe, which today is an active player in international politics, into a passive recipient of global developments. It welcomes external influence and divide-and-conquer tactics from foreign actors like China and Russia. European sovereignty is envisioned as a loose assemblage of national sovereignties, bickering and employing outside leverage to counterbalance each other. They understand transnational political cooperation merely in rhetorical, performative and reactive terms, as a network of strong men who resist such evils as globalism, liberal think tanks, the established international media and so on.

If nationalists and populists had their way, EU sovereignty would simply mean freedom to be bounced around. The knee-jerk instinct for the pursuit of short-term advantages by individual states would take precedence over the dangers of China extending its economic and technological influence, Russia entrenching its position in the Eastern neighbourhood and the Balkans, and the US withdrawing strategically from Europe.

The social-liberal vision

Unlike populists and nationalists, social-liberals and the broad centre–left see internal centralisation as a response to the demand for external action. Developing the EU's independent security capacity, instigating a European industrial policy to foster 'EU champions' and centralising immigration policies and border control are all indispensable for making the EU a proper international actor.[26]

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[26] *France 24*, 'Macron Calls for "European Sovereignty" to Combat Authoritarianism in Speech at European Parliament', 17 April 2018.

In its most sweeping form, the social-liberal vision completely sidelines national sovereignty as the EU becomes fully responsible for representing the interests of Europeans in matters related to trade, security and the climate. Internally this entails doing away with the principle of unanimity in foreign policy decision-making, handing over the protection of national borders to EU agencies and having the nucleus of an EU army take over from NATO both in the European periphery and beyond.

For social-liberal centralisers the vision of a state-like, supranational EU is paired with a preference for strong global governance and international institutions.[27] However, institutions are not, on their own, a substitute for values. This became obvious in the aftermath of the Trump victory and the emergence of fears about the future of the international liberal order—fears that were shrewdly exploited by China, leading to exaggerations such as Xi Jinping's triumphant appearance in Davos in 2017.[28] For many people, the Trump presidency created the idea that the US and global governance are fundamentally antithetical, and that in this situation the EU could only be on the side of multilateralism. As Richard Youngs put it in making his plea for the EU to realign its foreign policy from the US to emerging non-Western democracies to safeguard multilateralism, 'the fate of the West and the fate of the liberal order are not the same thing.'[29]

But this identification of international institutions with liberal democracy is conceptually tenuous. Partaking in international institutionalism does not always equate to adhering to liberal democratic values. After all, there are many totalitarian, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes that are willing participants in and contributors to global governance in a range of issues. Conversely, not everything about institutional liberalism is universal: its emergence and structure reflect long-term historical and cultural processes in Europe and North America, the regions of the world from where it emerged. Indeed, this is evident in the difficulties non-Western states often have in adapting to its standards and norms.

Social-liberal centralisers view EU foreign policy through two separate sets of lenses. On the one hand, there is the vision of a strategic, hardnosed and sovereign EU pursuing its own narrowly defined interests, even against, if necessary, hitherto close allies such as the US. On the other hand, there is the vision of a universalist

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[27] N. Tocci, 'The Demise of the International Liberal Order and the Future of the European Project', Istituto Affari Internazionali (Rome, November 2018).

[28] J. Anderlini, W. Feng and T. Mitchell, 'Xi Jinping Delivers Robust Defense of Globalization at Davos', *Financial Times*, 17 January 2017.

[29] R. Youngs, 'The EU Needs to Rethink Its Approach to Liberal Order', *Carnegie Europe*, 21 August 2018).

EU unconditionally committed to international multilateralism and the provision of global public goods.

Now, combining interests and values is not new in foreign policy. The question is, what is the source of these interests and values? Rationalist and progressive ideologies tend to view institutions as means towards higher ideological goals such as redistribution, the imposition of new lifestyles and multiculturalism. These goals are promoted even if they run counter to the beliefs, values and perceptions of the majority of European societies.

For progressive centralisers, the purpose of institutions is not to reflect a society's values, sense of distinctiveness or belief in its worth. Rather, the purpose is to deliver on the ideological goals of progressives.[30] This is why institutions must constantly be bolstered: to deliver on ever more fanciful agendas for social change, however many reactions these agendas may elicit.

Thus, social-liberals present EU centralisation and the commitment to international institutions as a reflection of 'European interests and values', when in fact they are the means for achieving ideologically driven social change. In the social-liberal conception, what is in fact a means is presented as an end in its own right. This carries the danger of leaving institutions bereft of authority, and ultimately of the legitimacy they require.

A conservative perspective on European sovereignty

What would be a distinctly centre–right, conservative approach to the future of EU integration internally and to European sovereignty externally? The following sets forth the most important theoretical points and the practical policy implications that arise from them.

First, conservative centralism—a distinctly centre–right conception of the EU as an internally and externally sovereign actor—must be differentiated from the alternatives on the right and the left. Nationalists and populists claim that they represent genuine conservatism simply because they oppose the EU. A conservative understanding of European sovereignty shows that this is false.

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[30]   R. Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 3rd edn. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

As we have seen, fundamentalist anti-centralism is not a conservative position at all. It reflects neither conservatism's pragmatism—the recognition that circumstances may require granting powers to a political centre—nor respect for the sovereignty of European states, which would be weakened much more outside the EU than within it.

At the same time, conservatives must try much harder to explain how their Europeanism differs from the 'more Europe' message of the socialists, social-liberals and Greens. The monopolisation of 'more Europe' by the centre–left has, for many people, made the EU synonymous with a very narrow ideological outlook. A conservative centralism should articulate in more detail how a stronger EU is not in competition with its constituent units, as the centre–left presents it, but is actually a way to foster local autonomy and diversity.

Here it is important to recall once more that conservatives are no blind servants of official power. Throughout history conservatives have consistently demonstrated that decisions to support or oppose political institutions, as well as the transfer of power to them, are very much dependent on the values and ideas these institutions espouse, their respect for the particularities and rights of the constituent units involved, and their willingness to proceed with integration in a piecemeal, pragmatic manner.

In the EU sovereignty debate, this means that conservatives should not automatically support a generic 'stronger and more integrated' EU that pursues a vague 'European interest' internationally. While they recognise the value of liberal institutions in Europe and the world, conservatives' grounds for supporting them are not that they are an ideal form of political organisation from which no derogation is allowed. Rather, conservatives support them as an embodiment of a specific notion of authority: the preservation of Europe's diversity internally and the promotion of distinctively European values globally.

Contrary to the approaches of social-liberals, conservatives' respect for the particular, the rooted and the contextual leads them to treat the EU as the expression of Europe's pluralism. EU foreign policy should not be the backdoor to an imposed uniformity; indeed, the pressure to conform could lead member states to choose to disengage from the EU framework altogether if they see their interests trampled.

As Macaj and Nicolaidis have argued, a 'one voice' EU foreign policy is useful in some areas but may be counterproductive in others. Allowing the EU to send different—and if member states' preferences clash, even contradictory—messages

in world affairs could increase the EU's collective clout, for in this way its members would be able to engage different sides of the global debate, while European citizens would see their countries' positions represented effectively and not bent to a rigid, ideological 'EU one voice'.[31]

Today's major global institutions rely on a core set of universal principles. But beyond this, their objectives and modes of conduct have, historically, borne a very discernible European and Western imprint. Europe should not support the international order simply because it happens to be open, liberal and multilateral. Instead, it must continuously enquire whether, and to what degree, this order continues to reflect this imprint.

One does not have to go far to find evidence of the tendency to support international institutions unconditionally. Consider, for example, the speed with which European officials of centre–left background rushed to defend the WHO from US attacks during the Covid pandemic.[32] By failing to initiate a debate that was needed on WHO's conduct and relations with China, the EU left the task of criticism to be monopolised by Donald Trump's polarising rhetoric.

The implication of this analysis for domestic governance is that the main criterion for centralisation should be whether it bolsters the diversity of Europe's national and regional political, cultural and socioeconomic arrangements. For this to happen, centralisation has to take place in the right way and in the appropriate policy areas.

After a period in which macroeconomic uniformity was imposed in response to the economic crisis, it is time for member states to become freer to pursue a broader palette of economic outcomes based on their comparative advantages and social contracts.[33] Although the EU's decision to suspend the fiscal rules of the Stability Pact during the coronavirus pandemic is an extraordinary measure, it also highlights how flexibility is a necessary component of economic recovery. Post-pandemic, it would be advisable to maintain some of this flexibility within a broad framework of headline macroeconomic rules.

This could take place along with other, long-discussed measures to fortify the eurozone, such as the establishment of a fiscal facility. This, however, should be designed to enhance national growth strategies rather than to create an unhealthy

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[31] G. Macaj and K. Nicolaidis, 'Beyond "One Voice"? Global Europe's Engagement With Its own Diversity', J*ournal of European Public Policy* 21/7 (2014).

[32] *Voice of America*, 'EU Blasts Trump's WHO Funding Cut, Fears It Worsens Pandemic', 15 April 2020.

[33] E. Drea, 'How to Save Italy: Don't', *Politico*, 8 November 2018.

dependency of peripheral economies on the EU purse—akin to the southern states' pre-crisis addiction to cheap credit from northern banks.

The recent proposal for a sizable European recovery fund financed through EU debt could be the basis for a compromise that, while spreading the payments of stronger economies over time, does not burden the debt outlook of weaker ones. Here it would be advisable if after the pandemic this facility was no longer used as an instrument for redistribution but rather, as one for recovery, growth and productivity.

Incidentally, it is interesting that in describing the rescue fund initiative, observers used the Hamiltonian analogy: the Federalist success in mutualising the debt of US states and endowing the federal government with a fiscal capacity in the late-eighteenth century.[34] Leaving aside the fact that the analogy is far-fetched given the details of the plan, what is not acknowledged is that Hamiltonian economic centralisation was only one element of a broader agenda that included both resistance to the influence of revolutionary France and the safeguarding of a constitutional order that enshrined a delicate balance between central and state governments. What Hamiltonian analogies miss is that pushes for centralisation usually succeed when couched in conservative principles.

In this vein the main criterion that should be used for further reforms in the eurozone is the enhancement of the international role of the euro. This is because strengthening the currency's external function will bolster its political role and international credibility, which in turn will create space for a looser architecture of macroeconomic policy internally, such as the one the US enjoys. In this sense, the completion of the banking union would help in establishing the euro as a real global currency,[35] while decoupling national fiscal policy from the functioning of the banking system.[36]

The EU should also have a muscular competition policy to rein in gigantic non-European companies that operate in the EU market and constitute one of the biggest challenges to its economic sovereignty. The EU already has the tools and legal powers to lead in developing new technologies and digital infrastructure, areas where it has to square off against continent-sized powers such as China and the US, and where no European state can compete alone. In addition, the EU's regulatory policies should ensure that minimum standards Europeans

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[34]   P. Dausend and M. Schieritz, 'Olaf Scholz: Jemand Muss Vorangehen', *Die Zeit*, 20 May 2020.

[35]   M. Sandbu, 'Europe First: Taking On the Dominance of the US Dollar', *Financial Times*, 5 December 2019.

[36]   C. Wyplosz, *Creating a Decentralised Eurozone*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2019).

can agree on in areas such as privacy, personal data and free speech online are complied with internationally.

On the other hand, a conservative perspective would find talk of 'European champions' and 'European industrial policy' problematic.[37] Existing competition policy ensures fair market competition among European firms and between European and non-European companies. An industrial policy may aim to make the EU more competitive internationally, but it would also distort the internal market and entrench already worrying divergences between the EU core and periphery.[38]

This has become evident during the Covid-19 pandemic as loosening state aid rules to assist companies in distress has resulted in a big imbalance between companies from countries with more fiscal space, such as Germany, and those from countries hit harder by the crisis, such as Spain.[39] That this imbalance should arise during a crisis demonstrates the importance of the rules of the single market in normal times, not only as sound economic principles but also as the best way to maintain a balance between larger and smaller member states.

Similar considerations should guide the EU's migration policy. Refugee and asylum policies reflect different national understandings and social contracts pertaining to citizenship, identity and membership of the political community. As such, a uniform asylum policy with, for example, imposed relocation quotas across the EU would be unfeasible and unpopular. It would make the EU appear as an insult to national identity and sense of belonging (although the Union can encourage states that voluntarily contribute to burden sharing).

European citizens very much expect the EU to add value to border protection, and even to pre-empting illegal migration. Thus, it has to be seen that EU border management makes a tangible contribution to the pressing needs of borderline states. The quick mobilisation of EU institutions and the visible presence of police and border forces from other European countries on the Greek–Turkish border during the Turkey-induced migratory crisis of March 2020 was an excellent example of European solidarity with a member state in distress.[40]

Migration management touches on sensitive normative questions. However, if Europe is to make a positive contribution in the world, its citizens have to feel secure and confident in the ability of European institutions to protect them. The EU has the responsibility to ensure that this is possible. Again, conservatism's ability to hierarchise and differentiate between values—even those that appear equally compelling normatively—serves as a policy guide.

[37] K. Efstathiou, 'The Alstom–Siemens Merger and the Need for European Champions', *Bruegel*, 11 March 2019.

[38] B. Hall, 'Why EU Had to Stand Firm Against Siemens–Alstom Merger', *Financial Times*, 13 February 2019.

[39] S. Fleming and J. Espinoza, 'EU Members Clash Over State Aid as Richer Countries Inject More Cash', *Financial Times*, 1 May 2020.

[40] European Commission, 'Press Remarks by Vice-President Schinas on Immediate Actions to Support Greece' (4 March 2020).

Without violating international rules and the principle of proportionality, the EU must make clear that its claim to 'strategic sovereignty' is vacuous if it cannot defend its territorial integrity and borders in practice.

The conservative approach could inform the EU's grand strategy in ways that free the Union from some of the pressing dilemmas that neither the populist nor the social-liberal approach can resolve. The EU's relationship with powers such as the US, Russia and China should be pragmatic, which means that patterns of cooperation may coexist with periods or areas of tension. However, this pragmatism should not hinder the protection of core European values. For example, disagreements over international multilateralism should not serve as an excuse to rupture the common Western identity that the EU shares with the US.

The EU should engage with China and Russia where European interests can be served but be ready to face up to them when they threaten core European values. In the case of Russia, this should mean first and foremost taking a firm stance against the threat that it poses to Eastern Europe. Only then can the EU explore opportunities for cooperation in areas of common interest. As for China, the EU should recognise that it has an essentially incompatible system. The export of its political and economic model must be resisted. China's opportunistic engagement with the processes and institutions of multilateralism is not something Europe should be grateful for, and nor should it function as bait to disengage from the US.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that European conservatives stand apart from both of the extreme visions of European sovereignty. The historical overview of conservatism in periods of contested political centralisation showed that conservatives are neither prejudiced anti-centralisers nor unconditional apologists of central political authority. Today's European centre–right must take a stance on integration that is distinct and separate from the positions of its foes on both its right and its left.

European conservatives differ from the nationalists and populists of the right, whose radical anti-centralism would condemn the nations of Europe to irrelevance and decay. But just because they believe in a strong EU does not mean that conservatives and Christian Democrats agree with social-liberal centralisers, who unconditionally support European and international institutions as a backdoor to their ideological goals.

For conservatives, the purpose and meaning of European integration is not centralisation for its own sake but to protect internal diversity while promoting the distinctly European imprint on the world stage. Taking this thesis as its point of departure, the paper has offered a first overview of what a conservative vision of 'European sovereignty' could look like in various internal and external policy areas.

In sum, conservative Europeanism can be seen as a two-pronged response to the centre–right's opponents on the right and left. From its Eurosceptic opponents on the right it reclaims the notion of 'conservatism' by showing that it is something very different from fundamentalist anti-centralism. From social-liberal centralisers it reclaims the idea of 'more Europe' by demonstrating that European integration and sovereignty are only possible if they exist in a balanced relationship with the EU's constituent units and grow organically from the aspirations, values and needs of European societies.

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About the author

Dr Angelos Chryssogelos is an Assistant Professor of politics and international relations at London Metropolitan University and a research associate of the Martens Centre. In the past he taught at King's College London and held research positions at the London School of Economics, Harvard and SAIS Johns Hopkins. He is an associate fellow of the Europe Programme of Chatham House. His research focuses on European politics, EU external relations, foreign policy analysis and the interplay between populism and international relations. He has published academic articles in, among others, the *Journal of Common Market Studies, Journal of European Integration, European Foreign Affairs Review* and *European View*. A report he wrote for Chatham House was included in the list of the 100 best think tank reports produced globally in 2016. He is a regular participant in policy and public events of the EPP network, and in December 2019 he delivered a keynote speech at the New Democracy party congress in Athens.

Credits

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