Wilfried
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# Conservative Europeanism: IN FOCUS

## A Forgotten Tradition

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## Summary

In contrast to today's political narrative, which casts conservatism and Europeanism as opposing forces, this paper argues that the two traditions were historically intertwined. From Edmund Burke's 'Commonwealth of Europe' to Metternich's Concert of Europe and Christian Democracy's supranational ideals, conservatives were central to the vision and construction of a united Europe. Far from defending nationalism, as today's national conservatives do, traditional conservatives opposed its revolutionary and homogenising impulses, emphasising Europe's inherited institutions and shared civilisational values. The post-war integration project, from the Paneuropean Union to the European Convention on Human Rights and the influence of the Christian Democratic founding fathers, was heavily shaped by conservative ideals. However, recent decades have seen conservatism drift towards nationalism and the EU towards progressive technocracy, creating a damaging rift. Reuniting the two is not only historically coherent—it is politically urgent. A renewed conservative Europeanism could offer a third path: one that is rooted, forward-looking and civilisational. Defending European unity today, this publication argues, is not a betrayal of conservatism—but its fulfilment.

# Introduction

In today's political discourse, conservatism and Europeanism are often portrayed as opposing forces. Conservatism, it is said, clings to national sovereignty and tradition, while Europeanism promotes supranational governance and globalist uprootedness. This perception has been reinforced by recent trends in both European and American politics, where nationalism has increasingly cloaked itself in conservative rhetoric, while European integration is commonly associated with centrist liberal or progressive values.

Yet this binary opposition obscures a deeper and more nuanced reality: historically, conservatism and Europeanism were not only compatible—they were deeply intertwined. Far from being inherently Eurosceptic, the conservative tradition has long articulated some of the most compelling intellectual and political arguments for European unity. The current tension between conservatism and Europeanism is a relatively recent development, driven more by political drift and ideological capture than by any fundamental incompatibility. Reclaiming this older tradition is essential not only for the renewal of conservatism, but for the future of the European project itself.

# Revolutionary nationalism and the conservative roots of supranationalism

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, conservatives were among the most committed advocates of European unity—albeit on terms shaped by their distinctive understanding of history, culture and order.

Contrary to widespread assumptions, nationalism did not originate as a conservative force. It emerged in the modern era as a revolutionary ideology, intimately tied to the political and economic transformations initiated by the French Revolution and intensified by industrialisation. Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, nationalism sought to dismantle Europe's traditional empires and monarchies in favour of popular sovereignty and national self-determination.

As theorists such as Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner have shown, the modern nation-state did not emerge organically from inherited communities. Rather, it was deliberately constructed to serve the needs of mass industrial

societies. Gellner, in particular, highlighted how nationalism supplanted traditional, heterogeneous cultures with a standardised national identity tailored to a mobile workforce and a centralised bureaucracy—ironically, the very sort of homogenising force that national conservatives now accuse 'globalism' of being.[1] Anderson famously described nations as 'imagined communities', shaped by mass media, public education and state-orchestrated rituals—ultimately enforced, when necessary, by state-sponsored violence—rather than inherited tradition.[2]

Nowhere is this process more vividly illustrated than in Eugen Weber's *Peasants Into Frenchmen*, which details how nineteenth-century France transformed a rural population with diverse dialects and customs into uniform national citizens through infrastructure, schooling, conscription and bureaucratic integration.[3] This nation-building effort involved the suppression of regional languages, the marginalisation of the Church, and the weakening of intermediary institutions such as guilds and parishes. Far from conserving traditional communities, nationalism helped dismantle them.

These insights challenge the claim that nationalism is a natural ally of conservatism. They instead reinforce the case for a conservatism that is sceptical of, if not outright hostile to, radical nation-building and ethnic self-determination—and one that is instead grounded in the supranational cultural and religious continuities that have long sustained Europe's civilisational order. This was precisely the posture of the conservatives who first confronted the emergence of nationalism and opposed it with a vision of Europe rooted in organic, historical communities—monarchies, churches and local autonomies—united not by the arbitrary will of the people, but by a shared cultural and moral inheritance.

Thus, Edmund Burke, often regarded as the father of Anglo-Saxon conservatism, described a 'Commonwealth of Europe' bound by a shared religious, cultural and moral code, as well as by an overarching diplomatic and legal framework.[4] Burke's conservatism was anything but nationalist, while his Europeanism was not technocratic, but cultural and civilisational. He must be turning in his grave to see his name associated with the radicalism of

1 E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

2 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

3 E. Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

4 J. Welsh, *Edmund Burke and International Relations: The Commonwealth of Europe and the Crusade Against the French Revolution* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

today's national conservatives.[5] In Continental Europe, Prince Klemens von Metternich, the quintessential conservative statesman, famously declared Europe his *Vaterland*. He held nationalism in horror and devoted his political life to forging and maintaining an integrated Continental order through the Concert of Europe, a proto-supranational system designed to ensure peace and stability after the Napoleonic wars. In the political reflections and memoranda of his right-hand man Friedrich von Gentz, a leading conservative thinker who had also been the first populariser of Burke's ideas in Continental Europe, the language of 'federation' and 'federalism' was, unsurprisingly, ubiquitous in discussions on the subject of Europe.[6]

# From historical imagination to political integration

These views were far from isolated. Political Catholicism—the precursor to modern Christian Democracy—consistently embraced supranational conceptions of European unity. In Central Europe especially, it drew inspiration from the legacy of the Holy Roman Empire and medieval Christendom as the models for an organic, transnational European order. The goal was not to abolish national distinctions, but to integrate them into a higher framework of cultural and political unity. On conservative grounds, these visions resisted the disintegration of the continent into rival nation-states and power blocs, which were seen as betrayals of Europe's historical heritage and identity.

These conservative and Christian Democratic traditions did not disappear in the twentieth century. On the contrary, they shaped the intellectual and moral foundations of European integration after the cataclysms of the First and Second World Wars. A key, though often overlooked, expression of this continuity was the Paneuropean Union, founded by Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi in 1923. As the first major political movement to advocate European unification, the Union advanced a vision of Europe rooted in shared civilisation and Christian humanism. Though initially ideologically diverse, it was resolutely anti-nationalist and, under the leadership of Otto von Habsburg, increasingly embraced a self-consciously conservative and Christian outlook. Habsburg—heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne and later a prominent Member of the European Parliament for the Bavarian Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern)—championed a vision of

[5] The main national-conservative organisation, the Edmund Burke Foundation in Washington, DC, is named after him.

[6] See, for example, F. von Gentz, 'Considerations on the Political System Now Existing in Europe,' in M. Walker (ed.), *Metternich's Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1968), 71–84.

Europe grounded in Christian values, aristocratic responsibility and historical continuity. For him and his followers, European integration was not a rejection of tradition, but its fulfilment in modern form. The Paneuropean Union thus served as a bridge between the conservative image of pre-war Europe and the institutional integration that followed. It exemplifies how the idea of Europe has long resonated with conservative visions of order, civilisation and moral responsibility.

Christian Democrats and conservatives alike viewed the post-war European project not as a rupture, but as the restoration of an older continental order. Statesmen such as Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi and Robert Schuman saw European integration as the means to overcome the revolutionary cycle of nationalism and war. Their Europeanism was shaped not by abstract federalism or liberal universalism, but by a deep belief in unity in diversity—formed by Christianity and anchored in Europe's religious, cultural and historical inheritance.

Similarly, Winston Churchill—one of British conservatism's most iconic figures—famously called for a 'United States of Europe', even if his final government chose to keep Britain at arm's length from the initial European Communities.[7] His vision was not driven by bureaucratic logic but by a conviction in the shared destiny of the European peoples, rooted in common values and collective memory.

Conservatives were not merely participants in European integration; they were instrumental in designing its legal and institutional infrastructure. As historian Marco Duranti has shown, it was primarily conservative politicians and jurists who developed and championed the European Convention on Human Rights—which is today maligned by many conservatives, particularly in Britain.[8] The aim of these politicians and jurists was to safeguard key conservative principles at the supranational level, including property rights (threatened by Clement Attlee's post-war nationalisations in Britain) and the autonomy of religious schools (challenged by secularist reforms in France's Fourth Republic). Their concept of rights was not atomised or individualistic in the liberal sense, but embedded in an organic moral order informed by Christianity. Likewise, their conception of supranational law drew inspiration from the Church's traditional mediating role in European international relations during the Middle Ages.

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[7] W. Churchill, Speech to the Academic Youth, University of Zurich, 19 September 1946, accessed at https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/united-states-of-europe/ on 10 September 2025.

[8] M. Duranti, *The Conservative Human Rights Revolution: European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

# The great divergence: conservatism and Europeanism drift apart

Despite their deep historical alignment, the past few decades have witnessed the creation of an undeniable rift between conservatism and Europeanism. This rupture stems from a dual transformation—one in the evolution of conservatism itself, the other in the ideological drift of European integration.

On the one hand, conservatism has grown increasingly nationalistic and Eurosceptic. It was conservative leaders who once spearheaded Britain's entry into the European Economic Community—and it was conservative forces who later took it out through Brexit. The emergence of 'national conservatism' in the US and across Europe has elevated nationalism from a tactical posture into a central ideological commitment.[9] Sovereignty is now often presented not as a political instrument, but as an absolute principle, while supranational institutions are dismissed as existential threats to cultural identity and democratic legitimacy.

On the other hand, Europeanism has become increasingly dominated by a progressive–liberal ethos. Institutions of the EU are frequently perceived—at times unfairly, but often with justification—as detached from Europe's cultural roots and historical consciousness. Progressive values have come to define much of the EU's political and legal discourse, marginalising conservative viewpoints and relegating religious and cultural traditions to the status of outdated relics. Particularly contentious are efforts to promote expansive and ideologically aggressive interpretations of fundamental values in areas such as gender policy, LGBTQI+ rights and abortion.

This mutual estrangement has distorted both traditions. A conservatism that retreats into narrow nationalism abandons its cosmopolitan legacy and forfeits its historical concern for civilisational order across borders. Conversely, a Europeanism severed from tradition risks becoming a sterile, technocratic project—lacking emotional depth, moral grounding and democratic legitimacy.

[9] Y. Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

# Rebuilding the alliance of Europeanism and conservatism

This state of affairs is deeply unfortunate. European unity is not a transient political project—it is a civilisational imperative. The idea of Europe as a shared destiny, rooted in common culture and institutions, long predates both the EU and the modern nation-state. To abandon it now would mean rejecting over a millennium of history in favour of short-term populism—whether of the liberal or the nationalist variety.

The urgency of establishing European unity has only grown in today's age of geopolitical upheaval, great-power competition and global economic disruption. The question is no longer whether Europe should be united, but how—on what basis and towards what end. Conservatives cannot leave these questions to be answered solely by liberals, progressives or technocrats. They have a vital contribution to make: a vision of Europe as a civilisation, not merely a market; and as a historical and moral community, not merely a regulatory framework. The goal is not to dismantle supranationalism or reduce the EU to a glorified secretariat of sovereign nations, but to reform and re-anchor European institutions within the continent's deeper traditions.

Reuniting Europeanism and conservatism must become one of the essential political projects of the coming years. What is needed is not blind support for the status quo, but a revitalisation of the tradition of conservative Europeanism—a tradition that sees Europe not as a threat to national identity, but as its civilisational home. This means reclaiming the idea of Europe as a common cultural and moral order—an enduring political community grounded in memory, tradition and shared responsibility. It also requires a renewed convergence between Christian Democrats and conservatives: not just for pragmatic electoral reasons, but to shape a coherent vision for Europe's future.

If conservatism allows itself to be permanently colonised by nationalism and reactionism, it will betray its own tradition. If Europeanism continues to equate itself with progressive ideology alone, it will alienate those vast segments of society still rooted in Europe's older, deeper identities.

The task ahead is thus twofold. First, conservatives must resist the lure of nationalist isolationism and rediscover the supranational ethos at the heart of their own heritage. Second, European institutions must take seriously the

concerns of cultural conservatives and re-engage with the moral, historical and religious foundations of Europe's unity.

Such a reconciliation is not only possible—it is indispensable. The alternative is a Europe trapped in a false dichotomy: between technocratic liberalism, on the one hand, and authoritarian nationalism, on the other. A renewed conservative Europeanism offers a third path—one that is patriotic but not parochial, rooted yet forward-looking and united without being uniform.

Conservatism, at its best, is about honouring and transmitting the inheritance of the past. That inheritance includes the idea of Europe—not as an abstraction, but as a cultural, moral and civilisational reality. To defend and build Europe today is not to abandon conservatism. It is to fulfil it.

# About the author

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# Credits

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