

## Europe's reputation as a cosmopolitan haven has been exposed as a mirage

*The EU increasingly embraces the idea of a continental identity, one that's white and Christian. Is it really the liberal body of remainer lore?*



*A map of Europe in the time of Charlemagne.*

*Hans Kundnani*

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When Kabul fell in mid-August, almost the first reaction of European leaders was fear of another wave of refugees arriving on the continent. “We must anticipate and protect ourselves against major irregular migratory flows,” said the French president, Emmanuel Macron. Armin Laschet, the Christian Democrat candidate hoping to succeed Angela Merkel as German chancellor in the election that takes place in two weeks, said there could be no repeat of the refugee crisis of 2015, when Germany received more than a million asylum seekers. By the end of the month, the European Council had agreed to “act jointly to prevent the recurrence of uncontrolled large-scale illegal migration movements faced in the past”.

The focus on “protecting” Europe from an influx of asylum seekers reflects a troubling transformation of the European Union over the past decade. There was a time when “pro-Europeans” were confident that the world would almost inevitably be remade in the image of the EU, as it endlessly expanded its rules and exported its model centred on the “social market economy” and the welfare state. Since the eurozone debt crisis began in 2010, however, Europeans have become more defensive and now see the world largely in terms of threats.

Against this background, Europe also increasingly conceives of itself in cultural terms. As the European model has become less credible and compelling – in part because, led by Merkel, Europeans have hollowed it out in an attempt to become more “competitive” – “pro-Europeans” now talk endlessly of “European values”. Ursula von der Leyen’s “geopolitical” European Commission even includes a commissioner for promoting the European way of life (it was originally “protecting” rather than “promoting”), who is responsible for asylum and immigration issues.

When Macron became French president in 2017, he spoke of a Europe *qui protège* – “that protects”. This was initially, above all, about protecting citizens from the market; he hoped to reform the eurozone to create a more redistributive EU. But his plans were blocked, or rather simply ignored, by Merkel. Since then, under pressure from the far right and increasingly mimicking it, Macron has reinvented the idea of cultural, rather than economic, protection – in particular, from Muslims.

While the EU was based on learning the lessons of conflict within Europe, it never had anything to say about colonialism

“Pro-European” centrists such as Macron increasingly think of international politics in terms of a Huntingtonian “clash of civilisations” – but whereas Samuel Huntington saw the west as one civilisation that would find itself in conflict with China and Islam in the post-cold war period, they see Europe as a civilisation that is distinct from, and which must also assert itself against, the United States.

The civilisational turn in the European project complicates the story of Brexit we have told ourselves. Leavers have often been portrayed as yearning for a white Britain before mass immigration began in the 1950s. But the reality is more complex. For example, one-third of Britain’s black and Asian population voted to leave in 2016. As political scientist Neema Begum has shown, many did so because they saw the EU as a “white fortress” – and even those who voted to remain tended not to identify as European. Continental Europe generally lags behind the UK in terms of racial equality – for example, Brexit dramatically reduced the number of MEPs from ethnic minorities in the European parliament. (There are no exact figures because member states such as France and Germany do not collect ethnic data.)

On the continent, “pro-Europeans” believe they have something in common with other Europeans that separates them from the rest of the world – they think of Europe as what the Germans call a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, or community of fate. Few remainers think in this way; many are genuine cosmopolitans. The problem is that they are often as ignorant of the reality of the EU as leavers are and support an imaginary EU rather than the real existing EU. In particular, many on the British left imagine the EU to be much more open and progressive than it really is. Michel Barnier, the EU’s Brexit negotiator and now a candidate for the Republican nomination in the French presidential election next year, last week called for a suspension of immigration from outside Europe.

It is particularly odd, when you think about it, that identifying with “Europe” should be thought of as an expression of cosmopolitanism. Europe is not the world and supporting the EU, or thinking of yourself as European, does not make you a “citizen of the world”, let alone a “citizen of nowhere”, as Theresa May famously suggested in

2016. Rather, it makes you a citizen of a particular region – one that happens to be the whitest on earth. In fact, historically, “European” and “white” were largely synonymous – think, for example, of what “European” meant in apartheid South Africa.

It is true that, after the Second World War, a new, more civic European identity emerged, at least among elites, that was centred on what became the EU. But it constantly drew on older ethnic or cultural ideas of Europe for legitimacy and pathos – for example, the most prestigious prize for “pro-Europeans” is awarded in the name of Charlemagne, the embodiment of a medieval European identity synonymous with Christianity. As even the term “pro-European” illustrates, civic, ethnic or cultural ideas of European identity were always being elided.

Moreover, while the EU was based on learning the lessons of centuries of conflict within Europe that culminated in the Second World War, and gradually also came to incorporate the collective memory of the Holocaust into its narrative, “pro-Europeans” did not even attempt to learn the lessons of what Europeans had done to the rest of the world and never had anything to say about the history of colonialism.

The EU has become more embattled during the past decade as the far right surges throughout the continent and increasingly sets the agenda for the centre right and even some centre-left parties, such as the Danish Social Democrats. This means that the fragile civic identity that emerged during the postwar period seems to be giving way to a more cultural or even ethnic identity – defined, in particular, against Islam. In other words, whiteness may actually be becoming more, not less, central to the European project.

Hans Kundnani is a senior research fellow at Chatham House and the author of *The Paradox of German Power*