



Europe's Two Flags: Recovering the Conservative Telos of the European Project

Eric Hendriks

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About the Danube Institute

The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasizing the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with center-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic center-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

About the Author



Dr. Eric Hendriks is a Dutch sociologist, critical theorist, and Visiting Fellow at the Danube Institute (BLA). His research compares Chinese and Western notions of cosmopolitanism, globalization, and world order. He explores the tensions between Western liberalism and Chinese political thought, Chinese visions of civilizational coexistence, conflicts between national-conservative and liberal concepts of nationhood, the Romantic roots of conservatism, multipolarity, and Europe's ideological diversity. Hendriks is the founder and host of the China Keywords webinar series on contemporary Chinese political thought, organized by the Danube Institute in collaboration with the China Initiative of the New York-based Telos-Paul Piccone Institute, a platform for critical theory. Under his directorship, Telos' China Initiative also organised an international conference on contemporary Chinese political thought in New York in March 2025.

Abstract

The EU flag is beautiful and should remain. Yet its symbolism of an empty centre encircled by stars does not do justice to Europe's historical and civilisational substantiveness. This essay contrasts the EU Flag, also known as the Flag of Europe, with the composite Pan-European flag, whose sun-and-cross centre evokes an older and more substantive European inheritance. Recovering that inheritance means recalling the conservative associations long carried by 'Europe' as a civilisational concept, as well as the conservative and Christian-democratic energies that shaped the European project. European conservatives should not abandon the European project, but reclaim it. Needed is a conservative vision of European patriotism: modest, historically rooted, strategically intelligent, and critical of both liberal technocracy and self-universalising Westernism.

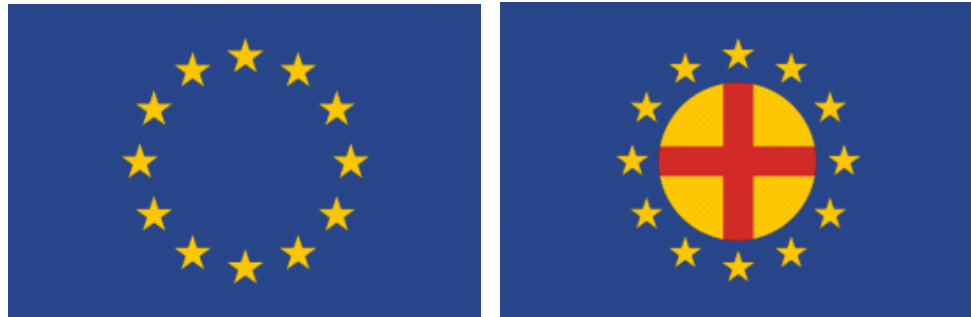


Image 1: The Flag of Europe, adopted in 1955 by the Council of Europe—an institution distinct from the European Union—and later adopted by the European Communities, is now also the flag of the EU.

Image 2: The composite Pan-European flag, combining Coudenhove-Kalergi's older sun-and-cross emblem with the twelve-star circle.

Introduction

We know the EU flag, i.e., the 'Flag of Europe': it styles a circle of golden stars, set serenely against a deep blue field. But there are other Europe flags. Given that Europe is older, larger, and more multiform than the European Union, it should not surprise us that European movements and institutions have flown several alternative banners to symbolise European unity. The most interesting is perhaps the composite Pan-European flag used today by the Pan-European Union, which combines the circle of golden stars with a golden sun bearing a red cruciform emblem. The two elements have different histories: the circle of twelve golden stars was adopted by the Council of Europe in 1955 as the Flag of Europe, while the sun and red cross derive from the older Pan-European symbolism proposed by Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi, founder of the Pan-European Union, the organisation that has advocated European unity since 1923.¹

In the composite Pan-European design, the circle of stars, symbolising European unity in diversity, surrounds the sun and red cross, which symbolise Europe's civilisational inheritance. The organisation still uses this flag, which may be understood as an alternative, more civilisationally charged banner of the European project. Indeed, Coudenhove-Kalergi's original sun-and-cross proposal was once a serious contender for adoption by the Council of Europe; had such a design prevailed there, rather than the more abstract twelve-star flag, some version of it might well have become the EU flag.

These two flags—the now-official Flag of Europe and the Pan-European Flag of 1955—embody different visions of Europe and different forms of European patriotism. The present essay will sharpen these differences into an ideal-typical contrast, in Weber's sense of the term. As a technique of analysis, such an ideal-typical contrast does not oppose empirical realities in all their complexity, for empirical realities are usually too mixed and historically entangled to fit neatly into simple conceptual oppositions. Rather, it accentuates certain features to make the underlying intellectual alternatives visible. I will therefore treat the two flags as symbolic crystallisations of rival possibilities for understanding Europe: one more abstracting, proceduralist, and universalist; the other more historicist, civilisational, and particularist.

The second of these possibilities is historically rooted in classical conservative concerns, which illustrates that even today the EU need not be an imperialistic liberal technocracy, or failed attempt at becoming one, but could instead be reclaimed and reformed by a strategically intelligent, modestly realistic, and cosmopolitan conservatism.

The pressing task for us, as European conservatives, is to develop such a positive vision for a reclaimed European Union: a vision that would underpin a constructive conservative critique of the Union's technocratic and liberal excesses, while enabling European conservatism to recover its pan-European inheritance.

That inheritance is vast, as this essay will briefly suggest. The European project—and here some readers may raise an eyebrow—was originally animated to a remarkable degree by conservative and Christian-democratic energies. Even the semantics of 'Europe' itself, which broke through as a civilisational self-description in the eighteenth century as a successor to 'Christendom', acquired a conservative coding from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, 'Europe' stood as the more historical, cultural, and particularist counterpart to the alternative civilisational self-description of 'the West' (*l'Occident*), which was newer and had avant-garde, rationalistic, and progressivist connotations.²

All this suggests that we European conservatives, however confused we may presently be about our relationship to a Union captured by liberal technocrats and self-universalising Westernisms, can and should offer more than mere critique. We should take responsibility for our European polity, and raise over it once more our banner.

Not, of course, in any literal sense. The EU flag, the Flag of Europe, is visually marvellous; it should remain. The banner we must raise is of another kind: one belonging to political thought and political culture, where a new direction is badly needed.

The EU's Conservative Friends

This essay contrasts two visions of Europe, symbolised by two Europe flags. Before delving into that ideal-typical contrast, however, it is necessary to forestall a possible misunderstanding among Anglosphere readers, many of whom view the European Union through a Brexit-inflected lens or even approach the European Commission with ideological hostility.

To be clear, such hostility is not the spirit of the present argument, nor is it an influential position among European conservatives. Unlike many commentators in Britain and on the American Right, conservatives within the EU tend not to hold outright anti-EU positions. Though critical of many aspects of the Union, conservative intellectuals and policymakers in EU member states are rarely opposed to the very existence of a supranational European polity.

A case in point is that even the largest parliamentary groups in the European Parliament commonly associated with right-wing Euroscepticism—Patriots for Europe and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)—do not advocate withdrawal, but emphasise institutional rebalancing, subsidiarity, and the importance of the nations within European collaboration. On its homepage, the ECR Group states that it ‘offer[s] a bold alternative’ to ‘no Europe’ sentiments, and that ‘the European Union needs a new direction’.³

The manifesto of the Patriots for Europe Group, with its notion of a “Europe of nations”, is admittedly ambivalent on the future of the EU as an organisation. Yet the leading party within the Patriots, the French Rassemblement National, campaigned in the 2024 European Parliament elections on a programme of institutional reorientation: strengthening the Council of the European Union vis-à-vis the Commission; “restor[ing] to the states the exclusive power to propose new rules—legislative initiative—within the Council”; and transforming the Commission into a general secretariat of the Council.⁴ That is quite different from proposing a Frexit.

Of course, there is no shortage of grounds for concern. The European Union suffers from a lack of geopolitical intelligence and an excess of bureaucratisation.

Conservatives in EU member states have good reason to despair at the overbearing weight accorded to an increasingly centralising European Commission, which operates in a bureaucratic, technocratic, and at times even imperial manner, both internally and externally. Internally, the Commission steadily expands its claimed mandates and the EU’s administrative layers, narrows the legal and political room for manoeuvre, and wages a culture war against Central and Eastern European understandings of nationhood and belonging. Meanwhile, externally, the EU increasingly presents itself in moralising terms and seeks to operate as a ‘legislative superpower’, compensating for its lack of hard power through a moral and legalistic universalism—a catastrophic combination.

Finally, liberal EU elites struggle to sustain a believable self-image, as evidenced by their grandiose claims about Europe’s opportunities in the present-day world, conveniently conflating their own ailing institutional structures with the prestige of a millennium of European civilisation.

European conservatives are quick to point out that ‘Europe’—that is, European civilisation—cannot be identified with, let alone monopolised by, a political entity founded in 1993 which, moreover, covers only part of the European continent.

Still, in many cases, a crucial variable is whether one looks at the EU realm’s problems from the inside or the outside. Insiders want to solve things. Viewed from outside—be it from within Anglosphere populist movements or from the imperial elites of Washington or Moscow—the observation of weaknesses on the part of the EU can easily encourage, or pair with, a broader hostility towards the European project itself.

In Trumpian circles, ‘Europe sucks’ has become a widespread sentiment, occasionally couched in semi-diplomatic language as a call for Europeans to overcome their supposed decadence, as in the Munich Security Conference speeches by Vice President J. D. Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio.⁵

Admittedly, Europe might be decadent in some regards, but to our friends in Washington, we say: let he who is without decadence cast the first stone.

That said, because a roughly parallel fault line runs through American intellectual debates about political identity, the stand-off between the two European flags—or rather, between the imaginaries they symbolise—should be relevant to American readers as well. The historical trajectory is entirely different, and the United States plays a very different role on the world stage. Still, there too one finds a tension between more culturalist and particularist forms of political self-understanding, of which America First rhetoric is one example, and more universalising self-understandings, pushed to their furthest extent in neocon visions that portray the United States as the force destined to bring freedom to the world.⁶

Yet this is an essay about the EU, written for EU citizens. Whatever attitude Anglosphere intellectuals may hold towards the Union, they do not bear the same responsibility for it that EU citizens do, and should recognise the legitimacy of our loyalties. From within the EU, one realisation imposes itself upon conservatives: for all its weaknesses, the Union remains very much our polity, one for which we, as citizens, bear responsibility; one that creates the regional space within which Europe’s smaller states can operate; and one that belongs to the longer history of pan-European movements in the early twentieth century, in which conservative and Christian-democratic figures once played a leading role and subsidiarity was held in particularly high regard.

The principle of subsidiarity holds that political authority should remain at the lowest possible level, with higher levels of governance intervening only where necessary. Founding figures such as Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi and Otto von Habsburg, who successively headed the Pan-European Union and helped keep the idea of European unity alive across the darkest decades of the twentieth century, were, in different ways, deeply marked by conservative and Christian-civilisational concerns.

Coudenhove-Kalergi’s Pan-European imagination was aristocratic, anti-Bolshevik, and civilisational in orientation, seeking to preserve Europe as a historical civilisation between rival world powers. Otto von Habsburg was more recognisably Christian-democratic and conservative: heir to the Habsburg tradition, later a CSU and EPP politician, and an advocate of a Christian and united Europe built upon subsidiarity.⁷

That should serve as a reminder to conservatives today that a conservative European Union is still entirely possible, and that we should not withdraw into resentful detachment, but instead participate constructively in shaping our Union.

Critics animated by such a constructive spirit, who critique the European Union from within and hope for its betterment, often recognise precisely the same shortcomings as its external critics, and are, in fact, usually more intimately acquainted with them. Yet they cannot embrace an attitude of wholesale rejection, still less one of hostility.

For the constructive internal critic, the Union is our polity, something for which we bear responsibility. European conservatives should seek to offer constructive criticism in the best spirit of European patriotism, for we should remain open to the possibility that our Union’s defects may yet be remedied and its course redirected.

In this, conservatives should feel encouraged by the fact that the European project possesses important conservative roots. What is more, the very semantics of Europe as a civilisational self-description functioned since the 1830s and 1840s as a somewhat ‘conservative’ conceptual rival to the younger, revolutionary, scientific, and universalistic concept of ‘the West’. Allow me a brief excursion into comparative conceptual history.

The History of "Europe" as a Civilisational Concept

A constructively critical, good-faith attitude towards the European project is all the more necessary because 'Europe' has indeed long been a conservative ideal. As a civilisational self-description and political identification, 'Europe' was historically coded in more conservative terms than 'the West'. To be sure, both terms have been used in many different senses and polemical contexts over the past three hundred years, and both acquired their modern political, as opposed to merely geographical, meanings much more recently than is commonly imagined. Still, 'Europe' tended to carry a comparatively more historicist and retrospective quality, while 'the West' had a more futuristic, avant-garde, even revolutionary one.

This is shown in Georgios Varouxakis's groundbreaking recent study, *The West: The History of an Idea* (2025). Varouxakis traces the historical emergence of 'the West' as an early to mid-nineteenth-century challenge to the conceptual supremacy of 'Europe'. '[T]he eighteenth century was the century of "Europe", as far as supranational self-identifications were concerned', he writes.⁸ Europe, in turn, had dethroned 'Christendom', which had functioned as the dominant civilisational self-conception throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period.

As Varouxakis notes, *'still in the eighteenth and much of the early nineteenth century, the terms "Christendom" or "Europe" were those used in the main to self-identify a cluster of like-minded peoples who wished to differentiate themselves from the rest of the world.'*⁹

Then came 'the West'. The term emerged in close association with the rationalistic political universalism of a late, radicalising Enlightenment, though it would later acquire many complex, overlapping, and often contradictory meanings in modern political discourse. The paradigmatically progressivist Enlightenment philosopher Nicolas de Condorcet was perhaps the first to use the West in something like its modern political, rather than merely geographical, sense in the 1790s, in works such as his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*.¹⁰

Condorcet's central conviction was that human history, guided by reason, science, education, and political reform, could move progressively towards freedom, equality, and the indefinite perfectibility of mankind.

In that modern conception, as Varouxakis explains,¹¹ the West was 'a potential political entity based on civilisational commonality', the entity that happened to be tasked with uplifting the world. Yet it was above all the positivist school of Auguste Comte that, in the 1830s and 1840s, systematised 'the West'—*l'Occident*—as a political and world-historical concept: a concept that captured a shared civilisational history and a political mission oriented towards the future. As Varouxakis puts it, *'Comte was the first political thinker to elaborate an explicit and thorough sociopolitical idea of "the West"—both as a supranational cultural identity and as a proposed political entity, based on civilisational commonality and shared historical antecedents.'*¹²

Both 'Europe' and 'the West' have long, meandering, and many-sided lineages in modern political history. Both concepts have been repeatedly reworked by different groups, for different polemical and identitarian purposes. Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the two came to stand in a polemical opposition that has largely fallen from view since. The West was avant-gardist, progressive, rationalist, and very French; Europe, by contrast, remained the more common civilisational self-description and carried more historical, cultural, particularist, and conservative associations. Comte developed the West as a political counter-concept to Europe, since the latter was, in his view, too centred on Germany and too willing to include Russia within the same civilisational space. As Varouxakis writes, *'It was primarily in contradistinction to Russia that the term "the West" was to be needed, to replace "Europe": as Russia's political, military and diplomatic weight on the European scene loomed ever larger after the defeat of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna, "Europe" was becoming more and more problematic for more and more people.'*¹³



Comte's concept of the West placed France firmly at the centre, excluded Russia, and assigned Christian history a different role. For Comte, there was history, to be sure, but it was not to weigh too heavily upon the future. Yes, the core Western peoples had emerged out of a Christian world. Yet what made the 'Great Western Republic' uniquely valuable and progressive, on Comte's account, was precisely that it transcended its own history, and religion as such, in its movement towards the light of reason. The subtitle of Comte's *Discours sur l'ensemble du positivisme* hails 'the Great Western Republic, formed of the Five Advanced Nations, the French, Italian, Spanish, British and German, which, since the time of Charlemagne, have always constituted a Political Whole'. To these he also attached their linguistic and colonial offshoots: the United States and other English-speaking settler societies to the British world, Latin America to the Iberian world, and the Netherlands and Scandinavia to the Germanic world: all were part of the West.

Besides identifying a unit still recognised today, Comte established forcefully the association, still prevalent, between 'the West' and a universalistic idealism. And already in Comte, this idealism displayed imperialistic tendencies, though it certainly did not advocate for any crude military or colonial expansion; to the contrary, it was the purest of imperialisms: an imperialism of the mind: a secular-ascetic, other-overwriting cultural imperialism that imagines the political self as leading world history. Comte was, in fact, opposed to the militarised imperialism of European colonialism.

His Western Republic was conceived in more high-minded and ambitious terms: as the world-conquering expansion, across time and space, of a higher spiritual order. As Varouxakis observes, Comte '*aimed at abolishing the European empires and replacing them with an altruistically inclined "Western Republic"*'.¹⁴ The West, in this original Comtean sense, was thus a political-spiritual project: post-Christian, post-revolutionary, positivist, French-centred, universalist, and future-oriented—a vision of humanity's future unfolding in the present. How much more bounded, modest, historical, and past-oriented was the concept of Europe. Here, then, is the original semantic contrast between Europe and the West: a contrast of which European thought was once vividly aware, but which eventually fell largely from view in the second half of the twentieth century, in liberal, Eurofederalist, and conservative circles alike.

The peak of awareness, a work venturing even into over-awareness, was Thomas Mann's wartime polemic *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, written and published in parts during the First World War.

Mann presented the First World War as a struggle between Europe, nation, culture, and conservatism, on the one hand, and the politicised, progressivist West of France, Britain, and the United States, on the other. Those were the days of 'Europe versus the West'. It was only later, with the Cold War, when the concept of the West became indispensable for Europeans seeking to secure American protection, that the semantic contrast between Europe and the West receded into forgetfulness.

The historical irony is considerable: what the European Commission today describes as 'European values', i.e., human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights,¹⁵ resembles, especially in their definitions, precisely the presumptuous Western-centric universalism that Mann and other conservative defenders of Europe in the period between 1871 and the mid-twentieth century regarded with suspicion. The Commission embeds European values in the semantic template of 'the West'¹⁶—a concept first systematically elaborated by Comte as an alternative to 'Europe'. In doing so, the Commission presents 'Europeanness' as what Comte called *occidentalité* exactly to avoid having to reference the category of Europe. It thus falls prey to what conservative Europeans in an earlier era would have recognised as the specifically Western temptation: the temptation to dissolve historical and civilisational particularity into an abstract language of universal reason, progress, and rights.

Against this background, the first imperative for European conservatives, both intellectually and politically, is to develop a vision of and for Europe that does not unthinkingly reproduce the assumptions of its old polemical counter-concept: the West. To be clear: conservatives in Europe and elsewhere should *not* be anti-Western. But nor should we allow ourselves to be captured by the self-universalising assumptions of Condorcet and Comte that may still be implicitly built into the concept of the West—a concept that, in its original Comtean systematisation, supplanted the concept of Europe.

Words, of course, are not destiny. Concepts can be reinterpreted, reappropriated, and filled with new meanings by contemporary conservatives, as by anyone else. Yet it remains important to be aware of their conceptual and polemical history, not least because the contrast between 'Europe' and 'the West' continues, in altered form, to live on in the present. This brings us back to the two flags of Europe mentioned above.

Two Flags

The contrast between the Flag of Europe used by the EU and the composite Pan-European flag—or rather, between the visions of Europe they symbolise—offers contemporary European conservatives an important point of orientation. It does so precisely because this contrast manifests, in symbolic form, the older distinction between 'Europe' and 'the West' discussed above. The Flag of Europe is more Western, while the Pan-European flag is more European, in the specific nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sense of that opposition.

As I shall argue, it is the symbolism of an empty, movable centre that renders the EU's Flag of Europe more liberal, universalist, Enlightenment-inflected, and 'Western' in the original sense. By contrast, the Pan-European flag carries with it a more culturally substantive, Romantic, historicist, civilisation-oriented, and, yes, more conservative vision of Europe.

Admittedly, this may sound rather high-flown. At the same time, the symbolic distinction touches on concerns crucial to European conservatives, who are overwhelmingly committed to the European project yet critical of its more liberal, technocratic, and abstracting interpretations and modes of operation. One well-known example was the conservative protest over the failure to include an explicit reference to Europe's Christian heritage in the proposed European Constitution during the debates of the early 2000s. Of course, a flag is just a flag, and different people can interpret the same symbol in different ways. Yet symbolism can function as a shortcut to understanding a deeper intellectual fault line.

The composite Pan-European flag of 1955 reflects the conservative yet forward-looking vision of Europe by Coudenhove-Kalergi and Otto von Habsburg. In it, the sun symbolised the Greek legacy of reason, philosophy, and civilisation, while the cross symbolised Europe's Christian inheritance.

Set against a deep blue background and enclosed within the circle of golden stars associated with European unity, the composite flag sought to present Europe not merely as a political or economic arrangement, but as a historical civilisation. The symbolism conveyed a vision of Europe as something spiritually and historically substantive: a civilisation with inherited institutional and cultural traditions and memories, extending far beyond and long preceding the institutions of the contemporary European Union.

The Flag of Europe, as employed by the European Union, conveys a different vision of Europe. The EU flag is empty at its centre. The stars, representing unity in diversity, circle a nothingness. That is telling of the EU's nineties-style liberal ideology, because liberalism imagines society without a substantive civilisational core, but rather as a minimal framework of rules within which individuals and civil society manage their affairs, while the central state safeguards individual rights and refrains from transmitting any thick ethical vision for the political community.

This formally minimalist liberal approach to governance was powerfully systematised by the American philosopher John Rawls in *Political Liberalism*, published in 1993, the very year the European Union was founded. I write 'formally minimalist' because liberalism in practice often moves beyond its procedural self-understanding and becomes a more substantive, culturally thick formation, one that can itself become intolerant of dissenters. Alexandre Lefebvre's *Liberalism as a Way of Life* (2024) is illuminating in this regard. Lefebvre, a Rawlsian liberal philosopher and former Danube Institute Visiting Fellow, acknowledges that liberals today often act intolerantly—a fact he regrets—while arguing convincingly that liberalism is not merely a political framework or set of institutional rules but, on the interpersonal level, can also be a personal creed or ethical orientation—a way of life.¹⁷



Yet, despite Lefebvre's recent supplement (which he himself understands in such complementary terms), the dominant focus of liberal political theory remains liberalism as a minimalist, overarching framework for managing diversity. This is what Rawls calls 'political liberalism'. In its leading theory and highest pretence, liberalism, then, is an attempt to ground political order not in a single comprehensive moral or metaphysical doctrine, but in a relatively thin procedural consensus that allows citizens to embrace different substantive creeds and worldviews while coexisting under the same, purportedly neutral, state framework. For Rawls, in short, the shared political core should be kept as limited as possible. In this sense, and in the context of its contemporary usage, the EU flag, with its empty centre and free-floating stars, is a Rawlsian flag.

This is not meant as a dismissal, for both flags are aesthetically beautiful and express a proud sense of Europeanness: a harmonious, orderly unity in diversity, with each star shining brightly.

Yet the conceptual difference between the two flags is profound, and Europeans will have to choose between these different political self-understandings, or at least learn to manage the tension between them. In the emptier, more Enlightenment-inflected, more liberal and 'Western', and, in some contemporary sense, specifically Rawlsian vision expressed by the Flag of Europe, there is certainly more internal room for manoeuvre. But precisely because there is less of a particularistic and substantive civilisational core, there is also less selfhood to block self-universalisation, and, accordingly, more room for outward universalising of European political ideas, ideals, and practices toward the global world beyond Europe.

An Overly Universalistic EU

The European Commission's universalistic self-understanding pairs with an overly universalistic—self-universalising—approach to the outside world, which at times takes on the character of cultural imperialism.¹⁸ Americans may be surprised to learn that Brussels even has its own EU-centric neocons. Though they can only dream of a powerful European military, they rival Washington neoconservatives in the scale of their universalist, even imperial, ambitions to reshape the world. The European Commission, in its dogmatism, presents 'European values' as universal values and elevates the EU into a 'regulatory superpower' capable of setting standards for the world¹⁹ (which, regrettably, is a poor substitute for geopolitical power and strategic intelligence). Thus, under entirely different political circumstances and relative ideological power relations, one nevertheless finds on both sides of the Atlantic a structurally similar tension: between substantive cultural or civilisational particularisms, on the one hand, and idealistic universalisms and imperial imaginaries, on the other.

On the whole, the EU would be better served by a more particularistic and historicist self-understanding—that is, a more Romantic and less stridently Enlightened one. This is also true for the practical reason that virtually nobody outside Europe is waiting for Europeans once again to imagine themselves as the exclusive proprietors of universality.²⁰

Now, one possible criticism of the more substantive vision of European civilisation expressed by the Pan-European flag—with the Greek and Christian legacies placed at its centre—is that it risks fixing Europe too rigidly in inherited traditions, making it insufficiently open to the future or overly prescriptive toward its peoples. I would argue, however, that the historicist-particularist, culturally substantive vision is, in the final instance, not all that static or prescriptive because the centre contains two elements: the Greek and the Christian.

Between these two, there is already enormous internal dynamism, since the Christian and Greek-rationalist-Enlightenment traditions have historically challenged, corrected, and unsettled one another continuously. Therefore, a filled centre here does not impose a closed dogma; rather, it points toward Europe's historical roots and inner dynamism.

It is admittedly ironic that Christianity and the Greek and Enlightenment traditions of logos and science are invoked here in a historicist and particularist manner—that is, as particular historical traditions—for neither originally understood itself in those terms, but rather advanced universal claims.²¹ In their very inner logic, both are universalistic credos, meant to be taken up by humans everywhere and forever.

Yet, besides implicitly destabilising one another's universalistic claims through incongruence, the pair of grand traditions is invoked here in a historicist and Romantic way: as shared historical roots rather than as universalistic claims upon the world's future.

The current mainstream EU symbolism—which leaves the centre empty because its political self-understanding is only weakly substantive in historical or civilisational terms—goes hand in hand with the European Commission's overly universalising, immodest self-portrayal.

The Commission speaks of 'European values,' yet offers no particularistic account of Europeanness, never getting beyond the generic claim that European values are equality, human rights, the rule of law, liberal democracy, and so forth.²² But since the latter are all supposed to be universal values, the whole strategy breaks down, for if they are universal, why are they simultaneously particularly European? And if they are indeed specifically European, what exactly makes them universal?



Monument to French philosopher Auguste Comte (Shutterstock)

That contradiction between a claimed, effortless access to universal validity and truth, on the one hand, and the particularity of ‘Europe’, on behalf of which this access is claimed, on the other, is neither resolved nor even noticed in mainstream EU discourse. Hegel would have frowned upon this. In Hegel’s account of the developmental stages of world-historical self-consciousness, development runs from a primordial, wholly unreflective particularity—a being that simply is, and takes itself to be the world—through various attempts to overcome particularity in the name of universality, towards, finally, a form of particularity that recognises itself as such among other particularities: a historically embedded perspective that knows itself to stand alongside other historically embedded perspectives, and precisely thereby gain access to the true universality: the universal condition of existing as a particular among particulars.²³

That is not where the European Commission’s official self-definition finds itself today, to put it mildly. To claim universality in the manner of the Commission—that is, by obscuring the particularity of one’s own position—is to remain stuck somewhere in the middle of the Hegelian arc of history.

More precisely, it resembles the phase of world-historical reflexivity that Hegel associated with the Roman realm (*das römische Reich*), in which abstract universality imperialistically asserts itself over the concrete plurality of peoples, traditions, and forms of life.²⁴ The self rebels against the painful multiplicity of the world by attempting to universalise itself, not by recognising others and self in their particularity, but by trying to absorb others into its own supposedly universal form.

In the case of the Commission’s EU, this would be its attempt to universalise, by regulatory means (apropos ‘regulatory superpower’²⁵) and through journalistically and academically promulgated ideological self-delusion, its historically particular understandings of ‘European values’, the rules-based order, the rule of law, democracy, and peace, masking these particularities as universalities. Still, one need not delve deeply into Hegelian philosophy to observe that the EU would benefit from greater modesty in its ideological self-depiction.

Towards a European Patriotism of Moderation and Intelligence

The EU would benefit from a European patriotism centred on ideological modesty and intelligent geopolitical discernment. Modesty here means acknowledging the cultural and historical particularity of the political self: one’s regime, institutions, and traditions of political interpretation. Far from being a merely academic point, such acknowledgement allows for greater epistemic openness towards the particularity of other polities, regimes, and ideologies, which in turn creates diplomatic, strategic, and intellectual opportunities.

Stated in reverse: if one imprisons oneself within a self-flattering worldview in which one embodies universality itself—democracy, law, freedom, equality, peace, and so forth—while imagining oneself to be surrounded, across time and space, by an endless sea of ‘authoritarianism’, then the ideals, ideas, interpretations, and perspectives of political and ideological Others become exceedingly difficult to perceive, which will come at the expense of strategic discernment. To act strategically in geopolitics, one must understand what moves others. Only the mightiest of empires can survive a self-deluded, self-centred geopolitical blindness for any prolonged period; and the European Union is not such an empire; it must, by contrast, navigate a multipolar world in which it must deal intelligently with the United States, China, and other powers.

The deepest intellectual problem among elites around the European Commission—their self-universalising tendency, their insufficient reflexivity, their sometimes imperial mindset, and their alienation from Europe’s cultural and historical particularities—has, in the end, something to do with that beautiful starry flag. In some sense, it is about the flag after all, even if we should certainly not replace it.

The Flag of Europe, with its empty centre and therefore unbounded mobility, lends itself to a conception of Europe in which Europe rises so far above its own particularities that its values become indistinguishable from the values of the world as such. Such a self-understanding easily encourages an imperial spirit.

Of course, in one sense, the EU must be imperial: it creates the regional European space within which smaller member states can operate. But towards the wider world, in geopolitics and diplomacy, it must not think imperialistically. It must think strategically, with an eye both to the otherness of others and to the particularity of the self.

The more rooted and substantivist Pan-European flag would, in this respect, better suit a conservative European Union: patriotic, but also self-reflective, and therefore potentially more strategically competent. Yet, aesthetically, I still find the EU flag extraordinarily beautiful, perhaps the most beautiful. There is tragic sublimity in the image of stars circling an absence, as though gathered around the ashes of a dead campfire.

And yet, if we are standing—or dancing?—around those ashes, should we not seek to reignite the fire at the centre? A living, dynamic intertwining of the Hellenic and Christian legacies: a sun around which the different European nations and peoples may revolve in all their distinctiveness.

References

¹Council of Europe, ‘European Flag’, Documents, Records and Archives, accessed 6 July 2026, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/documents-records-archives-information/european-flag>.

²Georgios Varouxakis, *The West: The History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025), 25–68.

³European Conservatives and Reformists Group, ‘Who We Are’, accessed 6 July 2026, <https://ecrgroup.eu/ecr/>.

⁴Compare: 1) Patriots.eu, ‘Manifesto’, accessed 6 July 2026, <https://patriots.eu/manifesto/>. 2) ‘Redonner aux États le pouvoir exclusif de proposer de nouvelles normes (initiative législative) au sein du Conseil.’ Rassemblement National, *Notre projet pour une Europe des nations: élections européennes du 9 juin 2024* (2024), 12.

⁵Many commentators noted the difference in tone between J. D. Vance’s 2025 and Marco Rubio’s 2026 Munich Security Conference speeches: Vance was more openly admonitory, while Rubio seemed to speak more flatteringly. Yet both speeches moved within a similar vitalist imaginary to diagnose European decadence. They claim Europe, once expansive and civilisationally confident, has become decadent, as it lets itself be overrun by mass migration and paralysed by self-doubt. In this imaginary, decadence means that Europe now lets the world’s problems enter through mass migration, whereas vitality belonged to the age when Europe projected itself outward into the world. Rubio’s formulation is especially revealing: ‘*For five centuries, before the end of the Second World War, the West had been expanding—its missionaries, its pilgrims, its soldiers, its explorers pouring out from its shores to cross oceans, settle new continents, build vast empires extending out across the globe. But in 1945, for the first time since the age of Columbus, it was contracting. Europe was in ruins. Half of it lived behind an Iron Curtain and the rest looked like it would soon follow. The great Western empires had entered into terminal decline, accelerated by godless communist revolutions and by anti-colonial uprisings...*’ Rubio’s timeline is striking. Rather than locating Western decline in 1914, 1933, or the Nazi catastrophe, Rubio places the moment of contraction in 1945, the very year in which the United States helped liberate Western Europe and assumed the leading role in the post-war Western order. Implicit in Rubio’s narrative is, first, that Nazi-Germany was less non- or anti-Western than the Soviet Union (or even still entirely part of the West); why else would Soviet expansion in 1945, but not Nazi expansion in 1940 and 1941, count as the West’s first contraction ‘since the age of Columbus’?

A second implication of Rubio’s speech is that Western greatness expressed itself perhaps above all else in European high imperialism. Besides being shockingly revisionist and disingenuous as advice toward contemporary Europeans, Rubio’s attempt to play on Europeans’ colonial nostalgia and chauvinism is ironic, since the United States also played a major role in hastening the end of European colonial empires after the Second World War. I cannot discuss here in detail what Vance’s and Rubio’s suggestions reveal about how the new American Right imagines Europe, Western history, and transatlantic relations—or what European conservatives, in turn, should make of all this. It suffices to note that this essay does not call for any anachronistic chauvinism or vitalism; I instead argue for a European patriotism of modest self-reflection, other-regarding particularism, and strategic intelligence. See J. D. Vance, ‘Remarks by the Vice President at the Munich Security Conference’, 14 February 2025, The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-vice-president-the-munich-security-conference-0>; Marco Rubio, ‘Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference’, U.S. Department of State, 14 February 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-at-the-munich-security-conference>.

⁶‘Neocon’ is a misnomer, as it is not a form of conservatism, but instead a neo-Napoleonism, as I have argued elsewhere. ‘Pompeo’s Neo-Napoleonism and the CCP Régime’, *Global Conversations: An International Journal in Contemporary Philosophy and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2020): 36–49.

⁷Otto von Habsburg, *Mémoires d’Europe: Entretiens avec Jean-Paul Picaper du Figaro*, pref. Alain Lamassoure (Paris: Criterion, 1994).

⁸Varouxakis, *The West*, 14.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Henry Laurens, *Orientales* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2007), 16, cited in Georgios Varouxakis, *The West: The History of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025), 16.

¹¹Varouxakis, *The West*, 14.

¹²Ibid. 49.

¹³Ibid. 26.

¹⁴Ibid. 51.

¹⁵European Union. ‘Aims and Values’. Accessed 3 July 2026. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/aims-and-values_en.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Hence, Liberalism, in Lefebvre’s broadened account, exists not only as a minimal ‘rules of the game’ framework for managing pluralism in society; it can be a substantive moral culture on the cultural and interpersonal level. Indeed, Lefebvre shows that this liberal moral culture is an entirely pleasant option. Crucially, however, Lefebvre too must keep the two levels distinct. The fact that one has embraced liberalism as a way to lead one’s own life does not mean that others must be forced to do so as well; to insist upon this would itself be illiberal. Accordingly, the fact that liberalism can become a thick personal creed does not undo what, according to the high theory, is liberalism’s first political vocation: to sustain a maximally inclusive public sphere, within reasonable bounds, by asking state institutions to remain as neutral, and thus as minimally interpretative of the good, as possible.

¹⁸On self-universalising senses of justice and right as the intellectual dimension of European imperialism, see: Brett Bowden, *The Empire of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁹Carla Hobbs, ‘The EU as a Digital Regulatory Superpower: Implications for the United States’, European Council on Foreign Relations, 8 April 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_eu_as_a_digital_regulatory_superpower_implications_for_the_u/; Anu Bradford, ‘The European Union in a Globalised World: The “Brussels Effect”’, *Revue Européenne du Droit*, no. 2 (Spring 2021), <https://geopolitique.eu/en/articles/the-european-union-in-a-globalised-world-the-brussels-effect/>.

²⁰Ibid. Bowden’s *The Empire of Civilization*, which outlines the history of European and Western imperialistic self-universalisation, should make it clear why intellectuals and politicians outside the West are more than fed up with said self-universalisation. But one may also approach it from the other side and appreciate, for example, how central the repudiation of Western universalism is to contemporary Chinese political thought. Eric Hendriks, ‘*The Polemics of China’s Counter Cosmopolitanism*’, *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary* 2022, no. 201 (Winter 2022): 13–37, <https://doi.org/10.3817/1222201013>.

²¹For an account of how the West’s different historical strands of universalism (Greek, Christian, Roman, Enlightened) built on each other, see: François Jullien, *On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue between Cultures*, trans. From French by Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), originally published as *De l’universel, de l’uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008).

²²European Union. ‘Aims and Values’.

²³G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse* (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1821), § 352–360.

²⁴Ibid. § 357.

²⁵Hobbs, ‘The EU as a Digital Regulatory Superpower’; Bradford, ‘The European Union in a Globalised World’.

