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Re: Federalization of the European Union

The European Union is a body probably unlike any other that exists in the world today: It exists in the twilight zone between a confederation and a regional alliance, with the ability to create law and regulations— as famously, or infamously, captured by the Vote Leave campaign in the 2016 Brexit referendum— but without the ability to fully control member states, nor the ability to craft a common defensive strategy or a common fiscal strategy. Now, however, that Britain has decided it will careen out of the European Union come what may from their departure, the EU has a unique opportunity to straightforwardly confront many the flaws that Brexit campaigners pointed out. The EU suffers from not just a democratic deficit but a control deficit: Because of the uncertain nature of the European Union, decisions from the Commission and the European Parliament can be perceived as illegitimate, and the best way to head off a future Grexit, Nexit, or Frexit, is to firmly federalize power while democratizing access to European federal power.

The idea that Europe should be a single nation is fairly simple to any outsider: the world’s second-smallest continent, it is already deeply economically and socially integrated after decades of postwar politics. Indeed, unification efforts accelerated after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War— several EU treaties were signed and some of the largest EU expansions enacted in the decade and a half after the collapse of the Soviet Union— but the European Constitutional Treaty was famously
rejected by the electorates of France and the Netherlands, and further political
integration has more or less stalled since then, save for in the face of crisis. Indeed,
given the existing links between the various European and EU countries, it only seems
reasonable to continue the integration process. Even Europeans, once thinking purely
rationally and with an analytical view of the past ten to twenty years, should understand
the importance of a single, powerful EU rather than a grab-bag of competencies
periodically updated or changed as crisis demands. Government by crisis is no way to
govern, especially when one is governing a population of more than half a billion
people, and the handoff of sovereign powers to the European Union under immense
pressure from situational concerns is not only deeply disruptive to both EU and national
governing processes, but can ultimately become counterproductive when related
powers are not appropriately delegated or centralized. The European Union’s greatest
flaw is in behaving like the Eurozone: Because powers are neither fully national nor
federal, the union itself is deeply ineffective and ultimately serves mostly to spread
national problems across the continent.

The best, though perhaps most controversial, solution to this problem is
European federalization. While respecting the various national traditions and political
conventions present in each member state, the EU as a body and the individual
member states cannot tolerate the level of division and dysfunction that currently exists
across Europe. The most immediate and lasting solution would be something akin to an
American constitutional convention: A gathering of delegates sent by their home
nations, selected through some consultative process, where a pan-European
constitution and form of government could be finally drafted and implemented. Europe would need, at the very minimum, a centralized executive having at least control over finance, defense, foreign affairs, and immigration; there would need to be a centralized and democratically elected legislature comprised of representation from each member state and vested with the absolute right to legislate in domains the European executive was granted power over; there would need to be some sort of legal sunset clause, after which national law would be totally replaced by standard European law, in order to ensure a centralized judicial system. A common currency and a free travel zone are not enough: Europe must federalize to compete with post-Brexit Britain, an increasingly isolated United States, a resurgent Russia, and an increasingly powerful China.

There is no way that any national government, or even a future European commission dominated by federalists, would willingly propose something that had been so anathema to such a broad section of Europe’s populations for so long-- such a leap would mean almost certain political suicide, and would lead to immediate jockeying for power between states. Because, however, the European Union as an institution is under such constant media scrutiny given the circumstances of Brexit and Prime Minister May’s perceived poor handling of events, now is the most forgiving time to introduce such a measure. Skeptical publics from Finland to France and Germany to Greece will be deeply offended and likely fund such a project repulsive, but if the European Union properly utilizes the theory behind the five-prong interest cycle to shift popular opinion away from narrow nationalism, such a radical shift could become potentially tenable and perhaps even achievable.
The first stage is, in keeping in line with the five-prong interest cycle, to engage with the pan-European public regarding the issues faced by the EU. Much of this work has already been done, and perhaps too effectively—migration has been a focus of national politics across the EU for years now, and issues related to finance and Russia have become deeply divisive across populations, with strong opinions emerging from all quarters and potentially undermining the EU itself. In showcasing the full cost of progress, however— the third stage of the five-prong approach— and in showing how a federal European Union with full federal control over an issue like migration policy could manage the crisis much more efficiently, the European Union can begin to win back skeptical citizens towards a more unified and federal solution. Brexit will also almost certainly be an effective tool in focusing public enthusiasm and alarm: A “hard Brexit” with Britain leaving the EU and defaulting to World Trade Organization rules in trade with Europe and other countries would very possibly be a dramatic economic shock, at least in the short term, to Britain, and could build support for a federal solution. The most difficult problem, however, does not lie in convincing a skeptical and often misinformed—sometimes willfully misinformed—public that a federal European Union handling various affairs would be the most effective method, but rather ensuring that that public was aware of the European Union’s successes just as much as they were the failure of national governments. Ensuring that consistent public attention was paid to the newly federal EU, beyond simply scandal-centric coverage like the coverage that most Americans see when interacting with their political system, is perhaps the most important aspect of this. Hence, the sunsetting provisions that a future EU constitutional
convention would decide upon become paramount: At some point, in order to keep the importance of a continually federalizing union in the public view, sunsetting the authority of member states to make critical decisions as independent components of the federation should begin in earnest. By using the five-prong approach to public attention, European leaders can begin creating a functional and democratically accountable-- and democratically reformable-- federation instead of a strange hybrid of a federal union and independent alliance.

The European Union, while currently flawed, has significant promise. Despite being faced with any number of crises--Hungary and Poland experimenting with illiberal democracy, the migration crisis, economic stagnation, Brexit, Russian expansionism, American withdrawal, economic competition with China-- the sum of the crises present an unusual opportunity for the current leaders of Europe to fulfill the dreams of the founders of the European Union. By carefully utilizing a five-prong approach when dealing with public opinion, a federal Europe can be created to better deal with current crises as well as future crises.