The SCUSA theme of innovation is an appropriate lens for viewing contemporary Europe. The relative stability of Europe today is largely the product of unprecedented efforts in political innovation. After the devastation of two World Wars, the European powers, with the guidance of the United States, created a complex matrix of institutions that dramatically increased inter-state cooperation and reduced the prospect for war. What is now known as the European Union succeeded in unifying the continent to a remarkable extent.

In the eyes of many observers, powerful forces now threaten this hard-fought peace from within and without. The following issues are particularly relevant to a discussion of the future of Europe and its relationship with the United States.

**Proposed Topics and Questions for Discussion**

**The war in Ukraine: whither US and EU policy?**

The most pressing security concern for both the United States and Europe is, of course, Russia’s continued aggression in Ukraine. While the European Continent has enjoyed a relative peace in the 21st century, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (it is important to remember that Russia had annexed Crimea in 2014 and destabilized Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region since that time) arguably represents the most significant challenge in Europe since the end of the Cold War.

The Russian invasion of February 2023 has drawn Europe and the United States closer together through heightened perceptions of shared values and interests. And Europe and the United States have offered extensive aid to Ukraine to counter Russian aggression. Yet there are growing indications that Western cohesion may be ebbing. What are the sources of this trend and how durable is it? How and to what extent should it be counteracted?

Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, "Will the West Abandon Ukraine?" *Foreign Affairs* [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/will-west-abandon-ukraine](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/will-west-abandon-ukraine).


Ben Baxendale-Smith, "Reasserting the UK's Role in European Security Through Military Assistance to Ukraine" [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/reasserting-ukss-role-european-security-through-military-assistance-ukraine](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/reasserting-ukss-role-european-security-through-military-assistance-ukraine)

**European military capacity: now even more dependent on the United States?**

While the EU has extended a remarkable amount of socio-economic and military support to Ukraine, the conflict has exposed, not for the first time, the shortcomings of Europe’s own defense capacity as well as a weakly shared approach to common security among its members. Observers conclude that European security will remain potentially fragile until Europe develops a greater
commitment to its own defense. To what extent has the war in Ukraine strengthened the impulse in Europe for self-defense and a reduced reliance on the US military shield?


Brian Burton, “Europe Should Not Try to Go It Alone on Defense, War on the Rocks, May 18, 2023, at https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/europe-should-not-try-to-go-it-alone-on-defense/


The Enemy Within: Right-wing Populist Authoritarianism

Vladimir Putin’s war against Ukraine may serve as a stress test of European democracy. Indeed, in a recent speech Vladimir Putin returned to his common theme that there are “two Europes.” Putin’s narrative is not entirely fictitious. Putin is attempting to appeal to populism -- a powerful political force that threatens the quality and perhaps the stability of democracy in several Western countries, including the United States. Briefly, populism, particularly in its radical form, is rooted in ethnonationalism and xenophobia, cultural traditionalism, economic uncertainty and inequality, and authoritarian political culture.

Above all, populism is hostile to incumbent elites and established political institutions as perceived sources of corruption, socio-economic inequality, and the exclusion of mass publics from political power. Driven by voters with deep-seated economic and cultural grievances, populist movements in the West, from the UK, Italy, Germany, and Hungary to the United States, have diluted democratic norms and weakened political institutions. The EU itself has long been under attack by populist forces in Europe as an institution run by elites who have forsaken the interests of their respective countries in favor of allegiances to globalization and supra-national organizations -- like the European Union. For years, Putin has supported populist parties in the West to foment political division and disunity.

Although the war in Ukraine has often strengthened mainstream politicians and parties in Europe, it is likely that populism in Europe and the United States remains a threat to democracy. Indeed, populism is only one, albeit important, element of the declining strength of democracy in the West as reflected in the long-term erosion of popular trust in political parties and democratic engagement. Observers in the United States routinely voice concern about the decay of democratic norms and the potential instability of American democratic institutions. In Europe, remarkably, a 2018 German survey found that 42% of respondents held some form of authoritarian views. Nevertheless, other observers maintain that European democracy remains robust. They point to an explosion in non-traditional forms of political participation, rooted in the virtual world, that enables participants to shed much of the organizational hierarchy and privilege of traditional parties and civic groups. Is the silver lining of the
war in Ukraine the renewed appreciation for democracy in Europe? Or will the war deepen existing non-democratic trends?

Daron Acemoglu, “The End of Democratic Capitalism? How Inequality and Insecurity Fueled a Crisis in the West,” Foreign Affairs, July/August 2023, at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/end-democratic-capitalism


Europe & China:
 Much of Europe is now paying a steep economic and political price for its reliance on Russian energy. As the EU develops policies that attempt to cut back this dependence, it is still uncertain whether Europe and the United States can forge coherent, complementary strategies. The question also remains whether the EU and the United States will apply lessons learned with Russia to the management of their relationship with China. Will the West sufficiently reduce its economic dependence on China so that it retains the political will to respond to Chinese aggression, particularly against Taiwan, and not be paralyzed by fear of the economic consequences of confronting Beijing? Finding the political determination to engage in such “economic distancing” with China would likely be significantly more difficult than maintaining the current common front against Russia. China doesn’t present the same clear and present danger that Russia does, a fact that robs the West of a coherent and pressing threat that would help mobilize political action. China is also much more embedded in Western economies than Russia, making selective de-coupling of the respective economic systems extremely complex. Nevertheless, the United States has already taken a number of steps, across multiple domains, to reduce China’s economic footprint. Has this been an effective, and necessary, strategy?


SCUSA 74 Roundtable Topic: Europe: Domestic Challenges and External Aggression


*The readings have links but you may encounter a pay wall. If so, access the readings through your institution’s library.

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1 http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69695
2 https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/a-blueprint-for-europe/