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# The Paradox of Post-National Europe

The belief that Europe's states have been undermined by a sovereignty-trumping EU has become as popular as it is inaccurate, argues Ada Regelmann. The real threat lies in these states' inability to capitalize on the benefits of political integration in what is fast becoming an interdependent world.

By Ada Regelmann for ISN

Open just about any newspaper in the United Kingdom and you will find a variety of things presented as evidence of the EU's meddling in the country's domestic affairs. Though apparently unrelated, [light bulbs](#), [lawnmowers](#), [cucumbers](#) and even new EU citizens feature regularly as indicators of the decline of national sovereignty at the hands of the European Union, not to mention the demise of the nation-state as we know it.

Yet it would be unfair to single the UK out in this regard. Across the EU, innocuous items like cucumbers, lawnmowers and light bulbs are deployed as metaphors for the EU's notorious "red tape". For some, these are tokens of over-regulation, rather than proof that member-states live up to European agreements on carbon emissions, consumer rights, or access to markets. In some sense, complaints about EU citizens from newer member-states stand in for similar things: access to markets, freedom of movement, and other policy targets that are set by all EU states jointly. The past six weeks in particular saw Romanian citizens victimised for making use of their right to free movement within the EU. Judging from the nature of the political rhetoric and media coverage in many member-states, the EU is a technocratic bully that thwarts national traditions, attacks established cultures and undermines the nation-state as a form of political organisation.

Not long ago, the EU was largely perceived in a positive light. Now, the ominous "crisis" has crystallised uncertainties about the EU's overall usefulness into purported certainties about how "good" nation-states would have it if the EU were to disappear. Where in the past European publics eyed national decision-making with disinterest, the growing interest of European institutions in regulating domestic issues is now perceived as a sign of merciless technocratic dictatorship. Likewise, European structures are accused of misbalancing interstate relations and challenging the sovereignty of smaller and weaker states. This point is aptly illustrated by a recent news headline - ["Today the German Bundestag will decide the fate of Greece"](#).

## What happened to the European nation-state?

To an extent, these signs do reflect a new reality. The diverse processes of European integration have indeed altered political organization in Europe. Europeans express their dismay at the Union because it now appears to exhibit features of sovereignty previously reserved for nation-states. Underlying this

thinking is a view of the state as the pinnacle of national self-determination. The idea of state sovereignty that entitles a nation to unlimited political authority over a clearly demarcated territory is widely known as the "Westphalian" model. Developed in the 17th century, it still influences how the state and national sovereignty are understood in Europe today – with a few modifications. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Westphalian state was expected to provide security to all citizens rather than just to elites; to foster favorable conditions for business; to offer welfare protections to the vulnerable; to endorse equal rights; and to ensure that the economic benefits are distributed in a way that most citizens consider to be just. Westphalian sovereignty today is therefore bound to the legitimacy granted to state institutions by their citizens. These days, at least in Europe, the Westphalian state implies institutions that work for the benefit of citizens, and is closely aligned with the will they express at the ballot box.

But even this reformulated Westphalian model has been overtaken by the reality of the European state today. Although decisions made by state officials remain bounded within national territories, their authority in these areas is no longer exclusive. In a whole range of policy matters, the EU now exercises shared competence and in some cases has an exclusive role in decision-making. From the point of view of EU member-states, this means that the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs has been blurred. In more than one sense, the state has ceased to be the only [“container, arena and regulator of social justice”](#).

Undoubtedly, however, this has been to the benefit of most Europeans. The EU has created new economic opportunities, as well as access to better education, living conditions, and work on a scale previously unknown in Europe. It has also ensured that more Europeans participate in decision-making that directly affects them. European integration has strengthened supranational as well as sub-national channels of political participation and brought governance closer to the people, either by strengthening regional actors or through local cross-border cooperation.

### **Whither the nation-state?**

However, the view that the nation-state has been circumvented or could even be eliminated by “top-down “ EU processes is as popular as it is inaccurate. The point of departure for integration was the search for alternatives to a bankrupt state-system after World War II. As one of the most prominent students of European integration, [Wolfgang Wessels](#), has put it: supranational structures were introduced to fill the gaps left by the declining capacity of traditional nation-states to satisfy the needs of citizens in light of growing global interdependence and new patterns of security competition. This changing international context was a key factor, for example, in the Franco-German rapprochement. More recently, the newly independent post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe joined the EU largely with the aim of smithing alliances against real or perceived threats to their security. As [Alan Milward](#) has insightfully pointed out, European integration has repeatedly rescued the European nation-state by reframing and reconstituting its sovereignty.

The effectiveness of EU policies still depends fundamentally on the institutions of its member-states. The EU has neither the competence nor the capacity to work in lieu of the state: it cannot police, levy taxes, secure borders, provide military assistance, or implement social policy. In other words, it needs nation-states far more than nation-states need the EU.

Without question, the process of European integration has transformed the nation-state profoundly. Yet the process did not run from a European centre to national peripheries. National governments remained in charge of policy-making by joining coalitions across national borders and aligning their interests with those of others. Indeed, the persistence of national control despite the process of European integration has led [Christopher Bickerton](#) to argue that a new form of the state has emerged as a result – the *member-state*. This new form, however, is inherently unstable, largely

because the complexity of negotiations among national governments decreases their transparency to citizens – making political power seem far removed from the will of national publics. Such is the paradox of the contemporary state in Europe.

### **Now what?**

Public concerns about the economic crisis have been directed towards states as much as towards European institutions. Across Europe, many have called for a ‘repatriation of competences’ in response to declining cohesion in the EU. At the same time, the capacity of nation-states to deliver policies in line with popular will has been questioned. National governments point to “Brussels” as the origin of policies that are unpalatable to their domestic electorates. But however much they do so, the EU remains a paper-tiger that prescribes policy frameworks without the leverage to implement them. By undermining integration these governments undermine their own capacity to provide for the welfare of their citizens.

A roll-back of integration does not seem likely to resolve the crises that fan both Euroscepticism and criticism of national states. The history of European integration suggests that the pooling of sovereignty actually allows states to deliver far more than they otherwise could in a changing international order. Most European states are now even less capable of surviving in the international system on their own than they were twenty years ago. If there is a threat to European nation-states today, it is their ill-suited response to the fact of growing interdependence – a failure that the global financial crisis demonstrated all too well.

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