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Citation for published version:

Cram, L, *The Idea of Europe*, 2015, Web publication/site, European Futures, Edinburgh.
<<http://www.europeanfutures.ed.ac.uk/article-1265>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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The Idea of Europe

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Permalink: <http://www.europeanfutures.ed.ac.uk/article-1265>

Publication: 2 July 2015

Article text:

*European integration has long been rooted in practical arguments instead of overarching visions, writes **Laura Cram**. She suggests that this course has allowed for various meanings of Europe to develop to suit different national debates, in which the idea of the EU is often used selectively to support the political narratives of the day.*

As the Eurogroup scrambles to find a solution to forestall Grexit and the UK gears up for a Brexit referendum, the future shape of the European Union is in question. Protests from German citizens at the prospect of underwriting support for Greek membership, have met accusations that the very idea of European Union is under challenge. This presupposes that a European idea exists, ever existed or could even be agreed upon.

The great trick of European integration was to dodge the question of the European idea. Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet, architects of the Union, realised this early. Any grand idea of a European future around which European leaders could coalesce would be so vapid as to be meaningless in practice. Their solution was to focus on practical, technical developments – the sharing of coal and steel production – from which all could benefit. Ask not what the EU is but what it can do for you was the prevailing philosophy. Through functional cooperation they believed, habits of collaboration would develop, economies would become intertwined and the prospect of warfare between the cooperating states would become impracticable. Around this mundane technical collaboration, national leaders were free to wrap their individual national narratives.

The European idea, in reality was always a multitude of European ideas, serving a wide range of purposes. Under threat of Communism, European integration provided a Western bulwark. A history of dictatorship could be distanced as membership of the Union symbolised democratic standing. For Germany, a commitment to peace and European solidarity was a powerful rehabilitating narrative. For the more reluctant UK and Denmark, the technical trade-based idea of European union allowed them to present cooperation in Europe as a minimalist guarantor of access to markets.

The idea of European Union has been as much a tool in national debates, selectively invoked to support current narratives, as any overarching plan. This remains the case today. In the referendum on Scottish independence, the EU played a prominent role. Scots were roundly warned of the perils of independence that would surely jeopardise their future EU membership, an irony not lost on many of the Scottish

voters who now face a referendum on the UK's membership. In turn, the distinct attitudes of Scots to European Union membership played an important role in the SNP's case for a double majority in the UK referendum, to ensure that Scottish voters could not be removed from the 'European family of nations' against their will.

These competing narratives, however instrumental, should not be ignored. Just as the founders hoped that habits of integration would develop over time, we now see a huge mobilisation of resource to preserve the integrity of the EU and to stave off the prospect of imminent Grexit and possible Brexit. Perhaps the habit of European cooperation is producing an idea of Europe based on everyday concerns and interests rather than a grand vision. These interests are shaped by and shape narratives. Perhaps as the early architects of the European project envisaged – if you build it they will come (and stay).

Laura Cram is ESRC Senior Europe Fellow investigating The European Union in the Public Imagination: Maximising the Impact of Transdisciplinary Insights (ESRC/ES/N003985/1).

This article was originally published on the [Centre on Constitutional Change Blog](#).

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