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Time for the 89ers to Defend Europe

Eurocrisis in the Press

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The politics of public discourse in Europe

By [Henry Radice](#)

On the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the familiar rituals of remembrance feel particularly poignant in a year marking the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, yet itself scarred by a grim array of conflicts which seem appallingly to celebrate, rather than to mourn, the innovations in inhumanity witnessed a century ago.

In contrast, our rituals of commemoration of 1989 and its symbolic centrepiece, the fall of the Berlin Wall, remain haphazard and unsettled, despite the far more positive legacy at stake (and the moving [celebrations](#) in Berlin on Sunday).

Taking stock of this twenty-five year anniversary in a powerful essay in *The Guardian*, Timothy Garton Ash [asks](#) where the 89ers are, contrasting the absence in our culture of such a group with the undoubted resonance of the generations of 1968 or 1939. Garton Ash ponders whether such a generation of 1989 might yet emerge, placing his hopes in those born at or around the end of the Cold War. But, on reflection, I would also like to lay tentative claim to the label, having come of age in an era in which European political consolidation was rapidly taking place through force of will rather than force of arms. For some of us born almost a decade before the fall of the Wall a political challenge lies ahead, the importance of



which already relates to the events of 1989.

As a seven year old who turned eight during 1989, that year's salient event was not, unsurprisingly, the political upheaval of large swathes of Europe freeing themselves from authoritarianism, but rather an extended caravan tour of Western Europe initiated by my parents, the objective of which was to explore which European country might represent the safest haven from the private affluence and public squalor of Thatcher's Britain.

Some months later, France having been declared suitable, began the kind of trans-European childhood that, astonishingly, was mine in theory by right, if, of course, enabled in practice by relative good fortune. Thereafter, the primary political context of my life has been a Europe messily united, rather than one divided by a frozen yet existential conflict.

In British public discourse today, the Polish plumber has replaced the Polish dissident. That should be cause for celebration. Yet the corrosive triviality of Nigel Farage and his ilk has infused debate to such an extent that some, unaccountably, seem more afraid of migrants than of a politician willing to get into bed with Polish 'dissidents' of a [far more sinister and reactionary bent](#).

It is reasonable to assume that the democratic body politic will, from time to time, produce minor irritants like Farage. Such ailments should be relatively easily treated. Yet the great failure of the main parties, reflective of a loss of nerve across much of Europe, has been to accept Farage's negative framing and opportunistic pairing of the questions of Europe and immigration. The opponents of eurosceptic populists routinely concede so much crucial territory by prefacing any comment with those oft-repeated phrases, "of course people are worried about immigration", or "of course Europe needs reforming", that they usually render any

retorical sorties that might follow at best Pyrrhic victories, whatever the [underlying facts of the debates involved](#).

We can, indeed, should, disagree about how to do politics in Europe, yet the political framework of a united Europe of free movement is worth fighting for, and is a fight that could yet define my generation of 89ers, provided we do not fall prey to a complacency that only sees value in political gains symbolised by blood and bodies, rather than mere rubble.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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