

Cross-Border Learning as a Political Strategy: Why Europe's Future Prosperity and Cohesion Depend on Its Ability to Learn

Executive Summary

- **Cross-national learning broadens the scope for policy decision-making by highlighting how other countries have successfully solved comparable problems and which combinations of institutions, regulation, and financing work in each specific case. In the European context, this logic of learning stands in tension with discourses on national identity, which often frame external models as a threat.**
- **Cross-national learning is not a method of technocratic depoliticization. Rather, it is a deliberately political strategy to look beyond the narrow confines of national habit to seek solutions to entrenched problems and conflicts.**
- **For policymakers, civil society, and foundations, this implies that anyone seeking to secure prosperity and ensure the capacity to act must strengthen analytical capabilities for international comparisons and foster a political culture that views learning as an expression of a willingness to take responsibility. Especially while Europe is in competition with the United States and China, cross-border learning cannot be limited to the elite in Europe. Rather, it is a prerequisite for its successful modernization.**

Europe is losing economic momentum because of lower growth rates, sluggish productivity gains, delayed digitalization and reform fatigue. At the same time, major structural problems — such as demographic change, a lack of competitive capital markets to finance necessary transformations, and the quality of public infrastructure — have been known for years.

We know reform is needed, yet implementation lags. Reforms are announced but are then postponed or watered down. In this context, a strategy is gaining importance that is often underestimated or strongly questioned in the social science debate: cross-border learning.

What is cross-national learning?

In political science literature, “cross-national learning” is generally understood as the process by which political actors systematically evaluate experiences from other countries and translate them into their own reforms through mechanisms such as policy transfers, diffusion, or convergence.

In many articles, this process is presented as predominantly technocratic. Accordingly, experts identify best practices and formulate recommendations that allow governments to adopt elements of policies implemented elsewhere in order to increase the efficiency or effectiveness of their own countries.

However, it is often assumed that cross-national learning depoliticizes conflicts to defuse them. Put simply, the criticism from the social sciences is as follows: Those who refer to external models aim to bypass historically developed national identities and pursue elite politics that is disconnected from the country’s democratic processes and voter base.

This criticism misses the core of the problem facing European nations today. In modern democracies, most deadlocks arise from a politicization that remains stuck in nationally shaped patterns of thought and limits on action.

These conflicts may be highly politicized, but they are trapped within a framework of action that systematically excludes successful alternative solutions.

However, parliaments and governments are increasingly finding that their familiar tools no longer work to fix structural problems. The result is a “status quo bias:” inaction or minimal change appear politically safer than attempting to adapt solutions that worked in other countries.

This static approach is portrayed as more “democratic” than a potentially inspiring recourse to cross-border learning.

The social sciences' criticism of cross-national learning often overlooks the macropolitical dimension. By focusing on identity conflicts, interpretive frameworks, or clusters within individual societies, it describes very precisely why certain reforms meet with resistance.

However, it does not translate these insights into a constructive learning strategy. Analytical proof that path dependencies exist is no substitute for policies that productively overcome those path dependencies.

Cross-border learning should by no means be understood as technocratic depoliticization. Properly used, it is a deliberately political strategy. Drawing on external models deliberately expands the space for conflict rather than closing it off. It compels political actors to ask why certain solutions work elsewhere and what adjustments would be necessary to make them work in their own country as well.

This shifts the focus: The emphasis is not on mitigating conflicts, but on addressing them productively through comparison with approaches pursued elsewhere.

This shift in perspective is particularly crucial in the European context. EU member states can only secure their sovereignty and prosperity if they pool their economic and regulatory strength. That is why they need an integrated single market, a deepened capital markets union, and common standards in key areas.

In practice, however, there is a tendency to cling to the nationalization of learning processes. That tendency has been further intensified by the rise of populist forces, which are increasingly pushing for the renationalization of the integration measures that have been achieved so far.

Best-practice examples of cross-border cooperation are thus coming under increasing pressure. They are interpreted in general democratic discourse as a threat to national identity, even when they originate from immediate neighbors.

Instead of asking, "What works where — and what can we learn from it?" populist forces look for reasons why learning from outside success is an unacceptable affront. Memories of historical struggles, coalition-building, or welfare state traditions no longer act to inspire adaptation

of new ideas, but rather to build a framework to argue against adoption of any outside practice.

Europe in the world

The problem is obvious: A European Union that wants to hold its own in global competition with the United States and China can afford less every year to remain stuck in 27 separate reform logics. Rather, its future vitality depends on the ability to identify successful solutions, combine them, and implement them in different institutional environments.

Cross-national learning is therefore no longer a “nice-to-have,” but a prerequisite for the effective, realpolitik implementation of the European ideal.

Anyone who takes European integration seriously must not downplay the importance of cross-border learning but must strengthen it institutionally. This is achieved through shared analytical frameworks, peer-review processes, the systematic evaluation of reform pathways, and a political debate that views external models not as foreign elements but as constructive resources for solving complex problems and navigating intricate procedural situations.

A case in point

A concrete example illustrates this tension. Sweden integrated capital-market-based components into its public pension system at an early stage. This reform aimed to strengthen the country’s long-term financial foundation, taking demographic trends into account and readjusting the link between economic performance and old-age security.

In Germany, comparable proposals were rejected for many years, primarily on the grounds that they would create an unacceptable breach of the welfare state, jeopardize historical compromises, and open the door to the privatization of a public pension promise.

The domestic political opposition — comprising labor unions, parts of the political left, and conservative skeptics — formed a stable bloc that barred the entry of any significant capital market component into the statutory pension system.

It was not until two decades later, and under significantly changed conditions, that a still-cautious learning process finally began. In light of demographic pressures and the fiscal limits of traditional pay-as-you-go systems, Germany took its first limited steps toward stock-based pension options and capital market coverage.

This example shows that refusing to engage in cross-border learning is not a cost-neutral act that promotes democracy. The endless delays imposed concrete costs on German pension recipients and shifted significant financial burdens into the future.

The fear of cosmopolitanism

Criticism from the social sciences of cross-border learning sometimes goes so far that the very concept of a sustainable, growth-oriented reform course based on analyses presented by the OECD is considered illegitimate.

Criticism of this kind closes off discussion of the fundamental problem — pension systems, capital market regulation, the labor market, digitalization, etc — in deference to a normatively charged defense of existing power and conflict constellations. This stance is anything but progressive. In fact, it is based on a complete misunderstanding of what “progressive” means.

After all, modernization requires addressing complex structural problems. Fear that success would be the fruit of “cosmopolitanism” or an elite project should not discredit a solution that yields real progress.

EU member states have little choice but to rely on their combined strength to face the United States and China.

The logic of seeking to secure European sovereignty, competitiveness and prosperity, while rejecting — as a threat to identity — models that work in other European or OECD countries, is highly contradictory. Insisting on 27 unique national reform paths is shortsighted, especially in the context of technological upheaval and geo-economic rivalry.

No automatic lessons

At the same time, it is self-evident that in any cross-border learning exercise, context is key to the success of any potential policy

adaptation. There are no automatic lessons that can simply be transplanted from one setting to another.

In education, for example, cross-border learning does not mean yielding to a presumable “PISA diktat” or deciding that everything must now be done the Finnish way. Rather, the Finnish school experience should be treated as one important source of insight among others that feed into a reasoned domestic debate. Any policy transferred into a new setting must be properly measured to fit the receiving country. Ultimately, everyone is responsible for their own decisions.

The strategic function of cross-border learning

From the perspective of modern reform policy, cross-national learning serves an important strategic function. It allows us not only to view structural problems from a domestic perspective but also, by examining international variations, to reevaluate structures that have become entrenched in domestic politics but are no longer fit for purpose.

The crucial questions are, first: What combination of regulation, financing, and institutions has demonstrably led to better results elsewhere? And second: Under what conditions could these combinations be adapted without abandoning a country’s core norms?

Such questions are anything but technocratic. They are deeply political. They touch on issues of distribution, power relations, and patterns of legitimacy. That is precisely why learning should not be understood as an attempt to depoliticize conflicts, but rather as an approach to place political conflicts within a broader field of experience.

Modernization understood in this way means that complex problems can no longer be left to simmer unchecked “in their own (national) juices.” It certainly requires courage to identify successful external solutions, adapt them, and take political responsibility for their attempted implementation.

Cross-national learning is not a technocratic shortcut, but a form of political initiative. It confronts domestically gridlocked systems with the fact that alternatives exist—and thus forces a decision on whether to use one or more of these alternatives.

Europe cannot afford to reject this form of politicization. Those who ignore it do not protect a European identity; rather, they risk suffocating Europe's prosperity and capacity to act.

Implications for the Strategic Debate in Foundations, Businesses, and Politics

This results in a clear mandate for action in the strategic debate within foundations, businesses, and politics. If Western—and especially European—societies want a prosperous future, they must collectively expand their institutional capacity for learning.

First, this involves strengthening analytical capacity through the systematic observation, comparison, and evaluation of political solutions within an international framework. Second, forums are needed in which external models are not only discussed by expert panels but also incorporated into parliamentary and public debates.

Third, political culture should change: References to “foreign” solutions must not primarily serve as an argument against adopting them, but rather as a constructive starting point for exploring how solutions found abroad could be adapted to take national particularities into account.

Media-oriented case studies that show the necessity and practical relevance of cross-border learning are a fundamental part of the “learning infrastructure” that is indispensable for the successful implementation of this strategic concept.

Publications in national and international media are key vehicles for raising awareness among political circles and fostering societal dialogue to encourage greater boldness in reform. Best practices from abroad can concretely demonstrate the potential benefits of cross-border learning and embed those lessons in a democratic public. The goal here is not merely to “report” on external knowledge, but to make it a benchmark for evaluating national policy.

When cross-national learning becomes the core narrative, the public is more likely to recognize that comparative political education does not undermine democracy but, on the contrary, has a measurable, democratic added value.

The goal therefore is to establish a new narrative of accountability: Political decision-makers should no longer be considered “courageous”

simply for defending national path dependencies, but rather because they are willing to learn and adapt proven models of success from other democracies.

Cross-national learning thus becomes a publicly demanded criterion for good governance. Increased production of “media-ready” analyses is a key lever for anchoring this expectation in political discourse.

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