

## **AS THE GOING GETS TOUGH, EUROPE NEEDS TO GET GOING**

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An institution usually ceases to exist once it is perceived to have outlived its usefulness. As the European Union currently finds itself at an existential crossroads, frustration of friend and foe alike is further exacerbated by the ambivalence of EU leadership on a common definition of such usefulness and whom it may serve. Too much talk and too little action have instead further illustrated the inability of the EU to put its own house in order, let alone respond constructively and in unison to international crises as they never cease to unfold. Instead, Europe has openly failed to effectively alleviate serious economic and political problems within its bosom: as austerity bites, unemployment rates soar and extreme right-wing electoral successes are on the rise, European institutions have come to resemble talking shops rather than policy-making entities. Obama tellingly first visited Warsaw and then Brussels on his latest visit to Europe a month or so ago: the message of where American affections currently lie was not only meant for Putin.

To understand the predicament of the EU today, one needs look to its past. Necessity remains the mother of all invention and delving back into a not-too-far-distant past, history and geography paint a rather clear picture of the hard realities on the ground which had served to create a European hub of cooperation in the aftermath of WWII and then, forty years later served to transform it into a tightly-knit, inextricably interdependent monetary union. The creation of the European Steel and Coal Community in 1951, the precursor of what has now come to be known as the European Union, was fundamentally underlined by the need for security, security and security. Scathed by the scars of war, which had left Europe in tatters and vulnerable to the encroachments of the Soviet threat, the ESCC was designed to be a bulwark of stability, prosperity and economic growth. In contrast to their predecessors, Schuman and his close associate Jean Monnet, believed that an important guarantee to French security was to actually strengthen Germany and not weaken it, engage it in shaping the scheme of affairs to come rather than isolate it, the spectre of 'revanche' imposed at Versailles being all too imminent to ignore. Thus, what initially began as a Franco-German joint mechanism of control over the production of coal and steel (resources necessary to launch a war) gradually became a framework of cooperation open to the participation of other European countries.

The idea of arriving at a political end through an economic means was, of course, all but new. One should not forget that the humble beginnings of the European Union can be traced back to a time when the Americans were both willing and able to chaperone and guarantee such European

designs for peace through prosperity. As much as Paris was obsessed with figuring out a way to keep the Germans down, Washington was equally preoccupied with keeping the Russians out. Arm-twisting through the granting of economic aid was an effective way to keep the communists away from newly-formed governments in Western Europe and in any case, made it almost impossible for all involved to bite the hand that fed them. The insistence on this form of economic 'containment' (running in parallel with the containment designs of NATO) should come as no surprise, as the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of the continent, in 1948, had been devised by none other than General George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the US Army and later on, Secretary of Defence.

In the 1990s, the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall was a deluge which few had predicted. Necessity became again the driving force for change, with European integration becoming simultaneously deeper and wider.

In a brilliant paper published in *Foreign Affairs*, back in October 2012, Timothy Garton Ash made the case that the European project (which had perhaps hitherto enjoyed an 'en granaze' smoother process of furthering integration) began to go terribly wrong when European leaders hastily designed a flawed monetary union with no solid foundations, against the sound financial advice of the Bundesbank, if Kohl is to be believed. Yet European leaders proceeded to use an economic tool for political reasons and political reasons alone. Going through the minutes of successive meetings between Mitterand, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Kohl, Thatcher and the US Secretary of State James Baker, the story unfolds whereby the Germans wanted to show their exceptional commitment to European integration, as this served their national interest of achieving unification - this had to be achieved, for the first time in their history, not through 'blood and iron', but through regaining the trust of an international collection of friends and allies. On the other hand, Mitterand was only willing to concede to a re-unified gigantic next-door neighbor provided Germany committed itself to a monetary union which he thought would bind Germany and enable France to win some leverage over it. However, once the markets finally caught up with the politicians and beat them to the ground, a financial crisis spread like wildfire in the Eurozone and the rift between North and South became deeper, only this time it was the economic which became political.

At the same time that the Protestant Work Ethic of the north has focused its attentions on the anathema of poorer, debt-ridden member states, imposing German-like fiscal discipline on haughty southerners, a much sharper division between East and West has also begun to manifest, one that can no longer remain unnoticed. While much has been said about the growing democratic deficit of European institutions themselves, something which has perhaps led people to abstain en masse from recent Euro-elections, very little has been done to address the democratic deficit

evident inside the newly -emerged democracies of the former Eastern Bloc.

Geography is back with a vengeance, reminding us that a whole lot of new EU states, which had found themselves on the wrong part of the divide and whose accession had served to make the definition of Europe much wider 10 years ago, have –alas, lo and behold- an almost total lack of civic reflexes, weak civil society institutions and at best, a shaky rule of law. Having missed half a century of democratic development, they still do not stand much of a chance to experience it soon enough, as most of their elites are nothing but survivors of the slippery hierarchy of the former communist parties, who have now transformed themselves into the new establishment. Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic (with perhaps the notable exception of Poland) probably fit more the type of ‘managed democracies’ found in the post-Soviet Near Abroad than other EU polities.

In recent times, the replacement of statesmen by politicians has done more harm than good to the European project, which has come to resemble an abandoned orphan, whose parents have been duly replaced by reluctant nannies. Nonetheless, as the going gets tough, Europe really needs to get going, if it will stand any serious chance of survival. More rather than less of Europe is needed, but primarily Europe needs to decide what it wants to be and then, proceed and do it with conviction. As to who can be in the driving seat, the lessons of history dictate that transnational projects of this kind can survive only when they fulfill the national interest pursuits of the states involved. After all, no German leader should miss the point that in the next 20 years or so Germany will be a medium-sized power caught in a clash of titans, saved only by the pretensions that its leadership of a united Europe can afford.

Although Angela Merkel has so far “carried Europe on her shoulders”, as Hilary Clinton has pertinently pointed out, she has done so in such a clumsy fashion that has sent chills down the spines of many Europeans. Unlike Kohl who was fully aware of the implications of being the direct successor to Adolf Hitler as the Chancellor of a re-unified German state, Merkel seems to be missing the point of rule by consensus reached through congruence of national interest of the various players involved, preferring instead to resort to the role of the high-handed headmistress. Enter Jean-Claude Juncker, hailed to be the new president of the Commission, a seasoned backroom dealer with an affinity to get the job done whatever the cost involved. Although more often than not being dubbed a mediocrity, perhaps he is the less threatening broker who can master the necessary negotiating skills to strike behind-the-scene deals on behalf of Germany, while still understanding the need to ease tensions between north and south, promote democratization in the east and last but not least, put food on people’s tables. In an ever-evolving world, the EU has no other choice but to adapt or perish.