

Europe: rediscovering its federalist origins

For the last sixty years Europe has enabled its inhabitants to live in relative peace, freedom and prosperity. No individual Member State on its own would have had the necessary means to offer citizens the same level of comfort, security and stability. This does not detract from the fact that, today, Europe's limits are plain for all to see.

by Emma Bonino
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Even a committed believer in Europe such as myself has a hard time approving of the Europe we have today. If Europe had listened more carefully to the warnings and suggestions launched from all sides in recent years, we wouldn't be in our current position, with anti-European and populist tendencies threatening the core tenets of integration and coexistence.

And yet, there are still many voices in the world clamouring for "more Europe". Every day we see concrete proof of how the EU is still a powerful catalyst, attracting neighbouring countries to the east and south, with a view to future integration. But Europe's appeal to its own citizens is another matter, and the dream of its founding fathers seems to be gradually but inexorably evaporating. Too often, the European Union appears too self-involved compared to the fast-moving world around it. And it is increasingly associated with the imposition of austerity, which can lead to recession, unemployment and high levels of social tension if not combined with appropriate economic policies to spur growth.

One thing is clear: actions to safeguard the fundamental freedoms of democratic states cannot rely exclusively on ethical and civil principles; they must also spring from the need to guarantee the necessary security for development, economic exchanges and investment. We have known for some time now that the violation of fundamental rights goes hand-

in-hand with increased risks for businesses.

However, in order to be able to rebut accusations of applying double standards, it is important to ensure coherence between the external and internal dimensions of Europe. A civil country is judged on its laws but also on its ability to respect and enforce them. As Italians we cannot ignore the huge volume of legal cases pending against Italy before the European Court of Human Rights and the fact that we are one of the countries with the highest number of convictions. Most of these cases concern excessive trial length and overcrowded prisons.

We must therefore make determined efforts to contrast these 'serial' violations: our international credibility is at stake. How can we preach respect for universal values abroad if we're among the countries with the longest rap sheet from the European Court of Human Rights? After all, the trouble we're encountering in attracting foreign investments is certainly linked to our inability to put our own house in order. How many foreign investors have ruled out Italy due to the length of its civil trials? How many have been deterred by legal ambiguities and lack of transparency?

So, it is in our own best interests to react to all these trends. In order to defend Europe, and its fundamental values, we need to reclaim the original sense of the European project, updating it to meet the challenges posed by the early 21st century. Yet no solution will be credible without a political dimension that fully em-

braces the entire European architecture. We therefore need a federal solution.

My support for a prospective United States of Europe is not driven by ideology, but by a careful assessment of costs and benefits. I know of no alternative to federalism that might allow 500 million people – from different nations, cultures, religions and speaking a multitude of languages – to live together in freedom while maintaining their diversity. Especially in terms of institutions’ efficacy in answering citizens’ demands for wellbeing and security and the need to provide a common sense of belonging within a ‘viable’ model that must continue to be inclusive, or crumble. If anyone knows of a better system, please speak up.

A couple of years ago I proposed a form of ‘light federalism’, an institutional model that requires no more than 5% of Europe’s GDP to fund basic governmental functions like foreign policy and security, scientific research and major infrastructure networks. Unfortunately, the majority of European governments are reluctant to go down this route, and the negative consequences of this indecision are clear to see: European-level initiatives remain fragmented and ineffective, resources are wasted and Europe risks becoming increasingly irrelevant.

2014 marks the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. We must not forget what happened to European countries when



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nationalism and demagoguery prevailed. If Europe does not resolve the problems caused by the recession/populism dichotomy, we risk losing everything we have achieved so far. The European Parliamentary elections in 2014 are therefore a crucial test: if we want to avoid populist parties gaining extensive support, we must put federal Europe at the heart of the election campaign.

If we embrace a new vision that fully involves our citizens and our governments, we can trigger a new phase of reconstruction and growth, fostering the democratic legitimacy of the European project and the EU’s role as a global player. For Italy – which takes over the rotating presidency of the EU in the second half of 2014 – this will mean the chance to make its voice heard and return to being a full-fledged protagonist in the process of European integration, in line with its natural historical vocation. **E**

“I don’t know of any alternative system that could hope to replace federalism and still enable 500 million people of different nationalities, different cultures, religions and languages, to live together freely while preserving their diversity”.