

The Future of Europe

The Reform of the Eurozone and The Deepening of Political Union

Coordinators

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



Lisboa | 2017

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Ficha Técnica / Datasheet

Título / Title:

The Future of Europe: The Reform of the Eurozone and The Deepening of Political Union

Coordenadores / Coordinators:

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Edição / Edition:

AAFDL
Alameda da Universidade
1649-014 Lisboa
Portugal

ISBN:

978-972-629-176-3

Depósito Legal:

440948 | 18

Dezembro | 2017

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Crisis in Europe or Europe in crisis?: A stronger Europe as a solution

Susana Sanz Caballero*

1. Introduction

On 2014 the concern was the future of the EU and how to recover from the economic and financial crisis. Three years later, those concerns are still on the table and, in addition, Europe is facing new challenges. Among them, mention should be made to the flow of refugees and migrants fleeing from armed conflict, prosecution or in search of a better life, a sensitive yet unresolved question for the EU and its member States. Neither the EU member States nor the EU institutions have been so far at the height of the circumstances. In times of troubled national governments, rise of populism movements, manifest breach of EU rules by member States that also fail to honor European values, increasing lack of solidarity and weak European institutions, the EU is at risk of failing to provide the adequate answer. Not to mention the consequences of the Brexit.

The answer to these challenges should be “More Europe” and a “Stronger Europe”. Today, as in previous “dark” periods of the European construction, the solution can only be to take steps forward in the European project instead of steps backwards. The solution has to be a communitarian one, at the EU level and with high mindedness.

Some years ago, the invocation of a two-speeds Europe was felt as an anathema. Today, it seems to be the only option for a viable EU. The financial crisis already showed –and the current humanitarian and political crisis is deepening in this direction– that in a period of weak support for supranational ideas and in a period of a steadily withdrawal of member States towards their own national constituencies and internal

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policies, member States are not precisely eager to bet for a strong Europe. However, the fact is indeed that we need not only more Europe but a stronger Europe to overcome this situation. And we need it more than ever.

The Lisbon Treaty followed the path that Nice had already opened of giving more prominence to member States views within the EU, especially through the European Council. Member States' interests are nowadays over-represented whereas the institution that represents the common interest is progressively losing power. Europe needs a strong Commission with new binding (exclusive?) competences in many areas including the economy, migration and asylum policies. In the same way that we were wrong to try to build an economic and monetary union without creating and encompassing a banking union, we are now wrong pretending to create a space without internal borders if we are to maintain at the same time 27 different migration regimes, 27 disconnected employment systems and 27 different asylum procedures (the UK is excluded from this count).

Despite some national reservations towards the Treaties' obligation to achieve an ever-closer Union –that hopefully will not have a contagious effect in other member States–, the only way to overcome, on the one hand, citizens' disaffection concerning both the European project and national governments and, on the other hand, the European institutions' meager results, is through a deepening of the European project. The proposals are the following: deepening of the European political project, deepening of the European EMU project and deepening of the European social project and of European values.

2. Deepening of the European political project

The current political crisis will never be solved if neither member States nor European citizens trust the EU. And trusting the EU means transferring more powers to those European institutions which better represent what unites us, instead of to those that represent national interests. Partisan national interests are at the origin of the type of measures and decisions that are being taken today in every field: economic, monetary, political, humanitarian... The lack of political momentum and the ineffectiveness of the EU are two clear consequences of this situation.

There is a need to legitimize and democratize the European institutions, to go back to a more communitarian institutional framework. Citizenry should also obtain guarantees that European institutions and EU agents are not spoiling money and are free from corruption. The EU needs competences and tools to fight against member States' corruption, too. European governance should be changed in order to respond to citizens' expectations.

Some of the proposed measures to achieve these goals have to do with the need of a change in the powers attributed to the different European institutions. To start with, the European Council was born to give general orientations but it has drifted towards an arrogant decision-making superpower capable of imposing its views to the rest of institutions without the possibility for the others to counterbalance the European Council's (often deceiving) views. Moreover, the existence itself of this institution beside that of the Council of Ministers leans the balance too much towards the intergovernmental side of the EU. The European Council should simply be amortized.

Conversely, the Commission should resume some powers it has lost with the last Treaty reforms and it should also gain some others. It is crucial that the Commission recuperates its central role in the institutional architecture of the EU. It should become the real government of Europe. The President of the Commission should be chosen democratically. He/she should be able to form own government from members of the European Parliament, assuring a geographical representation of the EU but without the need to represent the member States governments' political colors. The President of the Commission should also act as President of the EU and should ensure the external representation of the EU.

As for the European Parliament, it has to be perceived by citizens as the true legislator. It also needs to improve its working methods and composition. Some tentative ideas are the following: to give the Parliament more decisive normative power compared to the Council, to bet for single and open lists at European scale and to consolidate true European political groups. The Parliament's attitude itself should change to avoid being perceived as an exotic, circus-type forum where absenteeism and privileges are the general rule.

In the worst historical moments of the European construction, the Court of Justice has shown its best supranational face. The EU owes to the Court the settling of principles such as the primacy of EU Law, the autonomy of the EU legal order, the direct effect or the protection of fundamental rights. The Court has always made a stand for political integration. However, in recent times it has been quite inhibitionist and self-restrained, but also technocratic and jealous of its own prerogatives. We would ask for a simplification of the judicial remedies before the CJEU and of the Court's functioning. We should also be able to overcome the rigid and immovable approach that the Court has shown in its advisory opinion 2/2013 concerning the EU's accession to the ECHR.

All member States should agree on the proposal to strengthen the EU. Otherwise, a group of core member-States should try to lead the rest by being the (first) ones to apply more communitarian policies in any EU field of competences.

3. Deepening of the European EMU project

The crisis showed that the economic and monetary union cannot work properly if not followed by a tax and banking union. There is a need for a further cession of powers from the member States towards the EU, if need be, through a reform of the Treaties. Concerning the project for a fiscal union, nowadays each member-State has its own tax policy and this produces distortion and market unevenness. Among the avenues for this tax union, mention can be made to the harmonization of direct taxes and the common fight against tax havens. With regard to the banking union, the accent should be put especially on the further powers that the European Central Bank needs in order to develop the EMU. We need to grant a total and complete independence of the ECB in decision-making. We need new competences for the ECB concerning the issuance of European debt. The ECB should have the power to inject money in the Eurozone. The ECB should be able to stimulate the markets instead of only focalizing on austerity measures. It should work more clearly for the stimulation of the economy. There is also a need to reinforce the Commission's role in the coordination of national employment policies. Finally, funds to fight against unemployment should be enlarged.

4. Deepening of the European social project and of European values

The financial crisis did away with many fundamental economic rights and social achievements Europeans were so proud of social aids, unemployment allowances, subsidized housing, decent pension schemes, education scholarships, etc. There is a need to put an end to austerity policies in Europe. The new stimulus policies should recover those social measures and economic rights that individuals enjoyed before the crisis, if need be, through harmonization of national norms in labor, education, social security and housing and social matters, in general. The EU has to be again a project of social justice, and of social inclusion.

But lately, it is not only the financial crisis that is curtailing our social values, but also the ever increasing lack of solidarity towards migration movements and refugees flows towards Europe. This new circumstance put against the ropes the social and human rights values that, according to article 2 TEU, are the foundation of the European Union. In case of prosecution or danger for the life or integrity of the person, international legality demands us to respond in a humanitarian way, not only because of solidarity or tolerance but because of justice and human rights' motivations. However, so far European institutions have been unable to cope with the problem of providing access to protection to asylum seekers. Member States, themselves, have participated in a sort of shameful "every man for himself" vaudeville.

In the absence of a robust European common asylum system, States now deploy their own internal practices, which are often incoherent with those in the neighbor State, and are most of times also unsupportive. Our recommendation, if need be with a reform of the Treaties, would be to turn migration and asylum policies into an exclusive competence of the EU, to transform the EASO into an executive agency with compulsory powers able to mandate over national asylum offices, and to create a homogenous and harmonized European asylum framework with a new and generous European asylum code that replaces all the current Regulations and Directives from the Dublin system. This code should ensure that member States provide the same standard of protection and reception measures to any refugee regardless of the European State where he/she is located. The EASO should be given powers to deal with

individual complaints in asylum cases or, alternatively, an asylum court should be added to the CJEU. Member States of the EU should also facilitate the introduction of extra-territorial asylum requests to avoid risking lives. This could be done by authorizing the member States' diplomatic missions in third safe countries to accept and manage these requests.

5. Conclusion

The EU is still today experiencing a crisis at several levels –or maybe it is suffering from several and different crisis at the same time. There is still a financial crisis under way that hits the European social model and has progressively led to a disaffection of European citizens towards the current model of European construction. There is also a humanitarian crisis since the EU is unable to respond to the challenge of giving access to asylum seekers as well as to ensure them protection, shelter and a decent standard of living while their asylum demands are solved. Moreover, there is also an institutional crisis that prevents the correct and efficient functioning of the EU, since its most supranational institutions lack the competences to overcome the problems that Europe is facing. There is a political crisis too, that may lead to a two-speed EU. On top of that –o maybe as a result– there is also a crisis of European values, since the human rights basis that we always believed was the foundation of the EU, are nowadays being questioned due, among others, to the curtail of socio-economic rights. To add more threats to this scenario, one of the members of the EU has decided to withdraw from the common European project that the EU represents.

The answer to these challenges cannot be the return of States to their national interests to the detriment of the European common interest. On the contrary, what we need is more Europe (and a better and stronger Europe) to overcome the serious defiance that all these economic, financial, fiscal, banking, social, political, humanitarian an institutional challenges suppose for the future of an ever-closer Union. New (and clear) competences should be transferred to the EU in these fields and, in case of lack of consensus, initially core member States should lead the others.

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