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To deceive oneself, or to try to deceive public opinion, as the EU heads of state and of government tried to do in Brussels on June 21-22, that Europe's relaunch depends on the adoption of a "reform treaty", which may be more or less simplified than the constitutional treaty, is to underestimate the depth of the causes of Europe's impotence. This impotence is rooted in the fact that the process of European unification, within the framework of the European Union, has run out of steam, as is clear from the deterioration of relations between its member states, who are becoming less and less attached to a European outlook of reciprocal integration and more and more dependent on the military, energy and commercial and monetary policy decisions taken by the USA, by Russia (once again), and now by China too.

The disturbing thing – illustrated by the course and outcome of the latest European Council – is that the Europeans, even though their inaction is hastening the decline of national politics and reducing their political credibility on the international stage, seem unwilling, or unable, to start up a new phase that would give the unification project a future once more. And it explains the disdain with which (in a manner reminiscent of the way in which the kings of France and Spain treated the ambassadors from the still rich, but already powerless, Italian states of the sixteenth century, as recorded by Machiavelli in his writings) the representatives of the large, non-European continental states are increasingly tending to treat the emissaries of the European institutions or of the single European states.

In the light of all this, it is as well to leave it to the technocrats to pore over the new treaty's presumed advances and regressions, its inevitable leftovers and application protocols, and give the governments and their experts the task of undoing the institutional mess that they themselves have helped to create. The power question that needs to be resolved is a different one: it is a question of creating as soon as possible the minimum European power needed to get the European countries out of the downward spiral that they entered at start of the 1990s and which has left them increasingly weak and insignificant.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, and following their decision to create the single currency, western Europe's politicians and governments, primarily those of its founding member states, faced two alternatives: either to complete a difficult but possible task, that of founding a European federation, or to submit to the events that were moving in the direction of enlargement of Europe to the continent's central and eastern countries, and bringing with them the impossible problem of creating institutions for a boundless European community. Choosing the first option would have meant taking the brave and farsighted decision to found an initial European federal core. But this option was not chosen, and this why the Europeans are now forced to submit, passively, to the consequences both of the watering down of the EU into a free trade area, and of the opening up of the national markets in the absence of a European government in the economic and monetary sphere.

Responsibility for that grave political error, which as time goes on, risks becoming a grave historical error, must be shouldered above all by the governments and politicians of Europe's founding member states, to whom it should already have been obvious that the federation was no longer an objective for the future, to be pursued after goodness knows what further advances had been made and when time was somehow riper for it: the federal leap forward in the process of European integration was, at the end of the 1990s – as indeed it is, even more so, today –, the means, the only means, of tackling the global challenges that the European countries faced and continue to face. The events of recent years have confirmed the gravity of that error and highlighted the contradictions of a framework that wants to remain unitary

on a formal level, but is, in fact, divided in all the crucial areas. As shown by the differentiated integration begun in various fields and the failure to maintain commitments, as in the case of the stability pact, the European Union, as it is, is incapable either of developing in a homogenous and synchronised manner, or of evolving in the direction of a federation. Furthermore, the fact that the geopolitical visions of the two countries central to Europe's future, France and Germany, have started to diverge as a result of the imminence of new global balances and power relations – a divergence illustrated by the dubious management of the Airbus, Galileo Euronext crises and also by the attempts of the Germans and French to carve out a special role for themselves in, respectively, central-eastern Europe and in the Middle East – proves that time is working *against* not *for* European unity.

It has been clear, since the 1950s, what it will take to turn the tide; then, the choice between building a large or a small Europe amounted to choice between planning a Europe with or without one of its states: the United Kingdom. Today the situation only appears more complex, because, in reality, the crux of the problem is still the same: Europe's founding member states – starting with France, Germany, Italy and Belgium –, where the governments and public opinion are historically in favour of a more united Europe that has the capacity to act, should immediately enter into a binding federal pact and convene a European constituent assembly with the task of drawing up the constitution of a European federal state.

And it would not take long to do this: once the federal pact were approved, the constitution of the new Europe could be drawn up in the space of a few months. And this could be followed, within a similar space of time, by its ratification by the various states and the start of the process of creating the organs for which it makes provision, organs which, together with those of the European union, would then have the task of redefining relations between their respective institutions. In short, by 2009, we could already see the birth of an initial core of a European federal state, open to whoever should want to join it at a later stage. It is worth pointing out that putting this on the table as a concrete prospect would do far more than any solemn declaration, act or protocol can to encourage a more ambitious approach to the negotiation of the institutional framework of the enlarged EU – it certainly could not divide what is already divided, which is the fear of those who are more interested in defending the fragile national sovereignties than in creating Europe, but could only show the real path to unity. Indeed, for the first time since German reunification, the EU would be required to review its internal relations in the face of the creation of a new state born of the unification, not the disintegration, of pre-existing states. This would at last correspond to a real launch, in facts as opposed to words, of the process of managing the enlargement and deepening of post-Cold War Europe.

It is almost certain that the states and politicians that should be heading this initiative lack the courage and the will to take such a decision immediately. This does not alter the fact that it is their duty to take it, and that it is a choice that depends on them alone. It is thus entirely predictable that from now until the time that Europe's founding member states, or some of them, assume this responsibility, the enemies of Europe (those whose clear objective it is to defend national sovereignty and national powers) will be ideally placed to join forces, to water down still further the process of European integration, and to empty of all form and substance everything that even just hints at the idea of the development of a European power (as they have done already, with their corruption of the words Union and constitution).

This is certainly not to say that the time left for building Europe has run out altogether; rather we are saying that the Europeans need to come to the realisation, and urgently, that failure to go beyond the existing framework will leave them entirely unable to progress further towards the construction of a European power endowed with the capacity to decide and to act. But for this realisation to come, there will have to be, right now, a recognition and condemnation of the foolish and misleading enthusiasm stirred up by the new treaty, and the start of a new battle to create the first core of a European federal state.

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