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Italy's current political and economic crisis rings alarm bells for all Europeans, and it would be a serious mistake to see it as just another of the many difficult and paradoxical moments that this country has known in the course of decades spent trailing behind the world's more advanced societies. Italy's present crisis is nothing other than the most obvious manifestation of the general reversal of the European situation, a reversal rooted in the fact that, in spite of fifty years of integration, Europe continues to be divided, impotent and irresponsible.

Politics, trapped in the national framework, is incapable of rising to the challenges presented by the new world situation; it is also unable to guarantee the citizens either security – Europe's security now depends on the decisions of the American superpower whose interests have long since ceased to coincide with those of the Europeans –, or a future founded on progress. Our societies are now showing signs that they are declining and crumbling. Furthermore, the evident crisis of democracy, particularly acute in countries like Italy – and Belgium –, is not sparing the bigger players either: France and Germany are, increasingly, struggling with the problem of dwindling public support for their institutions and representatives. And what is most disturbing is the fact that politics, in the face of this situation, is coming up with responses geared not towards the creation of a European sovereign power, but rather towards a return to more or less overt forms of nationalism. Even Europe's founding member states, whose collaboration gave rise to all the initiatives that have allowed the process of European integration to advance as far as the creation of the single currency, today show an unprecedented level of division and are driven by divergent interests. We see this in, among other things, the growing sources of tension between France and Germany, and the fact that the political formulas that once corresponded to precise objectives in the pursuit of deeper European integration today have a false and paradoxical ring. Take, for example, the name "European Union": in the 1970s and 1980s this definition corresponded to an objective considered synonymous with political union; today, if we think of the most fundamental policy areas, what it actually covers is a "non-union" of states.

All this places at serious risk the very survival, in the medium term, of the European Union. It is a risk that the various sectors of public opinion and the political class tend to underestimate, because they fail to appreciate the crucial role played by global factors, after the end of the Second World War, in the creation of a framework of peace and then in the guaranteeing of the stable security that proved crucial to the rebirth of the European continent. Had there been no real sharing of interests in the economic and commercial spheres, and in foreign and military policy, between the two sides of the Atlantic and no convergence of the national politics of the two key countries, France and Germany, it would not have been possible to achieve what has been achieved in the direction of the *ever closer union among the peoples of Europe*, deliberately specified in the Treaties of Rome.

It is, therefore, a dangerous illusion to believe that reforms at national level, be they of the constitutions and electoral laws or of the social model, are the way to overcome the problems that currently afflict the European states. Not because such reforms are not needed in order to respond to the challenges created by today's huge economic and social upheavals, but because, if brought about in a purely national setting, they are

bound to be ineffective and unable either to get to the root causes of the crisis or to give society a boost in the shape of a credible project for the future; as a result, they can only amount to a defensive reaction serving to hold in check the most urgent problems. Only if the narrow, national perspective can be overcome can there be any hope of curing the European countries' ills. And it will not be overcome until it is realised that the time for taking small steps in the process of European integration is definitively over and that, to be real and credible, Europe's relaunch must stem from the abandonment both of the rationale of institutional reform of the twenty-seven-member Union and of the quest for *consensus among all* the member states.

Similarly, now is no longer the time for promoting enhanced cooperations in specific sectors between states that intend to retain their national sovereignty, or for creating new *directoires* that only deepen the divisions within the Union. Rather, it is time to take action to shift the framework of power and the political struggle from the nations to Europe through the creation of a new European sovereign power, based on the consensus of the citizens of all those countries ready to unite in a new state, which must necessarily be a federal state. It is in this regard that the political and social forces that genuinely care about the future of their respective countries can and must play an important role, guiding the debate, stripping away the ambiguities, and urging the governments and national institutions to make courageous choices. Moreover, it seems increasingly clear that their capacity to fulfil this role will depend on the extent to which they prove able to denounce openly the misconception under which the Europeans are being allowed to labour, namely the idea that a European system of government already exists and that it only needs to be reformed. It would be fatal to go on confounding – be it deliberately, in order to conserve national powers, or simply through lack of awareness or superficiality – the current European system, characterised by varying degrees of complexity and interdependence, but firmly founded on the *voluntary* cooperation among states in the ambit of the EU institutions, with a true supranational state system.

In short, the biggest political problem for the Europeans today is that of endeavouring to create a *new* power, a federal state that, given the contradictions inherent in a Europe of twenty-seven or more, can be established only among a limited number of states, Europe's founding member states first and foremost.

Even though the new Italian government that will come out of the forthcoming elections will struggle – on account of the country's current political and economic crisis – to find the strength and credibility needed to play an active role in promoting (particularly vis-à-vis France and Germany) this kind of turnabout in thinking on Europe's future, the fact remains that the political forces and public opinion in Italy must, as quickly as possible, espouse this design and prepare to support it whenever and wherever the opportunity to do so arises. While it falls to France and Germany, first of all, to take the initiative in this direction, Italy's role is, in fact, to offer support, and to demonstrate the urgent need for a federal leap forward in the process of European integration.

And this is a role that must, increasingly, be reflected in a determination to restart the building of Europe on democratic foundations through the convening of a constituent assembly (to be elected in those countries that will have signed and ratified an agreement to create a federal union) entrusted with the task of drawing up the constitution of the nascent federal European state, which will remain open to all those states that should, subsequently, wish to be part of it. All the rest, unfortunately, is only Europeanist rhetoric, and it will never save our states from their current slide into decline.

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