

## “United Citizens of Europe:” the way ahead to a democratic political Union

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The economic and financial crisis still looming on the euro zone showed a deficit at the European level, which affects not only the question of how Europe functions, from the point of view of the “decision-making process,” but also the problem of policy choices, namely the issue of European government of phenomena and dynamics with high social impact in regard to the interests and needs of the people at large living under the Union’s flag. In essence, the issue of the “decision-making power,” together with the political agenda and its democratic setting at European level.

**Who is governing in Europe?** Such issue, about the European authority to whom confer decision-making power, it hardly finds a center of gravity upon which to settle down. It continues to oscillate between formulas sometimes rather vague or rhetorical of “multi-level governance,” on one side, and, on the other, the requirements for the definition and fulfillment of a truly common interest, clearly identified, in a transparent way and, above all, on the basis of a fully democratic decision-making method. One may object that it is like the case of a dog chasing its tail. There is no (federal) European government simply because there is not any federation yet. But, as shown in general by the history of the integration process (starting since the early 1970s), and in particular by the financial (sovereign debt and banking) crisis, this is partially true, and probably totally untrue in the case of the euro zone. **Each time a “deficit of government” at European level has occurred, under the pressure of circumstances, it has been filled in, one way or another, with the initiative of the European Council, acting as a kind of “gouvernement européen provisoire;”** as already envisaged by Jean Monnet, in his *Mémoires*, clearly pointing out the advantages as well as the inconveniences of the intergovernmental method.

All of this raises questions of legitimacy and credibility of politics in Europe, concerning both European institutions and national governments, as well. Hence the disorientation of public opinion put in front of a scenario where various players are acting: European Council, Commission, Eurogroup, European Central Bank, heads of national government (as in the case of the so-called duo “Merkozy”, more recently replicated in the double speech held by the couple Merkel-Hollande in the European Parliament). Not to mention, furthermore, international authorities (the International Monetary Fund, as part of the “troika”).

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The resulting opacity, however due to the undoubted complexity of the European political-institutional architecture, yet precludes to see and deal with in a clear way some fundamental issues. **Two main issues come to the fore.**

First, the **issue of “government,”** as a form of European statehood, to which assign transfers of sovereignty, within a framework that respects the fundamental principles of any democracy: the **principle of separation of powers** (who decides what), and the **principle of political accountability** (who responds of what and before whom).

Second, the **issue of a “European political space,”** where it becomes of crucial importance the **relationship between sovereignty and citizenship**, in terms of transparent and democratic manner of deliberation, to the extent that any exercise of decision-making power at European level affects directly the living conditions of nationals as European citizens too. Both issues are closely intertwined with the Union’s legitimacy question, in terms of the **democratic unitary foundation** linked to the **sovereignty of EU citizens.**

Namely: **to what extent the EU Treaty's statement, according to which the "functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy," is to be taken seriously?**

This is a question of great practical consequences, in order to push ahead with political integration of Europe, **via a European Parliament (EP) "composed of representatives of the Union's citizens."** In the present institutional framework, it is evident the significance of a strong determination by the EP, being the **first and foremost voice of the EU citizens** (as already envisaged by Altiero Spinelli in his project of Union's Treaty), to fully play its role. That voice will have to be heard as the voice of the majority or the opposition, as may be the case, to uphold or withhold confidence in the Commission, and to exercise political control over its action. In this regard it is proposed that "the Commission's accountability to Parliament should be strengthened through the Union's annual and multiannual programming as well as by creating symmetry between the majorities required for the election of the President of the Commission and for the motion of censure" (EP 2013/2130(INI)).

If the EP and the Commission want to move together with determination towards a truly political Europe, as the times require, this means that decision-making power must lie with a government of Europe, under parliamentary control. Accordingly, the majority and opposition voices within the EP and, by and large, the interaction between Parliament and Commission will have to give shape, especially in terms of difference of views with the heads of state and government or ministries sitting in the Council, to a **political space of debate and confrontation, in order to make citizens more sensitive, informed and keen to form their opinion on major European affairs.** This change of pace is needed in order to counteract the trend that, so far, has seen the European Council reserving to itself the role as a principal agent of the Union's government and an agenda setter in policy priorities and legislative choices. A trend that has deeply affected and changed the nature and role of the Commission, by reducing it to a kind of "secretariat" of the Council, in charge of carrying out its decisions. With the consequent perception, at least by the public, that accentuates the predominantly "technical" (and "technocratic") character of the Commission powers, acting in a way suited more to its bureaucratic function of ensuring the application of the Treaties, rather than its political function of promoting the Union's general interest. It is no longer time of an alleged "neutrality" of the Commission, with regard to the definition and implementation of public policies directly affecting people's living conditions, in view of an abstract and disembodied Union's general interest, which is in reality a result of a compromise negotiated in the European Council between national governments, if not imposed inside and outside Council's closed doors by the prevailing bargaining power of some government over others.

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There seems to be no way out for the future of Europe, under existing treaties or in the light of their revision, that could really work without curing the main cause of the growing distrust of the people in the European project, by **reconciling and reconnecting citizens with this project.** Because **what is at stake is precisely the democratic government of Europe** as such, through institutions common to a **constitutional order**, of which **the Union's citizenship is the foundation, "at the heart" of the Union** (as spelt out in the Preamble of EU Charter of Fundamental Rights).

The enhancing of the Union's democratic legitimacy will bring about a new political dimension on the European inter-institutional agenda.

To this regard, the true meaning of the EU Treaty's provisions contained in Articles 10 to 12 lies in the fact that they give shape to a **basic core of "constitutional principles,"** according to and in compliance with which **Europe is to be governed in the name and interest of its citizens.** A proper reading of such provisions is in contrast with the role taken by the European Council as "governing body" of the Union, with an almost exclusive decision-making power, though formally kept out from the decision-making process. This

contrast and the resulting contradiction clearly point at the need of a **rebalancing of power, in line with the core principles of representative democracy at the basis of the Union's functioning**. Such need will have to be ranked high in the politico-institutional agenda of the Parliament and Commission, alike.

In this respect, to put the issue of a democratic government of Europe at the top of new political agenda for the future of the Union, it will really mean to put at the center of the European public space the question of how to get an active and informed consent on the part of the people, the citizens, in terms of readability, accountability and political credibility of the decisions taken, as one say, "in Brussels.

Indeed, **the battle for a political Union, democratically founded, is to be fought at grass-root level, on territories and among people. But it must be won at the top of the Union's institutional/decisional framework. Where Commission and Parliament will have to fully play each one its own role, being inspired by the visionary spirit of their respective noble fathers: Monnet and Spinelli, back again, but together!**

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