



Institute for European  
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## **The Faults of Italian Europeanism**

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Many Italians are convinced that Italy has a problem with Europe. One might be tempted to respond: “They are not the only ones.” However, the issue deserves a deeper reflection. The available surveys show a notable difference in the attitude of public opinion towards the European Union in the various member countries. They also tell us that these attitudes are rather constant or evolve rather slowly. Italy is an exception; in no other country do opinions show such rapid and extensive changes. Citizens’ attitudes towards the EU inevitably reflect the reaction to what the EU does (or does not do), but also a deeper factor: the perception of what the EU is. The two factors inevitably influence each other and I am led to believe that the second is more important than the first.

The European Union, in which we have lived for 70 years and which after Brexit no one seems willing to leave, was born on two pillars. The first is a shared aspiration based on a series of needs: to overcome the fratricidal wars of recent centuries, but also the awareness that our continent, once the driving force of history, now runs a serious risk of ending up on the sidelines. The nightmare that looms over us all is of another decline of Rome; without even the certainty that the new “Dark Ages” will be more merciful than the previous ones. The second pillar, more than a project, is a method at the service of aspiration. Born from the genius of Jean Monnet, it consists of a gradual sharing of sovereignty for the benefit of common institutions. It is a process that has produced the extraordinary results that are before our eyes, but in which the member states retain the ultimate key to full sovereignty. In other words, Monnet embarked us on an adventure whose destination he carefully avoided defining: what kind of “ever closer union”, as the treaties define it, do we want to build? All this in contrast to the 13 American colonies that, freed from the dominion of King George, established in Philadelphia in 1787 the outlines of a “more perfect Union” by equipping themselves with real federal institutions. In truth, it is a union that was not perfect enough to avoid a civil war and the fractures that we still witness, but it is still much more solid than the path towards an imprecise destination that the Europeans have undertaken.

The consequence of Monnet's choice was to introduce into the process the constant threat of precariousness, the risk of not being present at the next appointment with history; above all, it is a project by definition devoid of a complete and shared narrative. The inevitable result was that each member country provided its own narrative. More than a vision of Europe, they developed a vision of themselves in Europe. No member state would fully recognize itself in J. F. Kennedy's famous appeal to Americans: "Ask not what America can do for you, but what you can do for America." In evaluating these different visions, it is good to resist the easy temptation to establish clear lines of demarcation, such as "more or less integration". This is a factor that certainly played a role in the troubled British affair that led to Brexit and that is perhaps today at the centre of the "Hungarian question", but these are isolated phenomena. In almost all other cases, national narratives consciously place themselves within the Monnettian logic, but with accents and priorities that can be very different. An in-depth analysis would take us very far. Just think of the position of small countries, by definition the main consumers of peace and stability, but also jealous of their own identity. This is a particularly acute problem for the Nordic countries, deeply convinced of the superiority of their political and social model. It has created identity reactions that are perhaps now changing in the face of the discovery of the role that Europe can play as a bulwark against the renewed Russian threat. Or think of Germany's particularity, whose Europeanism is obsessed with the sacredness of the rules in a Europe that must first of all be the definitive seal of an immense tragedy. Finally, there is French Europeanism, which simultaneously considers itself, and rightly so, the architect and the center of the project but which, contaminated by elements of Gaullism, does not cease to claim its own exception within it. The sharing of sovereignty among EU member states becomes for the French first of all a means to strengthen a national sovereignty that they perceive as increasingly fragile. This set of discordant melodies inevitably creates problems, misunderstandings, bad feelings and is certainly at the origin of the exasperating slowness of the European process. However, the awareness of the need for compromise always prevails.

And where is Italy in all this? The Europeanism of the other member countries is, as we have just seen, endowed with notable variations, but it is the child of the Monnettian method. Italy's anomaly, instead, lies in the fact that its Europeanism has been nourished by a different cultural source. For Italians there is no doubt that, if Europe must be, it will be federal. Italian

Europeanism is not the child of Monnet but of Altiero Spinelli and the Ventotene Manifesto. In other words, it derives from that federalist thought that overturns Monnet's hypothesis by placing the definition of the final destination as the premise of the process. In no other country is the federalist option at the center of Europeanist culture as in Italy. This also explains the obsession of many Italian analyses of European events with distinguishing the “intergovernmental” elements from the “community” ones; the latter being seen as part of the path towards a federal union without considering that in the Monnetian perspective the two moments are often the condition of each other. Elsewhere, the tendency to consider federation as a possible perspective, but in a distant future, or to see European integration as a completely original model - an Unidentified Political Object (OPNI), as Jacques Delors called it - is more widespread.

Yet Italy, one of the founding countries of the EU, has always played a very active role within the institutions and has often contributed significantly to the progress made. We could perhaps define Italian Europeanism as a baroque melody with a basso continuo. The basso continuo is federalism, the element that gives unity and continuity to the whole. This allows a country that emerged from a nationalist adventure that turned into a tragedy to sublimate its search for a new identity in Europe. The national identity that Italians seemed to want to escape from was at the same time incomplete but also too narrow for a people that preserves moments of universality in their collective memory; a universality that goes beyond the question of being or not having been a “nation”. The desire to escape from the nation clashes with the reality of a very strong identity; it is sometimes fragmented in many regional realities, which however all express a sense of “exceptionalism” that is second to none.

How did we deal with the contradiction? By resorting to one of the main qualities of the Italian people: pragmatism. The basso continuo of federalism corresponded to the melody and counterpoint of the wisdom of a political class that was eager, first and foremost, to promote the peaceful integration of the country into the community of democratic nations. It was assisted in this by some highly valuable administrative centers, such as the Bank of Italy and one of the best diplomatic corps in Europe. The mechanism worked for a long time and to everyone's great advantage. It even managed to create national unity around this conception of Europe, including a communist party eager to escape from the Soviet trap. The federalist approach was all the more

natural for the Italian communists since their evolution was largely personally inspired by the author of the Ventotene Manifesto.

One might say, what harm is there in being federalists? Absolutely none, on the contrary. However, the price of placing federalism as the interpretative key of the entire process was to create in the conscience of Italians the feeling that the real Europe, that of Monnet, was not truly theirs: it was a form of earthly Jerusalem, when what really matters is the celestial one. This balance lasted a long time, but it was precarious. First of all, it made it possible to compensate with a strong pro-European narrative the frequent practice of disregarding European rules, especially but not only in matters of public finance. It is a contradiction that became unsustainable with the completion of the single market and especially with the advent of the euro. The other element of crisis is due to the collapse of the political balances that had characterized the so-called "First Republic". The party system that had played the basso continuo partly dissolved precisely at the moment in which European integration entered a more difficult phase, touching the heart of sovereignty: the currency, defense, immigration. Once the lid on the long-ignored European constraints was lifted, public opinion discovered a Europe that brought needs and not just benefits. Furthermore, deprived of the authors of the original narrative, great confusion reigned in the political space. Some will remember with dismay Matteo Renzi who, after having invited Angela Merkel and François Hollande on a highly symbolic cruise off the coast of Ventotene, thought it a good idea to show his irritation at a European decision by eliminating the traditional European flag from his press conferences and appearing surrounded only by tricolours. In the end, the space was inevitably partly occupied by populist movements for which it was natural to brandish the long-denied banner of "national interest". The paradox was that those in the baroque orchestra who had been tasked with playing the melody had in reality constantly pursued the national interest, often with great profit; the basso continuo, however, always required declaring that it coincided by definition with European interest. The populists, claiming the national interest in the face of those who had subjected themselves to a supposed European interest that was in reality that of Italy's competitors, thus occupied a space that had been guiltily and long left empty by the official narrative. Some eminent pro-Europeans like Carlo Azeglio Ciampi who led Italy into the euro, but also who restored the national anthem and the tricolour to be honoured alongside the anthem and flag of Europe, had in truth

understood the danger of separating patriotism and Europeanism, the nation and Europe. However, it was perhaps too late to avoid the populist tide.

As in other countries and as had happened in Great Britain, the populists, or as they are often called, the sovereignists, could have ridden the tiger of declared anti-Europeanism. The temptation, however, clashed on the one hand with the obvious and very instructive failure of Brexit, and on the other hand, with the unexpected strength of the federalist basso continuo in the popular conscience. The way out was found by declaring that the federalist solution would perhaps be the best, but since it is not possible and the current system works mainly to the advantage of others, all that remains is to loosen the constraints and reduce the degree of integration. It is a rhetoric that finds nourishment in the constant Italian tendency towards the “Calimero complex”: that of the partner systematically rejected and sacrificed by the powerful. The polls indicate that this new narrative seems to work. However, it is just as precarious as the traditional one. On the one hand, even if the federalist perspective is indeed uncertain and in any case very distant, important federal elements already exist in the European system and are often precisely those that correspond to Italy’s “national interest”. On the other hand, everyday reality shows that pursuing the national interest almost always means taking paths that are practically no different from those of the reviled predecessors.

This bundle of contradictions emerged with particular force when the spiritual heirs of those who had caused the tragedies that the Ventotene Manifesto but also Jean Monnet wanted to consign to oblivion came to govern Italy with Giorgia Meloni. Thanks also to the weakness of the opposition, Meloni is managing, albeit with difficulty, to navigate the dilemmas of her European policy. This cannot last long, also because Trump’s return places Meloni, like all Europeans, before particularly difficult choices. If we want Italians to fully reclaim the European idea, the only solution is to clearly exit from both narratives, the federalist one of the past and the sovereignist one of today. It should be recognised that, despite its indeterminacy, Monnet’s Europe remains the only credible one and within which everyone will play their own melody in the constant effort to create harmony. It is a terrain in which nation and Europe are not necessarily incompatible terms. The nomination of a pure representative of the Christian Democratic tradition such as Raffaele Fitto as a member of the Commission could perhaps represent a decisive step towards a broader national consensus, since we are fully aware of the

weaknesses and fragilities of the path undertaken. It is a process at the end of which perhaps one day there will be a federation. Or perhaps not.