

EUROPEAN DIVISIONS: THE EU ONCE MORE WITHOUT ANSWERS

by Carme Colomina*

Treaties are no more than legal documents at the service of the European Union. A fundamental question is 'what Europe do we want exactly?' However, the EU has been unable to come up with a unanimous answer. Ireland's 'no' to the Lisbon Treaty has reopened divisions among those that support economic union and those that aspire to more political integration. In times of a global threat to the economy and with Russia acting tough at the Union's borders, what the EU needs is not only a new legal framework but real political leadership.

Since Ireland's 'no' to the Treaty, the EU has been split in two. For some it is a chasm that divides European citizens from the political class. The EU, built from the top down as the result of political agreements on the distribution of influences, has to find a way to make the democratic process more transparent before the next round of European elections in June 2009. For others the European project has broken with its original objectives due to the lack of a clear answer to the most basic question: 'what Europe do we want?'

The eternal dilemma, unsolved by the current economic and political union, has returned once more to threaten its immediate future. A Europe that is more politically integrated not only frightens some of its citizens, but also most of its leaders. The veteran of all heads of European governments, Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg, recently admitted that 'between globalisation and the nation, there is an organised Europe', but 'we continue to act before public opinion

as if our national government was the only one able to provide answers to our most immediate problems'. Fifty years of a common project have still not changed the inertia of blaming Brussels for the difficult decisions that need to be made at state level. It is as if 'Brussels' was an entity in itself when, in reality, it is a European Commission, whose members have been assigned by each of the Member States and approved by the European Parliament, and a Council of Ministers in which the 27 EU governments participate.

The Lisbon Treaty was meant to put an end to fifteen years of institutional reforms begun in Maastricht and in need of consolidation. It was a matter of bringing to an end the almost five years lost due to the failure of the European Constitution. In the words of one European political expert, there was a need to pacify 'the two souls of this beast that is the European Union: the supra-national soul and the inter-governmental'. Once again, everything is left hanging in the air.



The shock brought about by the Irish ‘no’ and the new uncertainties in the process of ratification of the Lisbon Treaty have further weakened the already fragile European project. The European Commission’s capacity to initiate new legislation has been reduced to a minimum, unable to act in order to avoid a mistake: a mistake that might slow down a ‘yes’ to the Treaty or that may also affect the political career of its members just one year away from the renewal of Brussels’ executive. The poor leadership shown by this Commission has been the perfect excuse for those that defend the view held by the Council of Ministers that ‘the strict community processes, those of directives and an interior market, are practically finished, and that from now on it is much better to function with an intergovernmental mechanism’. This is because, as Nicolas Sarkozy argues, ‘there is life beyond the institutions’. The euro and Schengen are two great instances of cooperation between states that are held up as examples. If this view prevails, a European Union made to suit its

states would consolidate itself, to the detriment of institutions that were meant to guarantee the democratic participation of its citizens.

JEAN-CLAUDE JUNCKER OF LUXEMBOURG, RECENTLY ADMITTED THAT ‘BETWEEN GLOBALISATION AND THE NATION, THERE IS AN ORGANISED EUROPE’

The intergovernmental way is taking shape. From some European capitals the idea of a Europe operating on different tracks is gaining ground, as outlined in Maastricht and strengthened by each later treaty. 27 countries moving ahead as one is seen as an impossible undertaking. The latest ‘no’ from Ireland has convinced those who favour a more political union that it is necessary to find a way for those countries that want more integration in specific areas to go ahead, without being held back by those that resist giving up sover-

eignty. However, the smallest countries fear the formation of closed clubs of members inside the EU, with the larger countries calling the shots.

Institutional weakness is translated into impotence on an international scale. Only the recent European Union initiative, under Nicolas Sarkozy's leadership, to broker a cease-fire in the Russian-Georgian conflict breathed some life into a common foreign policy, even if negotiations were extremely careful not to damage strategic bilateral relations between the Kremlin and Germany, Italy or France. Beyond this, the EU appears trapped by its own Eurocentrism without realising that, little by little, it is losing its ability to face the new global arena. This Union of some 500 million inhabitants represents just 4% of the world's landmass and around 10% of its population. By 2025, China will be the second largest global trading nation and India will occupy the fourth position, just behind the EU. Asia is imposing new forms of capitalism which reject Western values. China and India are putting into practice new foreign policies in Africa and Latin America. Russia has revealed its new leadership under Dimitri Medvedev and the long shadow of Vladimir Putin. The United States will do so from next November with Barack Obama or John McCain. Meanwhile, the EU continues to be stuck with the impossible reforms of its institutions. The disproportion of the situation is evident. Europe's presence in the world is waning. The EU does not exist as a political entity on the UN's Security Council, for example, or in the International Monetary Fund, because the European states of which they are formed want it that way. Among so much limitation it is not possible for the EU to be a credible actor in foreign policy. Without the Lisbon Treaty coming into effect the European Union remains, for the time being, without a strong foreign policy, without the legal personality that would allow it to sign international treaties and unable to open doors to the new states born of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. The EU has for too long been offering the carrot of membership to the Balkans, while the reality has continued to erode its cred-

ibility in the region. The Union lacks a permanent president (one that does not rotate every six months) to represent it to the world. In a shocking instance of realism, a leading member of the European Council recently confessed to a group of experts that "we will never have a common voice in the world: our highest ambition should be to get a well rehearsed choir".

WHERE EUROPE IS CONCERNED THE CITIZEN'S DISSATISFACTION WITH THE POLITICAL CLASS IN GENERAL IS EXACERBATED

Ireland's 'no' is not an isolated case. It is the same 'no' as France and Holland gave to the European Constitution. It is a 'no' that mixes an absence of knowledge, false arguments, dissatisfaction with the current national government and above all else a lack of confidence in the EU. The citizens, who in surveys define themselves as clearly pro-European, respond with a 'no' to changes that would reinforce Europe. Meanwhile the governments are too scared to suggest a genuine consultation that could potentially supply ammunition for eroding their autonomy. The lack of confidence is mutual.

In recent months the main aim for the heads of the EU has been to buy more time to manoeuvre. Little else is expected than to avoid paralysing the ratification process. Ireland needs to find its own way out of the problem, while the Czech Republic should try not to make it any bigger. The Czech President, Vaclav Klaus, threatened not to ratify the Treaty. Europe once more became the perfect excuse for conducting internal politics in Poland since President Lech Kaczynski, who leaned on his European counterparts in order to essentially obtain a tailor-made Treaty, also tried to play his own cards against ratification. In all it foretells a complicated period of political leadership when Prague takes over the reigns of the EU's rotating presidency on the 1st January 2009. Diplomatic sources consulted in the making of this article do not expect a way out of the latest institutional dis-



aster till 2010, preventing the renewal of the European Commission and the next Parliamentary elections to be held within the framework of the Lisbon text.

In the following months there is important work to be done, not only to once again explain the European project, but also to really listen to what the citizens want from the EU. Over the years we have all learnt to view and value the EU with less passion and more pragmatism, but if this distancing and abstentionism on behalf of the citizenry is not dealt with, this sense of rejection will end up being a problem of political legitimacy. Where Europe is concerned the citizen's dissatisfaction with the political class in general is exacerbated. The day-to-day work of the institutions have served to enhance this perception. The image we receive from the media is of a Europe that is undermining its own democratic demands: the controversial debate about immigration; the investigation into the CIA's secret flights in EU

territory; the reduction of liberties as a result of the fight against terrorism; arbitrary measures such as the inspection of liquids and airport security checks; and the surrender of personal information of all European passengers that fly to the United States. Such measures are interpreted as a challenge to the social European model, till now considered one of the key values of the European project. In reality, social Europe has always been the lowest common denominator of a union that, since its enlargement in 2004, has become 'Britished' to coin a phrase. The new French president of the EU spoke on the 'need to reconcile European citizens with Europe'. However, the key questions are, 'with which Europe?' Followed by, 'to what end?' No one doubts that without the support of its citizens it will be impossible to move towards an ever-closer union. For those that want it, this much is clear. Reality has a habit of reminding us that we do not all want the same thing for this Union.

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