

Three things the EU must do to survive

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Luuk van Middelaar - Saturday 25 March 2017



European politicians sign the treaty of Rome on 25 March 1957. Photograph: ANSA/EPA

Back in 1957, the mayor of Rome had an idea: to have all the clocks in the eternal city chime together on 25 March to celebrate the signing of the founding treaty of European cooperation. This festive din, an expression of the desire for a new start, now looks like a supremely ironic way of ushering in an era in which Market-Europe sought its salvation in silent boredom, an inaugural sound show before the launch of a regulatory machine that left the public voiceless.

Few will dispute the initial successes of an adventure which brought prosperity and stability to a continent ravaged by two world wars and then divided by the cold war. But since 1989, the world has changed. This is no longer a time for regulation but for action. An unprecedented revolt has put the EU to the test: Farage, Le Pen, Wilders, Petry or Salvini – all are aiming either at the destruction of the union, its currency, its markets, its united front against Vladimir Putin, or a mixture of all these.

To mount a credible response to this revolt, the 27 presidents and prime ministers who come together at a summit in Rome on Saturday must engage not in empty platitudes but in a triple European initiative. The new Europe must *protect, improvise* and *allow opposition* – the direct opposite of the things it does so well: assuring freedom, predictability, consensus. These new axioms will be difficult but not impossible; the survival of Europe depends on it.

First of all, *protection*. Europe is a beacon for all those who like openness, exchange, opportunities offered by the large space of free movement: entrepreneurs, students, tourists, polyglot graduates, the young, the rich, the successful. Encouraged by this buoyancy, Brussels has lost sight of the less mobile citizens who see this Europe not as an opportunity but as a Trojan horse for globalisation that threatens their jobs, their security, their daily lives. This is not so much a question of “elites” against “the people” as a fundamental divergence between the interests of two separate halves of society, what the British now understand as the 48% versus the 52%. To regain the confidence of a solid majority of public opinion, Brussels can no longer be happy just to work in the interests of its own kind; the European Union has to find a better balance between the freedoms that it provides and the protection that it offers.

One signal example – borders. There can be no shared space free of *internal* borders if responsibility for *external* borders is not shared. That is the hard reality generated by the migration crisis of 2015-16. Since when, member states jointly manage the external border, albeit timidly. Sometimes, wisdom comes in a form of restraint, as it does in the field of social protection. Since Brussels cannot replace national welfare states without becoming the superstate that people reject, the better balance that we can aim for is to mitigate the impact of newfound freedoms on systems of social protection and healthcare. It is the whole issue of free movement of workers which so bothered British voters during the referendum, and which bothers many others. Such proven political dilemmas need to be confronted head on.

And so to *improvisation*. What should be done when a eurozone member dices with bankruptcy and half a billion euros must be found in a weekend? What to do when strange little men in green invade an eastern neighbour and sanctions against the aggressor need to be agreed without delay? How to respond when a crowd of refugees gets across the Mediterranean and starts a march across the Balkans caring not a jot about the rules of Schengen or Dublin? These are three recent examples that needed intervention by European institutions that have not traditionally been prepared for such events: to take decisions and act, without having the necessary time to smooth over disputes, refine opinions, find agreement and pull together green papers and white papers ... These aren't crises about goat's cheese or high grain prices of the good old days of the EEC, but questions about billions of euros, war and peace, identity and sovereignty.

Under the pressure of such realities, a “politics of events” is slowly emerging within the EU. It hasn't replaced the “politics of rules” of Market-Europe, but sits alongside. This is a veritable transformation which no one has got to grips with as yet. Market-Europe is badly prepared to face adversity, dangers, the unforeseen. But sometimes, one doesn't have the choice. What, after all, could be worse than doing nothing in an emergency? It is in such cases that new forms of executive power emerge, even new institutions. We understand the central place of the European council, the summits of national leaders, all accountable to public opinion, who together face the whims of fortune. During the euro crisis, for example, the Brussels institutions had neither the legitimacy nor the financial means to weather the storm. But heads of state or government, sidestepping the strictures of treaty, are able to

reclaim new unexplored territory and move together into the future. Europe can only act in conjunction with member states, not against them.

And so a new Europe hoves into view. *Protect*. we can now see the need. *Improvise*, leaders will do so under pressure from events.

But *allow opposition*, the final part of the transformation, remains more complicated. And yet it's just as vital as the other changes. As long as there remains this refusal to acknowledge opposition *within* the EU, it will manifest itself *against* it. This is the phenomenon we are witnessing today. While the Market-Europe founded in Rome faced at most a mix of indifference and mockery about the shape of cucumbers, the new Europe of currency, borders and foreign powers engenders far higher expectations and increased mistrust. The politics of events requires decisions which are not written down in treaties or the opinions of experts; they are a response to the exigencies of the moment, resulting from a clash between opposing positions and values. This is why they need public approval from voters who in elections and national referendums are increasingly prone to have their voices heard. And for good reason: when conventional wisdom loses its monopoly, that is when dispute appears; when executive power finally shows itself, it needs to count on solid public support.

There have already been attempts at introducing a dynamic within the EU between government and opposition, for example via the European parliament. But the federalist powerplay has merely strengthened national anti-European populism and is ill-attuned to the challenges of the hour. It is time to stop threatening to excommunicate opponents and dismissing all criticism of Brussels as "anti-Europeanism". The excess of consensus in Brussels stifles European political life. The big mouths of the moment – Tsipras and Varoufakis on the euro crisis, Orban on the refugee crisis – have an important role to play. They demonstrate to the public the real choices and dilemmas in play.

As well as being a decision-making mechanism, democracy allows us to stage and manage social and political conflicts, even use them as a source of freedom. A "dissensus" can give Europe a dynamism that the politics of events really demands. But all of this presupposes an essential prerequisite: the conviction that what unites us as Europeans is stronger than what divides us.