



WILL EUROPE FALL APART?

ROMANO PRODI

FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Is Europe falling apart? A deliberately provocative question, though grounded in more than trivialities. Our first answer could seem paradoxical, but has the facts on its side: the enormous difficulties faced by the United Kingdom in actually implementing the outcome of the Brexit referendum show that Europe is too strong to fall apart. After the referendum, I had predicted an exit negotiation in which a united Britain faced a divided Europe; instead, we have a completely different scenario: the EU has unexpectedly presented an unbroken front to a splintered UK suffering one of its worst crises in recent history.

This does not mean that the European Union is doing well, but that the process of integration has now gone so far that it is dramatically difficult to leave, even for a country that had obtained more opt-outs than any other – and one that thought it could have an alternative to Europe by relying on its robust American crutch.

Instead, the facts show that as soon as leaving shifts from possibility to reality it suddenly becomes clear what enormous benefits have been delivered by the European Union, for all its well-known limitations, and would now be lost. Although harmonisation of economic and social policies has been a slow and complex process, often failing to live up to expectations, we now have an absurd situation in which dissatisfaction with the EU is rising everywhere and yet, when it comes to the point, the vast majority of Europeans think it better to stay together. Some think it from conviction, some for convenience, but the prospect of leaving has little attraction. In essence, it has been the same story in Italy: vitriolic anti-European declarations have turned into criticism of specific policies, while insults have given way to mediation.

Romano Prodi, Italian politician who served as the 10th President of the European Commission from 1999 to 2004. He was Prime Minister of Italy from 1996 to 1998, and from 2006 to 2008

That does not mean things are going well – quite the reverse! Germany, France, Italy and Spain are in deep crisis, though the reasons differ. After the big decisions on the single market, EU enlargement and the euro, Europe is now at a stage in its history where the paramountcy of national policies over community ones has progressively marginalised the Commission and exalted the Council, a body composed of national governments where decision-making power is bound to be with the stronger countries. Hence the policy of austerity, which has done so much to divide the various players in European politics and to promote decisions dictated more by the will of individual countries than by the general interest.

The result is that Europe's citizens are faced with a Union that is incapable of making big decisions and has no clear plan for the future.

What, now, is left of the "Ode to Joy", the accompaniment to Macron's electoral success, which appeared to turn domestic victory into a continental project? Nothing but the tune. The fragmentation of politics in Germany, the daily contradictions in Italy, have revealed even more starkly the paralysis of decision-making in Brussels. If Europe does not fall apart, then, it is only because each country is afraid of being hit by its own splinters. Yet clearly if it sticks to "business as usual" the European Union could die of starvation.

There is also the possibility of accidents, especially economic and financial ones. Such accidents in a small country like Greece can be remedied, though with difficulty and at a high price. If, on the other hand, one should happen in a country as large as Italy then Europe as it is at present would certainly not be able to mend it. Even if no such accident occurs, though, the European Union cannot satisfy its citizens by continuing to mark time.

Usually, when democratic structures face a crisis they seek a way out in elections. In the case of Europe, elections are already scheduled; they just need to be used for a Europe-wide political contest, not a trial of strength on the problems of individual countries.

Eurosceptic parties may be growing but, despite the widespread alarm, they are still in the minority. By choosing Weber as its candidate the European People's Party is moving to the right but not departing from its traditional pro-Europe stance. It will keep Orbán within its ranks; it will attract Salvini's League more and more, and soon irresistibly. If liberals, socialists, and greens could only show enough political intelligence by jointly fielding single candidates for the presidency of the Commission and for senior European positions, they would be able to launch a EU-wide challenge, re-awakening the attention and interest of all European citizens. They would not have to merge, of course, nor lose their identity: in almost every European country governments are no longer formed by a single party but by (sometimes complicated) coalitions of parties which (except in Italy) want to move in the same direction.

If we want to reconnect citizens with Europe, however, our shared objectives must be important ones, clearly and simply communicated.

The European Union today has three fundamental objectives. The first is to supplement monetary policy with common rules for the progressive harmonisation of budgetary policies. No one can insist that the more prosperous member states help the others, but everyone must demand that at least there should be rules that take account of the state of the economic cycle and make the necessary harmonisation process



possible in the long term. The second object must be a European army, even more clearly needed now that the US is asking Europe to make substantial provision for its own defence: this is a task that cannot be left to individual states. The third object is an industrial and environmental policy designed for innovation, to create European companies that can take the lead, even in sectors currently dominated by the US and China.

A political contest on these three objectives would bring all the "pieces" of European politics back together, and give hope to all those who are at present afraid for their own future and for the future of the next generation. Only politics can prevent Europe from really falling apart, but those politics must aim high and be conducted accordingly.