



Brexit
Institute

Keynote Address

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Are we somehow beholden to Europe? The case of the environment.

Far removed from its citizens, oblivious to their needs, a source of burdensome obligations and curtailment of their rights that has caused so much suffering, Europe should be down-sized, to say the least, so as to leave more elbow room to Member States to exercise their sovereignty and uphold the rightful claims of their own peoples.

It would be foolish of me to disregard the reasons that have led so many Europeans to buy into these charges levelled against Europe and, consequently, to back those political movements that have thrived on such rhetoric to increase their consensus. The Europe embodied by the Visegrad group has set out to overcome the West, gaining strength throughout the Union, including those traditionally pro-European countries, such as Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden, and thus creating the expectation that the upcoming European Parliament elections will actually produce an anti-European majority in Strasbourg.

By way of explanation, several arguments are brought forth, of which two are especially relevant. The first deals with the roster of austerity measures and the overkill exerted by their restrictive effects; these have hit not only public debts, but have struck deeply at the heart of national economies, curtailing their growth and therefore the ability to raise revenues to pay off those debts. As if that were not enough, also the level of social protection – notably in Greece - has been slashed to an extent that is perceived as especially intolerable in a Continent so proud of its welfare. The second reason centres on immigration. Faced with this urgent matter, countries such as

Greece, Italy and Spain have been left alone to deal with the flux of people pressing on their sea and land borders; yet these are European borders that call for shared European responsibilities.

While there may be some truth in all this, the two issues belie the inescapable paradox of anti-Europeanism. There is a deep-seated hostility towards Europe, and this consequently translates into greater trust being placed in the Nation State and its policies of shutting down its borders; at the same time, the immigration issue clearly shows that the bone of contention is not what Europe does, but what it fails to do. And the same is true, perhaps less obviously, also with regard to economic and fiscal policies, where the solution is not to call for greater "flexibility" (as our governments have done insistently in these years), as this leads to an increase in public debt that we should be striving to reduce instead. The answer is a well-funded stabilizing function at European level, which is capable of introducing counter-cyclical measures to offset the cyclical effects of domestic fiscal consolidation.

This is a fact and, on a rational level, there is no gainsaying it. The truth is that a profound discrepancy has emerged between what is reasonably sustainable and what emotionally is a sure-fire winner. On an emotional level, anti-Europeanism is gaining ground and there are many diverse reasons why this is happening.

One of these is the current atmosphere that has been hanging over Europe since the days when uncertainty and anxiety over one's future have ousted the sense of confidence in progress and growth; still absent from the lives of many.

Another is represented by the two rifts that have opened up within Europe itself: the first is North vs South, between the debtor countries of the Southern Eurozone and the fiscally conservative states of the Central-Northern Eurozone that seek to avert the risk of defaulting on those debts by any means necessary; the second pits East against West as the most recent EU Member States, on the strength of their re-awakened pre-communist past, are openly defying the values and ways of life that have meanwhile thrived in the West. Both scenarios have obviously driven a wedge through the concept of solidarity upon which integration is based and have stoked hostile sentiment anew.

Finally, we must address the new means of communication, and social media in particular; by their very nature these create filter bubbles in which especially negative emotions are given ample space and privileged opportunities for self-affirmation and amplification.

If we seriously intend to take on the task of countering anti-Europeanism, at this point, we need to ask ourselves whether this is still feasible or whether we should give up hope and yield to that gut instinct which (we are told) everyone today follows even though it flies into the face of reasoned opinion. Let us explore the alternative option, and begin by asking ourselves whether or not our deafness towards proven truths does not amount to a gross act of cowardice; let us fact-check and find out whether there are cases in which rational arguments might gain acceptance. And indeed there are such cases. Our thoughts go to that mother whose immunologically compromised child was at risk of being surrounded by non-vaccinated children at school. She launched an appeal against the Anti-vaxxers and, by herself, collected over two hundred thousand signatures. Was this not an example of rationality overcoming prejudice? Of scientific fact over gut feeling? Let us also consider those British voters who, after voting for Brexit two years ago in the name of "taking back control" over their own affairs, are now undergoing a collective re-think because the realistic terms governing the UK's exit are likely to feature more disadvantages than advantages. Is this not another example of reasoned opinion trumping gut feeling?

So let us try and map out a European narrative that reflects the truth more closely. Of course nobody can deny (far from it!) that finding an unnecessarily intrusive European directive is an all too easy task. But to use this as an excuse for espousing "*souverainiste*" tendencies, especially after having made the comparison with the national legislative output, would really be hard to swallow. Beyond that, is it true that the Union behaves in such a way that it meddles with our lives, making them worse? The answer is "no, it is not true" and there are many examples to support this. These range from the misgivings that have entered the minds of many Britons concerned over Brexit today (but who voted to leave in 2016), to a highly topical case in recent weeks in Italy, where the common sentiment (after the collapse of the Morandi bridge in Genoa) is against extending the duration of motorway concessions: such extensions are incompatible with European law and, if we failed to comply, the EU would take steps to halt such proceedings.

What we shall focus on here, however, is a textbook example, namely, the case for the environment. In terms of environmental protection, we owe the European Union the adoption of policies and measures that cater to the most urgent needs of our populations, especially with regard to the younger generation: starting from ensuring the very survival of our planet to the issue of air quality, from guaranteeing clean water to waste management, from the protection of the natural habitat of wildlife to renewable energy.

To claim as a counter argument that ultimately on these matters, individual states already fulfil these requirements on their own does not bear thinking. A large part of national environmental laws are made in Europe, thus shaping institutions and principles created in the European Union. As for the Member States, these make up about 80% of their total legislation. Moreover, most of them, and certainly this includes us Italians, often lag behind the implementation of those same institutions and principles, causing the EU to launch infringement proceedings. And if we are being pressured as a result - let us be clear about this - the fundamentals of our national identity are not the issue; indeed, the cause of concern is rather our illegal landfills and our sub-standard sewage networks.

The European Community began to grapple with environmental matters very early on. The first concrete step in this direction was the 1972 Stockholm declaration; while Member States had not yet delegated powers to legislate on such matters, the EC nevertheless held that a consistent and coordinated environmental policy had to go hand in hand with a common economic development. Legislative competence came a few years later with the Single European Act of 1987 and with the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992, which even elevated environmental protection to one of the few and overriding cross-cutting issues; such matters not only may be the subject of specific European legislation, but must also be protected and in no case be endangered in the exercise of any other competence.

This is not the place to drone on about general principles (some might object to such pro-European rhetoric). Yet while on this preliminary ground, I wish to add one more thing: with reference to the supposedly awkward language of European documents, so out of touch with the needs of the average Joe, I should draw the reader's attention to the simplicity and clarity with which the European Union set out its goals in its 2001

Sixth Environment Action Programme: "In short, we need to encourage the development of a society where the cars we drive are clean, the wastes we produce are recycled or disposed of safely, the energy sources and technologies we use do not lead to global warming, the products we make, from computers to baby toys, do not disperse hazardous chemicals into the environment, our food and our bodies, and where our business, tourist, housing and agricultural activities are planned so as to protect our biodiversity, habitats and landscapes." Let us ask ourselves quite frankly whether any of our national public documents, of the kind we are accustomed to reading, are written in a language that conveys more accurately the way we speak or feel.

Let us now consider what we truly owe to Europe when it comes to environmental matters. We shall begin with the EIA, the Environmental Impact Assessment. For sure, no small number of defilers of our land would willingly waive this obligation. Nowadays, however, it is certainly one of the essential tools for environmental protection. Well, the EIA was created by an EC directive of 1985. I remember that, as late as 1992, Italy was facing infringement proceedings for failing to adopt it. An urgent framework law to this effect had to be passed and put before the Regional governments in 1996 to ensure that Italy would start complying. Since then the EIA has gained increasingly solid ground in our own legislation and in the practice. Occasionally, in a bid to "speed things up" some regional law comes along dispensing with the EIA in the case of supposedly less impactful land management interventions. On these matters, however, at least the Constitutional Court can set things right, if and when it has the chance to rule on the validity of such laws.

Also on the subject of waste and landfills, regulations were first drawn up at a European level, with the issue gathering momentum very early on, even before the EC was granted formal powers to legislate on these matters. The first directive was enacted in 1975 (No. 442) and its legal basis rested *inter alia* on a Treaty of Rome provision that allows the harmonization of national laws in the interest of safeguarding competition (a somewhat wafer-thin argument, it has to be said). More to the point, the directive also relied on the flexibility clause, allowing measures to be adopted even beyond lawmaking competence, when these are necessary to achieve a common goal (this is also how integration was pursued, when anti-European gut feeling was still far from widespread). This directive was short-lived, in fact once formal competences

were attributed to Brussels, it was replaced in 1991 by a much more detailed directive (n.156). And it is striking that waste recycling and reuse, or its use as a source of energy, were expressly provided for even back then. Indeed, over the years such objectives would become the pride of many Europeans who would pursue such worthwhile activities for the sake of their quality of life.

Italy implemented the directive in 1997, with a legislative decree bearing the name of the capable Environment Minister who wrote it, Minister Ronchi. Yet its concrete, sub-legislative implementation, consisting of actions and behaviours, was beyond his control; its success was up to all of us - from Regional governments, to Municipalities, and down to the citizens themselves. It is here that a long history of widespread breaches first began, leading to a total of four infringement proceedings. The first one was launched in 2004 - due to the sub-standard sewage systems and purifiers of 109 municipalities (all over Italy) with over 15,000 inhabitants - and was closed fourteen years later, on May 31 this year, with 74 of those still non-compliant municipalities being condemned by the European Court of Justice. The fine costs Italy 25 million euros, plus another 30 million for each semester of further delay. The other three proceedings are still underway. In the latest case, just a few weeks ago, in July, the Commission gave us a two month deadline to render the sewage systems and sewage treatment plants of 276 Municipalities with over 2,000 inhabitants compliant with EU law.

Let it be known that these are our most recurring grievances with the EU, just as these are the reasons behind the fines we receive.

Europe should also be given credit for the advancement of the renewable energy sector. A first directive was enacted in 2001 (n.77) with little to show for it; this was followed by directive n.28 of 2009 that successfully set out the famous "20/20/20" goals: achieving a 20% increase in energy efficiency, 20% reduction of CO2 emissions, and 20% renewables by 2020. Foiling the naysaying forecasts of the EU's unwavering critics, constantly complaining about ever-stringent European laws that never take national differences into account, the directive did indeed mandate that 20% of the bloc's final energy consumption should be produced from renewable energy sources, with targets varying based on the potential of each country: from a minimum of 10% in Malta to 49% of total energy use in Sweden. Member States

usually meet these targets on time (Italy exceeded its 17% goal well ahead of schedule), partly because the commitment of private individuals is handsomely funded by tax incentives, which make solar power installation and photovoltaic production much cheaper than they otherwise would be.

In the meantime, the EU has already set its sights on the 2030 targets: energy saving will have to rise to 27%, the weight of renewables is bumped up to 32% and greenhouse gas emissions must fall by 40% below 1990 levels. This time it won't be so easy to come up trumps. Other notable factors in the equation are the transport and construction industries, and the European plan relies heavily on the renewal of transport equipment and extensive building refurbishment in order to achieve such ambitious energy saving goals. It should be added that the Union envisages a real "democratic" revolution in this field, also enabled by these new technologies and the widespread use of renewable energy. Indeed, it strives for the autonomous self-production of energy by citizens, households or communities who cater to their own needs, and are no longer dependent on large-scale energy suppliers. The revolution would be triggered once the phenomenon has reached an extensive scale, and therein lies the democratization of energy production.

We shall see. For sure, these facts do not tally with the stereotypical portrayal of the EU - out of touch with its citizens and tone-deaf to the reasons for democracy.

The last account I would like to recall here - that of Natura 2000 - also fails to match such a depressing cliché. Natura 2000 is the network of core breeding and resting sites for rare and threatened species that stretches across all EU countries, aimed at preserving natural habitats, plants, wildlife and therefore the existing biodiversity. The network gradually came into being, with each Member State playing its part, on the basis of two fundamental directives, the "Birds" Directive of 1979 (n.409), later amended, and the 1992 "Habitats" Directive (n.43). The tangible difficulties encountered in their practical implementation led the Juncker Commission to subject the two directives to a "fitness check" to make them more business-friendly, yielding to popular demand (or rather, urged by governments) and in the interest of citizens. The Commission decided to launch a public consultation among EU citizens to establish whether the Birds and Habitats Directives should be subject to such a "fitness check". A record 550,000 people took part in an online consultation about the future

of the EU nature directives and the response was an overwhelming "No": the laws should be left alone. Any practical difficulties should be overcome by addressing the ability and willingness of Member States to actually implement Natura 2000.

I shall now stop here, but I wonder whether our fellow citizens who feel so drawn to the anti-Europeanism of the *souverainistes* know these things. And if they do not, I also wonder whether we should even bother informing them or whether it's a pointless exercise, because their gut instinct is to shut such news out. It is my heartfelt belief that we should never give up; firstly, because we do have agency over our gut instincts (or our hearts), and secondly, because we don't all have the same gut instincts.

It is wrong to say that gut instincts cannot be controlled, because the examples I put forward above (Leave voters grappling with the possible fallout of the 2016 Brexit vote, or the immunologically compromised child's mother starting a petition against the Anti-vaxxers) show the opposite to be true. It's a tough confrontation as the proponents of decisions based on gut feeling often resort to smear tactics or character assassination of their opponents. But when the stakes are especially high, whether because of particular interests or noble ideals, these risks must unquestionably be taken; sticking to one's (heavy) guns, shooting down the lies, yet trusting the rational force of truth (not in an abstract sense) to win the day, as it has already proven itself capable of doing.

Finally, it is not true that we all have the same gut instincts. If this were the case, pro or anti-European sentiment should be more or less evenly spread throughout Europe, partly because anti-European feeling is making inroads everywhere. But this is not so. The Standard Eurobarometer reports that, with few exceptions, Europe has witnessed a strong recovery in pro-European sentiment, with an average support rate around 60% (questions ranged from whether Europeans believe their country has benefited from being a member of the EU, to whether EU membership is still a good thing today). Despite being traditionally pro-European, Italy has recently slipped to the last places, even though support for Europe has recently been rising, and is currently at 39%. A word of warning here: in this same Italy, so disappointingly anti-European, a whopping 61% would like Europe to "do more" and take on even greater decision-making responsibilities (this is somewhat at odds with the "*souverainiste*" rhetoric). Moreover, in Italy as in other countries, there is a clear gap between the generations, with

younger people (especially in the 15-24 age range) reportedly much more pro-European than over-55s. A notable difference has emerged among young people though: the better-educated among them are undoubtedly more pro-European than those with low qualifications.

All this brings us to the last topic that I would like to present and which I have already addressed in one of my recent works, dedicated to the Manifesto for the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, published by a group of young people for the Villa Vigoni, German-Italian Centre. Looking back over the entire history of European integration from its first steps after World War II, we are faced with three generational groups that are very different from each other. The first group was made up of men and women who had lived through the war and then started and advanced the integration process; they felt that the real drive to integrate required the strongest motivation: no more wars between us, no more fields of crosses under which are buried fathers, brothers, and comrades-in-arms, whether French, German, or Italian. This same motivation underpins the Ventotene Manifesto and was still alive in the next generation that, while not having lived through the war, still had retained a memory of it. For the members of this generation it was inconceivable to fall back into *Souverainism*; they understood that the exclusive sovereignty of the States and the alleged exclusivity of their respective identities were the trigger points so ruthlessly exploited by the hate-mongers who had stifled the feeling of solidarity that they wanted to build. It is thanks to this generation that the integration process cranked on, moving one cog at a time.

Let us examine the last, and youngest, group whose members certainly lack the original motivation of their elders, yet have undergone a European training, in one way or another. Indeed, since primary school they have been used to living alongside children of different ethnic groups; they do not see internal borders as barriers between national identities. In fact, far from harking back to the days of closed borders, they take joy in the opening up of internal borders. They love to travel and live freely in other European countries, to study and even work there for a while.

Nestled between these two groups are the middle generations, whose members no longer retained the original, strongly pro-European motivation, but also lacked the European training of the young. These middle generations surely include many pro-

Europeans, but the instinct that naturally prevails in them is what I would call a sub-structure of "a-Europeanism" - as I have found in several cabinet members when I used to be in government. These generations have mostly worked on that sub-structure in a European context in which, since the Maastricht Treaty, the dissemination of the intergovernmental method in handling most common affairs has brought to the fore the juxtaposition of national interests as opposed to European interests. Ironically, the many coincidences of history have determined that the combination of unprecedented crises that have befallen us over the last decade has seen these generations act as protagonists in our societies and governments. In actual fact, the thrusts of Nationalist and anti-European sentiment have thrived on that sub-structure of a-Europeanism. Exploiting this sentiment to aggregate political consensus has become too irresistible for populists, speaking to an electorate filled with fear, uncertainty and anxiety, and whose questions fall on deaf ears in a European Union that is not particularly attentive. So far this tactic has shown to be the winning one.

The fact that members of the younger generations - just look at Austria and Italy - have adopted this approach to build up their political fortunes, does not change the fundamentals outlined above. Opportunistic choices, in economics as in politics, know no generational boundaries. What we know for sure is that this growing anti-Europeanism has reached its peak, while the middle generations are central to European societies.

We should not feel inclined to draw deterministic conclusions, and think that the passage of time will be enough for things to change for the better. We are responsible for making history and its pathways never follow pre-established criteria. But precisely because nothing is set in stone, the main findings here allow us to conclude that the opponents of "*souverainiste*" anti-Europeanism can look forward to future prospects, investing on a generational change that is not inexorably affected by the gut instincts of the middle generations. In short, it is a goal worth pursuing.