

## EU and Nationalisms: Tensions in the Federation<sup>\*</sup>

*by Yves Bertoncini, Secretary General of Notre Europe*

It is a classic that the economic and financial storm which has hit the European Union should be fuelling the nationalistic thrusts that we can observe in south-eastern Europe. Other than in Greece, it probably isn't the main cause of those thrusts, which can be detected beyond the Balkans as well. But the best way to measure the extent to which these thrusts reveal a rejection of the values proclaimed in Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union, or even a rejection of EU membership itself, is by taking a separate look at the historical and political situations of the various countries in which they are making themselves manifest.

It is one of the ironies of history that it is in a country where protesters have, on occasion, thrown Germany's distant past back in its face that the "Golden Dawn" neo-nazi party should have achieved such marked electoral success, although we shall have to wait until 17 June to discover whether that success is simply a flash in the pan or not. In losing access to the financial markets Greece has also lost a part of its sovereignty, because it depends on European and international aid plans formalised in a "memorandum of understanding" which naturally clashes with its national pride. These plans are being implemented in return for socially painful structural adjustments which are not only being somewhat inequitably shared out but their economic effectiveness remains imperceptible (Ireland, for instance, is in a better position). In this context, the success of the radical leftist "Syriza" party is equally emblematic of the 6 May vote, the primary feature of which appears to be a rejection of the two major government parties, held responsible for development built on an illusion in connection with which the Greek people need to vent their wrath. Yet the opinion polls show no trace of any majority wish to leave the euro zone, or by extension the EU, even if they do point to the rejection of any excessively brutal economic and social adjustment. The issue here, rather, is whether the people are willing to place their trust in a structurally weak state and, in return for European solidarity, to fully subscribe to the disciplinary measures involved in membership of the EMU – an issue that will be decided by the vote on 17 June.

Hungary, a member of the EU since 2004, is governed by a president and a party that have used their broad majority in parliament to push through a series of laws judged to represent an attack on pluralism, on democracy and on the rule-of-law, respect for all of which is part and parcel of the values enshrined in Article 2 of the TEU. Their fingers unquestionably burned by the precedent of Austria in 1999, the European authorities have adopted a position against these laws – the law relating to the protection of journalists' sources has recently been modified to be less destructive of freedom. The submission of the country's media watchdog and central bank to the political authorities also betrays a clear design to revert to some kind of "strong state" to counter the decline of a country which once dominated Europe in the guise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but which the Treaty of Trianon, and then the Cold War, cut back down to a more congruous size. The recurrent mention of "Hungarians outside Hungary" appears to point to some difficulty on the country's part in fully integrating into a European space which puts the relevance of national political borders into a

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different perspective – so Hungary really needs to continue to be the object of strong monitoring by the EU and by the Council of Europe, particularly in case of ethnic violence.

Serbia has just been officially granted EU membership "candidate" status and it is engaged in dialogue with the EU to set a date for the start of negotiations. Elected in the wake of a tightly-run battle for the presidency, the nationalist candidate does not seem to wish to question a candidature that will force his country to comply with the body of EU law, including the Community's values. The status of Kosovo, and in particular of the Serbian minority living there, is going to be one of the key issues in these future talks, which will give the EU a capacity for wielding influence proportional to the force of economic and political attraction that it exercises over many of its neighbours. "Respect for the rights of the individual, including when the individuals in question belong to a minority" being one of the EU's values, it should be possible to find room for an understanding that will make it possible to safeguard Kosovo's territorial integrity in return, without reviving debates that would plunge Europe back into the kind of bickering over borders that it was set up precisely to minimise.

From a historical viewpoint, these nationalistic thrusts of varying origin appear above all to reflect the weakness of certain states in south-eastern Europe. They also remind us that the task of reconciliation which lies at the heart of European construction remains crucial in a "European Federation of Nation States" which is perfectly compatible with the expression of national sentiment but which is built to counter nationalistic excess.