

EUROPE, YES WE CAN, by Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa *

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Just a year ago, by this time, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were still struggling for the nomination, in the midst of the most intense and uncertain Presidential election that we remember. Today, America's face, words, acts, style in government has profoundly changed: restored rule of law, energy conservation, opening to the Muslim world, new relationship with Cuba, ban on torture, social reforms. Futile arrogance, use of fear, myopia, abuse of power have given way to seriousness, calm, willingness to listen, long view. The essential mechanism of democracy has functioned: to peacefully change a policy and a government of which people are discontent.

Could it happen in Europe? Could we, in a year from now, recognize in the 2009 European vote a turning point in the history of the continent? No divine curse or constitutional provision prevents this from happening. If it won't happen it will be only because of the laziness and the indifference of the Europeans themselves.

Let us try to imagine. In a Resolution voted by all its groups, the new Parliament declares that the current crisis, the dis-integration of the Single Market, the change in global economic and political relationships, the blatant impotence of individual countries, the waste of resources caused by the fragmentation of public expenditures in fields of common interest, require a change in direction. The Parliament therefore decides two moves.

First, it reclaims for itself, as it happens in every parliamentary regime, the choice of the new president of the Commission (as well as of the Commissioners), who could never take office without a vote of confidence. Hence, Prime Ministers and the European Council should know (like any Head of State or King) that the Parliament will automatically veto any name not previously agreed with the representatives elected by the people. Second, the new Parliament calls for an immediate and radical reform of the Union's budget and policies: expenditures are to be made flexible and discretionary, no rigid repartition by countries, a truly European levy, and new resources to implement common policies required by the Treaty and so far always impeded by the Council.

The two moves completely subvert the Union and block its functioning: suspension of all payments, protests of the recipients, street demonstrations. The Parliament does not yield. Eventually, after a paralysis of months, national Governments and the Council (the coalition of the unwilling, the huge table at which national ministers recite the speaking notes drafted by their officials) understand that the game has changed and accept that a new power has risen in Europe. Why? Because a complete paralysis of a few months is more intolerable (albeit less pernicious) than the hemi paresis in which Europe had been languishing for decades. A few countries refuse the change and decide to exit from the Union, while preserving some of their rights.

All this would not take more than a year. It would not be a greater turn in history than the unification of Germany in the 19th century or, in the 20th, the October revolution, the end of colonialism or the collapse of the Soviet empire.

Very few think this event will happen. I, myself, think it will not happen. But I think that it could happen at some point, that it is desirable, that people should know it's possible. And I would like to see some politicians constructing their fortunes on this eventuality, just as in the past some have constructed them on the conquest of a united Italy, of universal suffrage or the abolition of slavery. Yes, we can.

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