

Article

Is a United States of Europe possible?



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Received 8 September 2021, Accepted 23 September 2021

KEYWORDS:

United States of Europe; European Federalism; European Treaty Reforms; Europarties; People and Peoples of Europe

ABSTRACT:

The federalist desire for a United States of Europe is impossible today because it is not widely shared by national political elites and public opinion. However, progressive European integration has its own dynamics, driven mainly by economic factors. For the time being, this ongoing process is not resulting in a federation because of the political differences between the member states: the confrontation between pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics has become a structural characteristic of the European Union, although the level of integration achieved would now be difficult to reverse.

PALABRAS CLAVES:

Estados Unidos de Europa; Federalismo Europeo; Reformas de los Tratados Europeos; Europartidos; Pueblo y Pueblos de Europa

RESUMEN:

La aspiración federalista de unos Estados Unidos de Europa hoy no es posible porque las élites políticas y las opiniones públicas nacionales no la comparten mayoritariamente. No obstante, la progresiva integración europea tiene una dinámica propia, impulsada sobre todo por razones económicas. De momento, este constante proceso no culmina en un Estado federal por las diferencias políticas entre los Estados miembros: la confrontación entre europeístas y euroescépticos se ha convertido en un rasgo estructural de la Unión Europea, aunque sea difícilmente reversible el nivel de integración alcanzado.

MOTS CLES :

États Unis d'Europe; Fédéralisme Européen, Réforme des Traités Européens; Europartis, Peuple et peuples d'Europe

RESUME :

L'aspiration fédéraliste d'uns États Unis d'Europe n'est pas possible aujourd'hui car les élites politiques et l'opinion publique de chaque des pays ne la partagent de façon majoritaire. Néanmoins la progressive intégration européenne à une dynamique propre, poussé sur tout pour des raisons économiques. Pour l'instant ce constant procès ne culmine en un État fédéral à cause des différences politiques entre les États membres : la confrontation entre européistes et eurosceptiques est devenu un trait structurel de l'Union Européenne, bien que le niveau d'intégration obtenu soit difficilement réversible.

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1 MAIN TEXT

Let me answer this question now, before further analysis: obviously not at this time. Realists need not discourage those of us who identify with the project of European federalism and does not prevent the defense of this worthwhile idea in the long term, even if it is still with minority support. To begin with, it should be remembered that the idea of progression towards European integration is historic (following the early antecedents of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, the first pro-European intellectual movements emerged in the 19th century), and, in this regard, everything changed with the creation of the European Community in 1957 (the Treaty of Rome), a huge historical achievement. It is true that, since then, progress has been gradual and sectoral without a final plan, while more and more states have integrated: from the original 6 to the current 27 members (with the sole exception of *Brexit*, an enormous fiasco), developing from a mere common market to a Union with a supranational political vocation.

In its 64-year history, a hybrid system has taken shape that is difficult to define: what is the European Union (EU)? It is more than just an international alliance of states, but less than a federal state. It is simultaneously confederal and federal, with intergovernmental and supranational elements. In short, as Jacques Delors (arguably the best President the Commission had between 1985 and 1995) said, it is an "UPO" ("Unidentified Political Object") which is not a state and has no people to represent, but which has many imperative competences binding on all its members. Basically, the EU remains a club of nation states that have found in this entity a way of dealing with globalisation in a (more or less) coordinated way in an attempt to preserve their interests. The situation is as follows: the EU is *supreme* in its domains (delegated by states and therefore reversible), but it is not *sovereign*. States could dissolve the EU, but not vice versa. This is because in the legislative lattice the states have ensured that the intergovernmental institutions (the two Councils) predominate over the supranational ones (the Commission, the European Parliament (EP) and the Court of Justice). The explanation is simple: the states do not want to have a European superstate ruling over them; as a result, the EU is a deliberately weak entity.

However, the EU objectively has enormous potential. It is: 1) the world's leading trading power, 2) the world's leading donor of development aid, 3) the world's second largest exporter of manufactured goods, 4) has a high per capita income, 5) has a high level of scientific development, 6) enjoys efficient inclusive social services, 7) has the world's largest diplomatic corps, and 8) if the armed forces of the 27 were added together, the EU would be the world's second largest military power, even without the UK. The big question is: does any of this do us Europeans any good? Hardly, because the EU has none of the attributes of a sovereign state: no real government, no single foreign policy, no army of its own, no fiscal power. To make this paradox clearer, just add up any global statistical index on trade, R&D, education, health, GDP and so on for the 27 as if they were a single state: the EU would automatically become the world's leading or second-ranking power, depending on the sector.

The obstacles to a United States of Europe are many, some objective and some subjective, some real and some apparent, and they are varied - political, economic, social and cultural - but in theory they could all be overcome. It is worth pointing out the enormous advantages of statehood for the EU: 1) its legitimacy would no longer only be derived from its results/benefits (when there are any), but would rest on the principle of European popular sovereignty accepted and assumed by the citizens (as is the case today with nation states), 2) a real division of powers (Executive/ Legislative / Judicial, with all their attributes), 3) a federal distribution of competences clearer than those existing today, 4) full economic and fiscal governance with a European Central Bank similar to the US Fed, 5) harmonised welfare

states, 6) real Euro-parties, not the virtual ones we have at present, 7) unified diplomatic, military and police forces, and 8) single representation in the UN, IMF, WB, WTO and others.

As the EU is nowhere near achieving these, it has moved forward blindly (when it does, because at times regression is clear) due to the lack of a clear strategic project giving it direction, and no such project exists because there is no consensus, so any specific debate regarding this issue would be very divisive today. The rhetoric is therefore maintained (*ever closer union*), which is indeterminate and non-committal, being an empty phrase to state that one wants "more Europe", without specifying what would be desirable to make it "better" than the current one. The EU has several shortcomings: it has representative limits, poorly accountability (elitist, technocratic and sometimes opaque) and it is only relatively effective in its responses to citizens' demands. It was certainly not up to the task during the Great Recession of 2008 because of its absurd determination to impose "sacrosanct" policies of austerity to control debt and deficits. In this regard, the lost decade deepened the gap between the winners (few) and the losers (many), and most negatively, discontent has almost always been capitalised on by the far right, particularly with the major refugee crisis of 2015, which was badly mismanaged by the EU. However, there has been a clear turnaround with the Covid-19 crisis since 2020.

In these circumstances: what is to be done? We could try to articulate the following proposals: 1) simplify the institutional system, which is objectively cumbersome, variegated and inefficient, and poorly understood by citizens from a subjective viewpoint, 2) streamline the overly complex procedural mechanisms that exist today and make them less obscure, 3) complete economic and monetary union and tackle banking and fiscal union in depth with a European Treasury and permanent Eurobonds (that said, what was radically novel was the creation of temporary bonds to deal with the pandemic), 4) shape a more credible and truly "common" foreign and defence policy, especially after the Western powers' disaster in Afghanistan (August 2021) and 5) foster genuine civic solidarity among Europeans with more cultural impetus and more social redistribution. Clearly these objectives are very easy to state yet very difficult to put into practice because of the deep-rooted resistance they engender in the influential sectors of elites and public opinion that would rather "regress" to their national states.

One of the EU's major political problems is its poor democratic quality: it is true that it would be a mistake to extrapolate the democracy of nation states to the EU, which lacks their attributes, but there should be no excuse for not addressing the EU's representative and decision-making shortcomings. For example, the EU has imposed measures of far-reaching impact without real open and pluralistic debate: from austerity policies to intervention in the issues of wages, collective bargaining, pensions, and even administrative reforms. This happened with Greece with the bailouts and even forced a change of government in 2011 (from Papandreou to Papadimos) in 2011 and was repeated in Italy (from Berlusconi to Monti). In other words, the EU acted in an extremely intrusive manner without the will of Greek and Italian citizens being considered. So, on the one hand, there has been a deterioration in the democratic quality of nation states (in Eastern Europe this is already a very serious problem, particularly in Hungary and Poland), and on the other, this has not been compensated for at the supranational level because European democracy leaves much to be desired.

A specific problem of the EU is its strange, dysfunctional institutional architecture, with two Councils controlling national governments and three EU institutions (Commission, EP and Court of Justice) with fewer real powers (though these have been increasing). This is without mentioning the increasingly powerful, though opaque European Central Bank, perhaps the only materially federal institution the EU has, even if it does not (yet) have all the attributes of the US Fed which, in addition to deficit control, intervenes in growth and employment. Nevertheless, with Draghi and Lagarde there have been important advances,

though in a more attenuated way: the former's famous *do whatever it takes* was crucial to cut short the speculative assault on the euro. It is very difficult for citizens to identify with the current unbalanced, incomprehensible, and obscure EU institutional model. In this respect, the EP comes under particular scrutiny: although its functions have continued to grow, it (still) has some considerable limitations. For example: 1) it cannot decide on its seat (Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg, a dysfunctional and costly nonsense in every sense), a matter of competence of the European Council by unanimity, 2) it has no "constituent power" in the Treaties because it is not *sovereign*, 3) it has no legislative initiative, this a monopoly of the Commission, 4) it cannot legislate on many non-communitised matters, 5) it lacks fiscal power (the famous *no taxation without representation* principle does not work here), 6) there is no dialectic between government majority and opposition minority, 7) there are no real Europarties (those that exist are virtual), 8) it represents neither national peoples nor the (still) non-existent "European People" (in theory, it represents European "citizens") and 9) if anything, not only is its work little known by the general public, it is also relatively non-transparent, although there have been certain recent improvements.

Despite these limitations, it must be recognised that the EP enjoys some advantages: 1) it is the most legitimate European institution as it is the only one elected by popular vote, 2) it cannot be dissolved in advance (its five-year legislatures are guaranteed), 3) it does not depend on any government and therefore has its own rules of procedure and agenda, and 4) it is not dominated by partitocracy because there are no real Europarties. What the EP lacks: 1) the power to legislate on matters currently reserved for the states, 2) the power to decide on its seat (the vast majority of MEPs favour Brussels as the only seat), 3) the power to turn the Council of the EU into a second chamber of the states, 4) the power to create genuine Europarties and 5) the power to elect the Commission on its own.

A classic argument of Europhobes and Eurosceptics is that, in the absence of a European People, a United States of Europe is impossible. They even go further: the current EU (which is not a state) seems to want to be one, which is supposedly inappropriate *per se*. Consequently, many of its decisions are illegitimate and undemocratic. Apart from the fact that democratic multinational states can exist (there are several examples), it is unfair to argue that the EU's undeniable democratic deficit renders its decisions illegitimate. This is because EU decisions are taken by democratic nation states, which means that the EU has at least indirect and derivative legitimacy.

This is wholly related to the question of the "European People" (a community of citizens, not an "ethnic" people, so by definition, a community of peoples). It is true that regular Eurobarometers show that the vast majority of the citizens of the 27 have a much higher primary attachment to their respective nation state than to the EU, and that the EU is accepted, *per se*, if it is *useful*. Therefore, instrumental support based on rational cost-benefit calculations clearly predominates. Considering this, the Great Recession of 2008 was doubly disastrous: 1) it has widened the gap between winners (few) and losers (many) and 2) it has strengthened the radical populist right as never before. However, the joint responses to Brexit and Covid-19 have provoked a significant turnaround. In short, this is an area where it is not easy to reconcile an attachment to primary national identities with one that is not merely pragmatic towards the EU. This is also the case not only because of the shortcomings identified above, but also because we do not even know what our final borders will be. As the question of incorporation remains open, it is impossible today for citizens to internalise a clear European territorial space: without a definitive "map" it is very difficult to take on board something as vague as "Europe" or even the EU as a state unto "itself" that defines a certain shared identity in the world. The other major critical argument is that Europe is so linguistically and culturally heterogeneous that federalisation would be impossible, not to mention the problem of not having a common lingua franca among Europeans (English is an imperfect substitute). India relativises both objections: India is as heterogeneous as the EU -

for example, some 500 languages and dialects are spoken and only 40% of citizens speak Hindi - and yet it is a single federal state.

Rather, the problem in this area is twofold: 1) public opinion today seems largely unprepared for a supranational scenario and 2) elites lend little support in shaping a pan-European sentiment. The European Treaties recognise "European citizenship", but as something derived from and secondary to national citizenship. Considering this, two suggestions could be made: 1) it would be very opportune for the media to stop including information on Europe as international or foreign news, because European affairs are no longer international or foreign at a practical level for its members, and 2) when European citizens travel or reside in another European country other than their country of origin, saying that they travel or reside "abroad" should be avoided.

In the economic sphere clear progress has been made in integration, although there are still too many weak areas, apart from the excessive prolongation of misguided orthodox austerity policies at any cost. What is true is that recently there has been a significant rectification with the approval of the substantial neo-Keynesian *Next Generation* funds from 2020-2021. However, economic and monetary union is not yet complete, despite successive emergency measures adopted after 2008 to save the euro. As yet there is no way to achieve fiscal union, create a European tax (levied by European authorities), or mutualise permanent debt (the temporary mutualisation to deal with the pandemic has been a positive step in that direction). Without a European Treasury, a European Debt Agency, and permanent Eurobonds, it is unlikely the euro will become a global currency (even though it is already the second most widely used currency in the world after the dollar) because it has no state backing. The other problem remains that of the differing interests between the North and the South, as well as the East: it is very disappointing to see the debates on the 2021-2027 multiannual budget in which the Community share is reduced to a ridiculous 1% of GDP. Not to mention the incomprehensible tolerance of unjustifiable tax havens such as Ireland, Luxembourg, Cyprus and even the Netherlands, although improvements are beginning to be made in this respect.

Ultimately, particular responsibility lies with the political elites, who always prioritise the short term: the Europragmatists of the "central bloc" (Populists, Socialists and Liberals) are proving to be very apathetic, the Eurofederalists (Greens and a certain sector of the renewed radical Left) are weak and the Eurosceptics and Europhobes are strong (Conservatives and radical Right, with a sector of the "orthodox" radical Left). If the three "core bloc" groups - who are the decision-makers - were more consistent, it would not be difficult to extend federalist agreements with the Greens and the renewed radical Left and this would form a strong qualified majority in favour of greater supranationality. While this is not resolved, democratic deficit, the continuation of exhausted economic policies (though with not insignificant current rectifications) and the absence of a clear pan-European civic project will persist.

The consequence will be the ongoing consolidation of populists and identitarian nationalists of an essentialist type: EU authorities often complain about this issue but fail to act effectively to reverse it. Nevertheless, the 2019 EP elections halted what seemed to be an unstoppable rise of the *ultras*: for the first time since 1979 turnout increased (just over 50 per cent) and pro-European options were strengthened. In this respect, a certain strategic reorientation of the *extremists* who have ceased advocating an exit from the EU or its dissolution, to downgrading it from within to a return to the old European Economic Community without integrationist political vagaries is not without significance.

So, what is the EU lacking? Firstly, it must overcome the obsession with always reaching near-unanimous consensus solutions, which leads to paralysis or short-termism. The EU should lose its fear of open political debate as opposed to the criteria of technocratic

elites who supposedly know "what needs to be done", and so the need to increase the debate on ideas and projects. If this is not done and only short-term, almost unanimous agreements are sought, then populists will be given the opportunity to protest about all the EU's problems and oppose its dysfunctions. So, one can and must disagree with specific EU policies without fear of being labelled "Eurosceptic". Is there only one "right" way to build Europe? As this is clearly not the case, it would be much better to dare to accept the free engagement of alternative projects. To be more concrete: what should European federalists do? : 1) explain in greater detail the benefits of moving towards a United States of Europe that would both allow an improvement in democratic quality and afford more means for social redistribution, 2) make the prohibitive cost of a non-Europe clearly evident, because disunion would make us much more vulnerable and absolutely irrelevant in today's world, 3) debunk with facts the fallacies of the Europhobes whose theses, if applied, would provoke authoritarianism and underdevelopment, and 4) put pressure on the officially pro-European parties to be consistent with what they claim to defend ("more Europe").

What we do not see is any European state ready for such a project: Germany (the first European power) is absent, France has too "French" a project for Europe and, moreover, is divided on the subject (Macron/Le Pen), Italy has almost disappeared (although Draghi has given it a certain boost) and Spain is not making its voice heard (it could be more effective if it badgered Italy to be firmer on the idea of supranationalism) and, finally, there is a serious problem in the countries of Eastern Europe: democracies of extremely poor quality, some of which, such as Hungary, are no longer democracies, with a strong tendency towards exclusive nationalism and even xenophobia.

After *Brexit*, less progress has been made than might have been expected (it was always argued that the great obstacle to political integration was the UK): it is as if the EU has not learned its lesson, as the predominance of national interests over the pan-European vision is detrimental to the whole. Strong states have refused to increase EU budgets, which makes it very difficult to progress on research, technology, digital transition, climate crisis, migration, security, and other key issues. Nevertheless, it is true that the approval of extraordinary funds to tackle the pandemic represents a change: 750 billion euros, 45% in non-refundable subsidies and 55% as flexible loans with low interest rates and long repayment periods (Recovery and Resilience Mechanisms, React EU, Sure and others).

In conclusion, one can predict the following: the EU will not disintegrate (as the Europhobes would like) because there are too many shared basic interests (dismantling the single market is unimaginable), but neither will it be transformed into a true federal state in the medium term. We will continue with this hybrid and with this policy of moving forward gradually and sectorally without knowing exactly where we are going. All in all, this process is leading, if only for practical functional reasons, to ever greater supranational integration. There is no automatism (economics determines neither politics nor cultural identity), but the process is helping to move us confusingly towards a scenario that will increasingly resemble federalism.

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