

THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: BETWEEN FEDERALISM AND REALITY

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A federalist vision

The European Union faces various economic, cultural and political challenges these days, any of which have serious implications for European society. The main economic problems stem from the financial crisis and its consequences in the eurozone. This existential threat developed fear in many Europeans and created tension between the citizens of member states. It also led to the rise of Eurosceptic voices propagating nationalistic messages.

As a reaction to this phenomenon, a Hungarian politician, former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, provides a counter-argument that promotes common European values. In an opinion piece, he elaborates on the concept of a United States of Europe and the current public sentiment surrounding the EU. Gyurcsány argues that it is in our best interests to build even closer economic, political and cultural ties within the European Union. He acknowledges the growing popularity of Eurosceptic parties but urges citizens to stick to their shared values and their European identity instead. This historically developed identity is, according to the author, what binds the “Old Continent” together, and as a consequence, countries should take the path of cooperation. As an ultimate goal, he envisions a European government with a prime minister and a strong parliament within the framework of a United States of Europe that would serve all European citizens and provide freedom and equality to all of them.

Too optimistic?

From a theoretical point of view, Gyurcsány gave a very important message that is not often heard these days: a sense of togetherness that originates from the European people’s shared history and traditions can help formulate a meaningful definition of what Europe is. History has shown that cooperation and openness are always more effective than an introverted approach that focuses on national interest.

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However, the end goals he set out might have far-reaching and unforeseeable consequences. Nation states, regardless of their historical proximity, will not be willing to give away more of their sovereignty after years of economic depression. That said, emphasising the benefits of economic cooperation rather than talking about a political union might be a better strategy, especially at a time when the very foundation, the economically beneficial nature of the European Union, is questioned. Many people today have to live in financial insecurity which has resulted in the emergence of new walls between them.

People fear for their jobs and see their existence threatened by others coming from foreign countries. Many Europeans today feel that the disappearance of borders and the free movement of the workforce has many disadvantages for them. In addition to this problem, the public perception of immigration does not reflect reality. According to a study published by *The Guardian* (Nardelli and Arnett, 2014), citizens tend to overestimate the number of immigrants in their home countries by large margins. From the perspective of the European Union, these ill-perceived issues are harmful because people tend to identify them with the institution itself.

Dissolving fear and raising awareness

In order to overcome this problem and improve the image of the European Union, this fear of the 'other' needs to be dissolved and the misperceptions need to be clarified. In my opinion the reason why these misperceptions can come to existence in the first place is the lack of knowledge about European Union among citizens. People do not really know the integration they are part of and there is a low level of engagement between them and the institution. This is reflected in the systematically low turnout numbers in European elections. Citizens tend to feel that Europe is an elitist project (Dempsey, 2011) and that the decisions are made at the top level without ordinary people having a real impact.

For these reasons I believe that the main task of the European Union is to educate citizens about European matters so that they can develop a more sophisticated view on the role of this institution. The media also have a great responsibility in disseminating information about the EU. Unfortunately, the European news coverage tends to be negative since positive news are often less newsworthy. Instead of only focusing on boosting their viewership, media outlets should realise their important role in the future of the Union and provide more balanced coverage in terms of valence.

However, the media and the EU institutions have only limited capacity to raise awareness among European citizens since they cannot mobilise people who are uninterested in European affairs. This process has to start at an early age so that it becomes an essential part of people's identity. Therefore, I argue that it is necessary to integrate a class on the European Union into the curricula of high schools throughout the continent. Another essential element of this education process could be the extension of European exchange programs like the successful Erasmus project. Extending it to younger students could help improve the image

of the European Union in the eyes of future generations. They could meet fellow Europeans, learn about their culture while also creating a bond based on their shared European identity.

This identity is the backbone of the whole integration project and in times of struggle it is important to find ways to protect it from the damaging effects of Euroscepticism and ignorance. It is our job to think of ways to improve the institution's image so that European citizens become aware of the numerous opportunities it provides them with. We have to recognize the importance of education and show people the essence of the EU: it is diverse, and at times it might seem to be divided but there is a strong bond between European nations that will eventually prevail and lead to cooperation.

References

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