

Europe of the Seven Unions

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Europe protects us. In a violent world, we have the privilege and good fortune to live in a political space whose foundational values are dialogue, peace, and strength of law, rather than the law of the strongest. Europe is irreplaceable. Even those that criticize it must recognize that Europe is the only refuge in the most dramatic moments. Europe is a fragile construction. Even one of the 27 members deciding to get in the way can lead to everything becoming complicated to the point of political paralysis. This is why Europe must be changed in order to align it with its historic mission and the expectations of its citizens. It must above all be freed from the stranglehold of the right to veto which is stifling its aspirations. Its social dimension must be strengthened. It must finally grow up in the energy, security, and foreign policy fields.

The threat of Putin is the Leviathan that is forcing us to take this definitive leap forward and show that, in this very world of violence, we can prosper and be protagonists thanks to the strength of our values. Only one task remains: to complete the journey that we started 65 years ago. For the first time, we are able to do this; we have never been so close to a federal turning point. In Italy, after February 24th, trust in the European Union reached its highest level in ten years. All over Europe, when people have seen themselves threatened, citizens have decided to defend their values with conviction. Millions of people took to the streets. They understood that the time for unity has come. Indeed, there has been a resurgence and new momentum in favor of the European project.

This is happening at a moment when two opposing visions of international relations are colliding in the Ukrainian tragedy. The European Union strives to be a values-based power: it does not promote interests and values through force, but through rules, peace, culture, and a unique way of life and development model. On the other side is Putin, who pits the strength of law against the law of strength, sending a clear message to the world: there is no room for alternatives to his model, a mixture of new power politics and old imperialism.

Putin has never hidden his repugnance for Europeanism; to him the European Union is not among the great powers. His reasoning is seen through the lens of the 20th century, and it is from that century that he draws on the always frustrated ambitions of an aspiring Russian gendarme and hegemon of the security order of the Old Continent.

Defending the European model against Putin is, above all, to make clear that being a values-based power is not the ambition of idealists or do-gooders. We owe this defense to ourselves and to those that continue to look towards

Europe with hope, to the Ukrainians who are resisting and fighting for their independence, as well as for European freedom. We cannot abandon them and there can never be an equidistance.

In order to be a values-based power, able to defend peace, the Union needs instruments that are equal to today's challenges as well as a strategic doctrine that reinforces our principles. Today, all the conditions are in place to advance European integration to a higher level. Out of the war and the pandemic "Seven Unions" must emerge. Seven Unions to be created, with roots going back many years, but which have become extremely relevant in this period of crisis.

Firstly, the Foreign Policy Union. There was an immediate reaction. In response to the invasion of Ukraine, the Union immediately displayed a strength never before seen in this sphere. Within the space of just a few hours, sanctions of unprecedented degree and scope were approved. Equally unprecedented was the degree of European unity: unanimity in procedures and in political condemnation. This stance is unprecedented and revolutionary compared to the past when diverging interests concerning Russia divided the Union's countries. The sanctions are working, they are hurting, despite threats and attempts to circumvent them.

Analysts agree that Russia's GDP will see a steep decline in 2022, up to -10% or even -12% according to the most recent forecasts. The sanctions are working because the international community worked in concert, beginning with the European Union member states and the partners of the transatlantic axis. Freezing the Russian Central Bank's reserves, a plan devised by Mario Draghi directly with Janet Yellen, was effective precisely because it involved a large part of the global financial system.

If the Union is to defend its values and its role, it must make use of this lesson. It must now take measures to protect our economies with the same unity by compensating households and businesses for the consequences of sanctions and protecting them as much as possible from inflation. But the Union must above all ensure that the united and immediate response of recent months is the rule, not the exception.

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Particularly in this period of instability, failure to meet expectations could once again produce a boomerang effect. Welcoming today in order to integrate tomorrow is a geopolitical priority for the Union. It is unthinkable (and counter-productive) to close the door to those that aspire to European democracy and the rejection of autocratic models.

We must build a European Confederation, a kind of wider circle that would

hold together the Union's 27 member states and its candidate countries. The European Union would follow its normal course, but a highly visible political space would be added alongside it to develop the European identity of those who wish to join.

This Confederation does not replace the formal accession process – which would proceed in parallel – but can offer a useful alternative to the rigidity of the current binary, “in or out”, system. Without watering down the requirements of full membership in the Union, the Confederation should envisage time and places for sharing Europe's major strategic choices, starting with foreign policy, defense of peace, and promoting the fight against climate change. I can imagine European summits where we meet at the Union level on the first day, and the Confederation level on the second day.

As far as reception is concerned, the third Union where signs indicate a change of pace is in common asylum policies. It is pointless to recall the glaring failures of the last several years, immigration being the great black hole of Europe. For more than a decade, due in part to the geographical asymmetry of the matter, we have been experiencing a confrontation between the Mediterranean countries, which have been on the front line of receiving immigrants and demanding a European approach to migration, and Central Europe, which is hostile to any possibility of solidarity between states.

The Ukraine crisis has upended this situation. Within the space of a few days Poland became the world's second largest host country for refugees. Within the same time frame, unanimity was reached to activate the European Temporary Protection Directive for the first time, an instrument introduced in 2001 which had never been used due to national vetoes.

This is an historic step: the Directive guarantees the right to citizens fleeing Ukraine to remain in the Union for at least one year without having to navigate the labyrinth of asylum procedures required after 90 days of stay.

It is a lot, but it is not enough. Europe has managed the emergency well; it must now provide a structural response to the management of migratory flows. This is also not an easy challenge to overcome. Several countries are already raising objections based on the different nature of people arriving from the East and those crossing the Mediterranean. These are objections that are politically and ethically unacceptable. Rejecting them and finding an agreement which reconciles solidarity and opportunity is a maturity test for Europe as a values-based community.

The fourth major chapter: the Energy Union. The war in Ukraine has shaken up the political agenda, putting the issue of dependence on imported fossil fuels at the top of the list. Today, gas and oil expose us to the dual vulnerabilities of geopolitics and climate. Geopolitical because the Union's territory is practically devoid fossil fuel deposits, containing only 0.2% of global reserves of natural gas and 0.1% of oil reserves. Climate because the last report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reminded us that «without immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors, limiting global warming to 1.5° is beyond reach» and a «substantial reduction in fossil fuel use» is therefore necessary.

Faced with this dual vulnerability, there is only one solution: accelerating the production of clean energy. This cannot be done without the European

dimension of a common energy policy. The REPowerEU plan is a step in the right direction, but greater integration is now necessary regarding the main dimensions of the Energy Union: common procurement, shared storage, grid integration and coordinated investment projects.

This last point, in particular, is crucial for reaching the main objective of increasing our capacity to produce energy from renewable sources in order to – finally – combine sustainability and energy sovereignty (ie. autonomy), all while freeing us from dependence on fossil fuels and the need to import energy products. However, this transition will only be effective if it is fair. All these actions must be based on European solidarity and be characterized by equity; social equity within countries to avoid the yellow vest effect and ensure a just transition. Equity between States as well, because on the path to the Energy Union, compensation mechanisms between countries must be envisaged to avoid expanding, rather than reducing, economic disparities in the single market, as Paolo Gentiloni always reminds us.

From energy security to military security, the fifth Union is that of Defense. From listening to the Italian debate in the media, this almost seems like a sudden insight, a novelty. In truth, we know that there has been discussion of European defence since the dawn of the integration project. In 1954, after the failure of the European Defence Community, an idea with federal dimensions to solve the European question, a more functionalist proposal was put forward which led to the birth of the European Community in 1957. Since then, there was never a serious discussion on common defense, at least until the election of Donald Trump.

The paradox of the lack of defence integration is confirmed by the numbers: when added together, the military spending of the 27 EU states is almost four times greater than that of the Russian «military superpower». And yet, this does not translate into sufficient defense capability. Indeed, the lack of synergy results in inefficiencies and redundancies, which have never been more unsustainable. The new security and defense efforts already undertaken by European states must be accompanied by the creation of a federally inspired governance which builds upon the idea of the European Defense Community.

The path to get there has been suggested by Romano Prodi and involves a pact between Germany, France, Italy and Spain. If the four largest European countries do not decide to move in this direction, it will be impossible to accomplish. If we do not succeed, the tension over transatlantic relations and NATO's role will continue. The contradictions between the «burden sharing» that the United States demands from its European partners in terms of defense costs and the legitimate desire of Europeans to develop their strategic autonomy will continue. The Defense Union is the choice we must make with determination. This is the only way to build an effective synthesis between the need for protection and the need to develop our identity as a values-based power.

At the same time, the European model does not only have to defend itself against “outside” enemies. There are formidable enemies within our own democracies. Antidotes can be found in the last two Unions to be created: the sixth and the seventh.

The sixth Union is that of a social Europe. Over the last several years, populists

and conservatives have even openly threatened the cornerstones of democracy and the rule of law. In order to respond to this internal threat, it is essential to strengthen social Europe by following the path laid out last May by the Porto Summit, starting with the efforts to expand and structure SURE, the European plan against unemployment.

Never before has there been such an inextricable link between democracy and the European social model. In moments of major transition, a functioning democracy has a strong social dimension: it is the space for redistribution, solidarity, and the protection of rights. As Jacques Delors noted in 2016: «if European policy-making jeopardizes cohesion and sacrifices social standards, there is no chance for the European project to gather support from European citizens”.

For the same reason, it is no longer possible to delay the construction of a Health Union – the seventh – that guarantees all European citizens the same standards of care and well-being, overcoming regional differences that remain scandalous even within Italy alone. Ursula Von Der Leyen has publicly expressed her hope that this will be one of the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe, that great exercise in participatory democracy which, for almost a year, has engaged citizens, social partners, civil society, and institutions in a transparent and inclusive discussion. The Conference represents a major opportunity to give renewed momentum to the drive for European integration, based for the first time on guidelines that are the result of reflections and discussions among citizens, which have transcended the classic instruments of involvement in representative democracy. But this opportunity risks being wasted if there is no clear political will to take its conclusions seriously with a concrete commitment to move them forward.

Of course, these seven Unions cannot be separated from an overhaul of European economic governance. The extension of the Stability Pact’s suspension – which, within this wartime context, should be announced as soon as possible – cannot be used as an excuse to once again delay a serious discussion. Reform of the Stability Pact is both necessary and long overdue. The publication on April 4th of a joint document by Spain and the Netherlands shows that the debate is open and allows for the possibility of previously unheard-of alliances. Italy must play a leading role because this is a strategic issue for our economy, which, more than others, cannot afford a third recession in ten years. It must be able to make a decisive contribution as it did for creating Next Generation Eu and as it must do now for its effective implementation. The Stability Pact must become the Sustainability Pact, which will structurally enable the public investments needed for the ecological transition and the revival of a sustainable economy in accordance with the Next Generation EU strategy. Within this new framework, debt reduction rules should be adapted to the context of each country, as Spain and the Netherlands have also indicated, in order to avoid stifling growth and repeating past mistakes.

In each of these matters, Europe is trying to respond to the needs of the moment. The Union’s current institutional architecture already allows for progress towards more coordinated and forceful action. But this is not enough: what is needed is a breakthrough, a vision. There are indeed limits to further progress toward European integration within the framework of existing treaties. All of this can be summed up in one word: «unanimity». National vetoes are what

prevent the European Union from being even more effective in its action.

One example is enough to realize the absurdity of the situation. In 2020, after the fraudulent elections in Belarus and the violent repression of demonstrations, the European Commission immediately announced a package of sanctions, which remained blocked for more than a month, however, due to Cyprus' lone vote against the proposal. It is hard not to think that this delay was one of the signals that pushed Putin to risk everything, convinced that the Union would not be able to react even in the event of a full-scale invasion.

The right to veto is perhaps one of the most paradoxical aspects of the Union: it is the main source of European weakness, but it is also the one most used by some national leaders to feel an illusion of strength. To begin with, the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, who, as soon as he was re-elected, used the popular legitimacy he had obtained to champion the veto. He did not use it on a single issue but made the more serious threat of using it systematically. Unanimity has always been the greatest obstacle to European integration. We have seen this since the era of Margaret Thatcher, whose European legacy weighs heavily. By constantly setting limits, brakes, and obstacles, she made the European Union an asymmetrical construction: very advanced in terms of economic integration, but very weak on the fronts of political integration and social protection. We are still paying for this damage today.

Without an institutional leap forward, the Union will not be a true values-based power in the world today or, above all, tomorrow. Modifying treaties must no longer be taboo but must become a concrete political battle.

Today, while everybody seems ready to sacrifice tactical positioning in the name of emergencies and greater interests, a window of opportunity has opened. In the wake of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which ends in one month on May 9th, the time has come to launch a new European Convention. The Convention is the natural consequence of the Conference: starting with citizen proposals, discussed with institutions and social partners, in order to arrive at a reform of the Treaties. This would be the first major example of democracy's potential in the third millennium. This natural continuity is also suggested by the macro-themes addressed by the Conference on the Future of Europe, which largely coincide with the above requirements. This would also be a wonderful way to pay tribute to David Sassoli's memory, who was one of the most passionate supporters of the Conference. The Convention thus finds its legitimacy and strength in the very principles of our democratic model.

We need a «powerful» moment like the Convention because the upheavals of the last month are just as powerful. A «revision» of the Union's institutional structure is not enough. In addition to policies, what is most needed is politics. In other words, instruments must be accompanied by a European doctrine and an ambitious vision if we really want to transform the Union into a value-based power. We therefore need both a soul and screwdriver, even in the European Union, to defend our role in the world, to protect people, and to strengthen our democracies.

This strengthening cannot be separated from more effective rules within the Union itself for safeguarding our values. We cannot be a values-based power if we are inconsistent with them. We need to introduce mechanisms to effectively block and sanction member countries that question them, notably by

extending to all European funds the conditionality criteria introduced by Next Generation EU, which links the effective allocation of resources to respect for the principles of the rule of law.

But our soul also requires us to ask uncomfortable questions. The European values of democracy and openness are not only under attack from Putin's ambitions, but also from political, demographic, and economic trends which it is time to confront. How do we react to the rise of autocratic regimes, which in recent years have once again outnumbered the democracies? On what basis are we prepared to confront them? And what are the lines we cannot cross if we do not want to betray our values? Neither isolationism nor cynicism are compatible with European identity; we need a new and distinctive response.

And what is the answer to the spread of economic models that challenge the rules of economic multilateralism? The World Trade Organization was born in an era when more than 60% of the world's GDP was generated by open economies of the Western model, but Bloomberg's calculations tell us that by 2050, this percentage will fall to only 26%. Are we prepared to defend an open economic model, without falling into the naïveté that has exposed us in recent years to unfair competition from the Chinese model of government subsidies with little respect for social and environmental standards? How do we envision involving our partners in designing a new globalization that will finally give priority to social justice and sustainability?

The defense of peace, as well as of our European model, depends on the answer to these questions.

The European Convention is the best place to discuss this issue in greater depth and, in so doing, finally provide the European Union with new instruments that are up to global challenges and our values. Today, we have the opportunity to write a new page in the story of European integration. We have the duty to make these seven Unions a reality. We will do so by proposing to the European progressive family that this becomes our shared mission.

Italy, like the other European states, must be fully aware of a new era that requires brave decisions if we want to continue to exist and be influential in the world of tomorrow. When European integration began, the world was small, with less than three billion inhabitants. Today, there are already eight. We Europeans were half a billion out of three, and today we are the same half billion but out of eight. In that small world, we were big countries; Italy, just as France or Germany. Today, we are moving from being big countries in a small world to being much smaller countries in a big world. In order to be influential and able to protect ourselves in today's big world, we must make the choice to be united. It is only by doing so that we will be big enough tomorrow, together, to be as influential as the individual European countries were in the previous century. If we follow the siren calls of the sovereigntists and nationalists, if we do not unite once and for all, if we do not build these seven unions, we will face a future as small, unimportant countries, forced to put ourselves under the protection of others in order to survive. Putin's war has eliminated all doubts and excuses. We must choose our future and that of our children. Now.