

The Greek crisis represents the humiliation of European democracy

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On 17 July, the German parliament voted in favour of starting negotiations on the proposed Greek bailout deal. **Andrea Mammone** writes that in light of the Greek crisis, the EU appears to be an organisation focused on perpetuating a particular economic ideology, rather than on ensuring solidarity between European citizens. He argues that if this is indeed the new reality of European integration then the electorates of European states should be consulted directly and allowed to have their voice heard.



Fears, disillusionment, uncertainty, and astonishment are mixed together by the hot wind blowing from Greece and the cold rain coming from some of Northern Europe. No, it is not a weather forecast. After the Greek referendum and the recent night-long negotiations, these are the feelings of many people across Europe.

Even if the reality will probably be less apocalyptic, the truth is that democracy is being ridiculed around the EU. Some media from all around the world are, in fact, suggesting that Greece has been excessively humiliated and there is a strong attempt to force it out from the Eurozone. And this is not merely because one of the proposals from the summit stated that €50bn of Greek assets had to be handed over to an institution fundamentally controlled by Berlin.

These days Greece has been constantly at the centre of Europe's microcosm. The "mother" of western democracy and inner culture, according to some, has to learn the lesson. It is a matter of mere power. They rejected austerity, potentially provoking another European downturn, and a default with unclear outcomes. Stories of poverty and unemployment are indeed in the eyes of everyone willing to see them.

The situation is undermining the future of the European community. It is not simply opening the way for member states to be essentially pushed out by the strongest ones. Referring to the Greek early approach and a possible "exit", EU Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker said that he could not "pull a rabbit out of a hat". This is very true. But early post-war politicians pulled many rabbits out when Europe had to be rebuilt after the war, and so one would expect a similar proficiency. This contemporary generation of European leaders might be instead remembered like the one leading to the disappearance of many transnational bonds established by Europeans.

Europe is, then, really navigating with no compass. It has not a single voice. Socially, there seems to be no concern with people's living standards. Politically, they lack any preoccupations with geo-politics, as some of the Mediterranean might fall under Putin's influence. Budget and austerity are the main interests. As Pierre Moscovici, the socialist EU economic commissioner, in fact, put it, the "integrity" of the Eurozone has been saved with the novel agreement.

The key (overlooked) question here is: Is this EU reflecting Europeans' will? Its image (and also Germany's image) is seriously damaged even if all Greeks voted yes. For this reason the statement by the German European MP and chairman of the leading centre-right European People's Party, Manfred Weber, that Europe is "based on solidarity, not a club of egoists" looks highly paradoxical, especially after what it is happening to Greece.

The honest assessment would be that if this community has become something with the economy (and budget) at the centre of its interests, politicians should give a voice to people to see if they accept this reading of European integration. Democratic legitimacy is not provided by markets and rating agencies, nor do existing treaties provide one nation and its finance minister with the power to impose a political and economic line.

With European centre-right parties fully backing austerity, and the EU elites sticking with a no-empathy policy on Greece, there is another unforeseen outcome of this form of German-led politics: the strengthening of Euroscepticism and the far right. Marine Le Pen and UKIP, for example, have been immediately and instrumentally trying to take the mantle of this missing solidarity towards the Hellenic republic and European citizens.

Le Pen claimed that the referendum was “the victory of people against the European Union oligarchy. It is a [vote] of freedom, of rebellion against [the imposition of] the common currency, through austerity.” Facing a future ballot on the EU, UKIP and the British right-wing media echoed this propaganda, with Nigel Farage mentioning how the “deal shows that national democracy and the membership of the Eurozone are incompatible.” In sum, all the Eurosceptic forces are showing national electorates how ugly the EU is, and why it is better to be out of the euro.

The narrow approach pursued by mainstream European leaders is fuelling this anti-EU stance. This is another burden which has been neglected by the leading elites. The rise of nationalism is also another result of austerity, mistrust, and especially anger. This latter development, more worryingly and generally, seems to be part of a somewhat collective unconscious, a shared mind crossing some strata of the European society.

With the moderate European Socialists almost out of the game due to their full acceptance of right-wing economic neo-liberalism, the fact of the matter is that nationalist forces will present themselves as the defenders of solidarity and of the people. The prospect of Athens turning into something of a “protectorate”, a third world like nation, full of holiday resorts and Unesco sites, providing cheap and very flexible manpower, and with almost all national assets controlled by foreign investors, may worry voters in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Eastern Europe, and even in the UK.

Years of austerity have produced a growing distance between the poor (and middle class) and the rich elites. Yet, the European obtuseness is to maintain the belief in this ideology: because Germany succeeded, everyone else in Europe has to manage to implement these policies, and have almost immaculate public budgets and financial efficiency. Once more, there is no legitimacy behind all this, while people’s votes, and abstention, are not taken into consideration.

If Europe believes in being considered the motherland of democracy and in the values of equality, integration and transnational belonging, it should realistically and introspectively enquire as to what went wrong: why, how, and when. There should be, in this sense, a moment of reflection and debate, with the potential to formulate an alternative vision of Europe.

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