

The Return of Politics – The European Union after the crises in the eurozone and Ukraine*

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Abstract

A crisis can reveal characteristics of a political order which in normal times remain invisible. Two such moments of clarification hit European Union (EU) countries in quick succession. The euro crisis tested the resolve of leaders and peoples to save the single currency. The geopolitical stand-off around Ukraine necessitated a joint response to a show of force. In both cases we saw a ‘return of politics’. Geopolitical interests trumped economic ones; a need for government (and not just governance) made itself felt; European politics became more salient and intertwined with domestic politics. In the turmoil, notwithstanding calls for a big leap toward greater unity, the European Union also showed its dynamic in-between nature. The public perceives this politicisation perfectly, hence both its disenchantment and the calls for more democracy. EU integration, after ‘permissive consensus’ and ‘constraining dissensus’, could be moving to the era of *binding dissensus*.

Keywords: euro crisis; government vs. governance; EU legitimacy; union method

Introduction: A Moment of Truth

On New Year’s Eve 2011, shortly after midnight, a sober but moving ceremony took place in the Estonia theatre in Tallinn. Prime minister Andrus Ansip withdrew his country’s first euros from an ATM outside the building, walked back inside and delivered a fine speech to the nation. ‘First and foremost’, he began, ‘what the euro means to us is security. The euro is our security that Estonia really is part of Europe.’ (Ansip, 2011).

It might be good to remember the state of the European Union at that particular moment. Those were the days when United States (US) based commentators were predicting the euro’s precise end date, speculators were betting billions on a Greek exit, and euro governments were struggling summit after summit to prevent ‘financial contagion’. Even its friends joked that Estonia had bought ‘the last ticket for the *Titanic*’.

Four years on, it seems the small Baltic country was smarter than many Anglo-Saxon pundits. Not only has the Eurozone survived the crisis, but due to a grave conflict with Russia, the rest of Europe, too, is rapidly learning to appreciate the political value of membership. Meanwhile, both Latvia and Lithuania have since also adopted the euro. For these countries, euro membership is not just a matter of economics, but also of politics – even security.

*This contribution is a revised and edited version of the JCMS Annual Lecture at the ECPR Standing Group Conference, The Hague, 5 June 2014; updates take into account events until 30 June 2015. The author wishes to thank JCMS co-editor Amy Verdun for her kind encouragements; thanks are also due for their generous feedback and suggestions to the participants at the conference, in particular Jonathan Zeitlin (University of Amsterdam), as well as to the manuscript’s two anonymous reviewers and to Peter Hägel (the American University of Paris) and Jacques Keller-Noëllet (Brussels).

This article is written by a practitioner who served during five years as the speechwriter and a close advisor to European Council president Herman Van Rompuy, and who was trained as a historian and political theorist in the Netherlands and France. It rests upon two assumptions: first, to *get* European politics it can at times help to zoom out, rather than to zoom in further. Second, the life of any body politic is as much shaped by specific events as by long-term trends (van Middelaar 2014, pp. 9-11, 22-24 and 128-133).

A crisis is a moment of truth. When the ground under your feet is shaking, when an opponent suddenly knocks on the door, you discover what inner strength you possess. An individual or a political body can learn more about themselves in such moments than in weeks or years when time is just passing by.

Two such moments of brutal clarification hit the countries of Europe within a short time. The euro crisis mercilessly tested the resolve of leaders and peoples to save the single currency. The geopolitical standoff around Ukraine necessitated a joint response to a show of force. Both these vital tests bring uncomfortable truths, but also empowering clarifications. My thesis is that in both cases we are seeing a return of politics: a pre-eminence of non-rule-based decisions, departing from the spirit of the community method and common market principles, and clarifying the EU's fundamentals, its political motives, policy tools, public experience and constitutional nature.

To summarise up front: four fundamentals in particular can be seen with new clarity. First, regarding motives: the European Union is not held together by economic interests alone; it possesses an invisible political glue, secreted when strategic interests are at stake. Second, regarding policy tools: the EU works through power as well as through values and rules – and it is therefore rediscovering ‘government’ alongside ‘governance’. Third, regarding public experience: belonging to the Union has become a daily reality for all citizens, not just a ‘project’ for a few, and this has dramatically increased its salience. Fourth, regarding its constitutional nature: the Union is a club of states and peoples, and is bound to remain so.

In order to grasp the significance of these fundamental traits, we must resist the media temptation simply to move the spotlight onto the next crisis. As twitter conversations move seamlessly from Greek coalition puzzles, banking policy and judgements of the German Constitutional Court to Kremlin-watching, *Maidan*-support and blow-by-blow accounts of Donbass fighting (and back again), one risks overlooking the powerful insights the euro saga provides for the Union's upcoming challenges. Likewise, the logic of academic specialisation in political science can become an obstacle to the observation of similar trends in separate policy domains.

Both in the euro crisis and in Ukraine, questions of solidarity and sacrifice come to the fore. Are members of the European Union ready to help others to protect monetary stability and unity? Are they ready to inflict pain on Russia, and face some in return, by standing up for European interests and values? These tough questions, upsetting the easy pragmatism of ‘win-win’ or ‘results’, are perhaps the surest sign the Union is moving into uncharted political territory.

Unsurprisingly, Eurosceptics have watched the contours of a more political Europe with suspicion. They exploited people's fears of it in their campaigns for the May 2014 European elections. Marine Le Pen of the French Front National and Nigel Farage of UKIP, who both cheered when the euro was in danger, are also fully aligned with the Kremlin over Ukraine. In November 2014, it emerged that Le Pen's party has received

a €9 mln. loan from a Russian state bank, with talks ongoing for a further €40 mln. – to help this adversary of European unity upset the French political landscape during the next presidential elections (*The Economist*, 2015).

More intriguingly, the euro-federalist camp has its reservations too. The Return of Politics challenges some illusions and shakes the self-image of the Brussels orthodoxy: was the original European Community not supposed to be the advanced guard of global peace, the forerunner of the ‘End of History’ or at least the supersession of the nation-state? Was ‘Europe’ not the promise of an *End* to politics-as-we-knew-it? Hence perhaps the lukewarm welcome in federalist circles to its return.¹

Admittedly, some of this article’s claims about the nature of the European Union are painted with a broad brush; almost all deserve to be further elaborated on, further empirically researched, or better embedded in existing literature. The purpose here, however, is to offer a *programmatic perspective* on the way recent events have been changing the Union’s fundamentals – as a modest contribution toward further research. The rest of this article consists of a preliminary look at these four political fundamentals.

I. The Invisible Political Glue

The European Union was from the start conceived as a political project. Simplifying in the extreme, one could say that the three overriding aims that its founders – as well as the leaders of countries joining later – hoped to achieve were *peace* (among member states), *prosperity* (for their citizens) and *power* (for their country or for the bloc as a whole vis-à-vis the outside world).² Clearly, the relative strengths of these basic motives varied over time and from one country to the next. The debate among political scientists on, for instance, the primacy of economic interests vs. geostrategic considerations, at certain crucial junctures of the Union’s history, may well continue for another two decades.³

For present purposes however, this is not of the essence, since even to achieve their *political* goals, such as continental stability, leaders often relied on *economic* means. The point is precisely that when it was dressed up in economic terms – a market, a

¹ Political scientists studying the European experiment have of course long ceased believing such grand claims; as a symbolic watershed, one could take Ernst B. Haas, 1968 preface to the second edition of his 1958 *The Uniting of Europe*, in which he acknowledged that he had underestimated the impact on integration of the geopolitical situation and of autonomous socio-economic change and that he had failed to appreciate the potency of longstanding political loyalties and charismatic national leadership – in a word: ‘De Gaulle has proved us wrong.’ (Haas, 1968, p. xxiii.) Yet the continuing temptation for Members of the European Parliament and other Brussels politicians, who are storytellers by profession, to portray EU politics as a radical rupture with the past ensures the notion of a clean break with past practices is kept alive. The myth also serves as a convenient bogey for the Eurosceptic side, which claims to be fighting against a European superstate. Hence the ‘objective alliance’, in terms of the politics of discourse, between federalists such as Guy Verhofstadt MEP and UKIP frontman Nigel Farage or the FN’s Marine Le Pen.

² One could perhaps add the factor *prestige*: that of belonging to, or playing a leading role in, a club called ‘Europe’ – a political motive that appealed as much to Adenauer or de Gaulle in the 1950s as it does to Ukrainian president Poroshenko today.

³ A famous example from earlier days concerns the link between the Suez crisis and the negotiations on the Treaty of Rome. The Mollet-Adenauer bilateral summit of 2 November 1956, during which the host received the news from London that the UK had unilaterally stepped out of the joint Franco-British military campaign in Egypt under American pressure, can be seen as the culmination of European treaty negotiations (e.g. Segers, 2008, pp. 271–85). Under the motto ‘primacy of politics’, chancellor Adenauer overruled the resistance of German sectoral ministers and the *Finanzressort*. The impact of the Suez crisis on the breakthrough in Franco-German relations is also recognized, despite both authors’ decidedly economic explanation of the motives for sealing the treaty, by Andrew Moravcsik (‘first major breakthrough’: Moravcsik, 1998, p. 144) and Alan S. Milward (‘when almost every obstacle fell’: Milward, 1992, p. 312).

currency – the Union's political *raison d'être* disappeared from the public's sight.⁴ In emergency situations, the underlying politics resurfaces, as we are currently experiencing.

Consider the debate on sanctions against Russia, where security interests trumped economic interests. Commercial and gas lobbies clearly weighed in during the spring and early summer of 2014. 'Was it really necessary to upset a fragile economic recovery or risk a cold winter?' asked those who were dragging their feet. But in late July 2014, after the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner MH17 above Eastern Ukraine – which killed hundreds of Europeans, most of them Dutch – that debate was over, even in Germany. All stakeholders, including businesses, understood the primacy of geopolitical stability as a precondition for the pursuit of prosperity. It was then that the European Union instituted the heaviest sanctions since the Crimea invasion of five months earlier, the so-called 'stage-3 sanctions'. Although it is no secret that the positions of member states on how to deal with Russia differ (and the Kremlin tries to exploit this), in the first twelve months following 'Crimea', the Twenty-Eight managed every time to present a united front in decisions on sanctions. As those familiar with the talks know, that relative success is not just due to converging views on the fundamentals of relations with Russia, but also to the fact that foreign ministers and heads of government all recognise the strategic importance of EU unity itself.

In the euro crisis too, although fought out in the financial language of banks, deficits, loans and 'spreads', political arguments outplayed economic ones. The economic costs and risks of a Eurozone break-up were pivotal; all actors wanted to avoid bank runs or a Great Depression. But by mid-2012, once German and French banks had reduced their exposure to Greek debt, it was felt in some circles that a Grexit was financially manageable. What tilted the balance in Berlin, Helsinki or The Hague were *political* arguments, related to such things as possible instability in Greece itself and more widely in the Balkans, Europe's image in the world,⁵ the Franco-German relationship, the survival of the European Union, perhaps national elections. The political stakes were hard to calculate and seldom articulated,⁶ but they were clearly in play.

One way to assert that claim and to make implicit motives visible would be to attempt a systematic comparison between statements during the crisis by European Union Finance Ministers, whose job after all is to look after the money, and statements by European Union Heads of State or Government, who have to bear the wider political picture in mind and who jointly bear a responsibility for the whole. More concretely: had it been up to German Finance Minister Schäuble and his peers alone in 2012, Greece might have been forced out of the Eurozone, but because the matter was *Chefsache* the political arguments to keep the country in prevailed.

Here lies the euro storm's most important lesson. Whatever the divisions and hesitations along the way, the invisible political glue that held the Union together was much

⁴ The fact that the early European Community was usually referred to in the English-speaking world as the 'Common Market' – a fact reflected in the very title of this Journal to this day... – is telling in this respect.

⁵ The argument 'Europe's image in the world' has a particularly pressing ring if you are the German Chancellor or French President forced to explain to leaders of the world's other economic powers at G20 summits how Europe intends to get the Greek situation under control. President Obama was worried the Greek situation could endanger a global recovery essential to his own re-election and kept pressing EU leaders to 'get their act together' in dealing with an issue worth 2 % of EU GDP.

⁶ Angela Merkel's "*scheitert der Euro dann scheitert Europa*" [if the euro fails, Europe fails] was the most famous exception. The Chancellor first used the phrase in the Bundestag on 13 May 2010 (Merkel, 2010).

stronger than anybody had foreseen or indeed was able to explain. It is worth keeping this in mind when predicting the Union's behaviour during future challenges, including the next stages of the Greek drama following the Syriza victory in the country's January 2015 parliamentary elections. In this new episode – still playing out as this article is finalised – the same fault-line is evident: between on the one hand the strict rule-based discourse dominant among finance ministers in the eurogroup (in which then Greek Finance Minister Varoufakis was completely isolated within two months), a perspective which corresponds to the idea of the Union as a market and a monetary union, and on the other hand a prudent readiness among heads of government, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, to weigh in the geopolitical consequences of a Grexit and to keep the dialogue with Greek Prime Minister Tsipras open as long as possible, even after he called for a 'no'-vote in a referendum on the creditors' rescue package proposal. Three years on, the Greek debt situation is direr than in 2012, but with the addition of the Russia crisis over Ukraine, the strategic stakes of a Grexit are higher too. Regardless of the ultimate outcome, all the key players are aware of this double dimension.

II. Limits to Rule-Based Policies, or Governance vs. Government

Limits to Rule-Based Policies in the Neighbourhood

That European states gave themselves rules to pacify interstate relations is historically the European Union's greatest achievement and remains a crucial asset. The Union has been taking this approach in relations with countries in its immediate neighbourhood as well. The European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union's Association Agreements all follow the EU's internal approach of gradually expanding rule-based interstate relations to as many areas as possible of economic, judicial and political life. However, you cannot base joint action on fixed rules *alone* when you are faced with unforeseen circumstances. Perhaps precisely because of the Union's internal successes, there is a danger that Europeans overestimate the potential of such an approach to work in all contexts and at all times. Similarly, research on the EU's relations with its immediate neighbours often focuses on the proliferation and expansion of 'Europeanisation', rather than on exceptions to it (e.g. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005; Jacoby, 2006; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009; Börzel and Langbein, 2013). Unfortunately such an approach is not a solid preparation for times when – given the anarchy across the Mediterranean in Libya and Syria and violence to Europe's East – the exception risks becoming the rule.

With Ukraine, Europe's enlargement and neighbourhood policy is reaching its limits – geographically and conceptually. Europe wants to be a force of normative attraction for its neighbours while at the same time denying that it thereby projects power, a perspective which proved seductive to both policy-makers and academics (Manners, 2002). This self-denial has become untenable, however, in light of the return of hard geopolitics. In negotiations about stronger ties, the EU representatives asked Ukraine in November 2013 to choose between signing the Association Agreement with Europe and joining the Customs Union with Russia. This was a truly *existential* geopolitical choice and, as it turned out, a matter of war and peace, so it was rather light-hearted to justify it by reference to bureaucratic rules (in this case those of the World Trade Organization, WTO).

Meanwhile, the first policy lessons have been learnt. The consequences of the 'return of politics' are now acknowledged in Brussels. A March 2015 EU paper, issued by High Representative Federica Mogherini and the Commission, states, with an unusual degree of candor, that the neighbourhood policy 'has not always been able to offer adequate responses to recent developments' (European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security Affairs, 2015). Three shifts point to a growth in political realism. First, the paper touches on 'differentiation' and 'flexibility'. In other words: stop putting countries from Egypt to Armenia in one basket and be able to react to changing circumstances. Second, look at the 'neighbours of the neighbours', meaning: do not design a Ukraine policy as if Russia did not exist, nor an Egypt policy that fails to consider Saudi Arabia and Iran. Third, it highlights 'stability' and 'security' as goals alongside democracy and human rights. This is no doubt a lesson from Libya, where the West brought down a dictator only to get anarchy and a refugee crisis instead. All three shifts cause EU policies to depart from the rule-based 'Europeanisation' model and encourage a more political interaction with neighbouring countries.

Events will push European countries to acknowledge that, like it or not, they are jointly a power-player. The new President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, seems to carry this conviction in his bones. Upon entering office, on 1 December 2014, he said: 'Politics has returned to Europe, history is back and such times need leadership and unity' (Tusk, 2014). With the former Polish Prime Minister for two-and-a-half, perhaps five years at the helm of the body of national leaders, this awareness will not be quick to disappear.

Limits to Rule-Based Policies in Economic and Monetary Union

Just as values and standards alone cannot constitute a foreign policy, rules alone cannot constitute an economic policy. In the Greek emergency of 2010, member countries learned the hard way that their Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) cannot survive a shock by relying purely on rules for debt and deficit. It required not only better rule enforcement, but also better crisis management. The argument in certain German and Dutch circles that if only the Maastricht debt rules had been respected, all would have been well, comes down to saying that as long as nobody plays with fire, there is no need for a fire brigade.

Leaders concluded they had to take joint political responsibility for their currency's future. This happened as early as 11 February 2010, at a snowy summit at the very start of the Greek crisis. Confronted with the problems of their colleague Papandreou, who was facing bankruptcy at home, Merkel and Sarkozy came round to the hard-fought formula, proposed by European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, that the financial stability of the euro area is a 'shared responsibility' and that they would take determined action, *if needed*, to safeguard it. That political declaration by the 'Heads' introduced the principle upon which, a few months later, rescue mechanisms worth billions of euro were built (Van Rompuy, 2014, pp. 11-15)

There is no need here to go into all the policy measures taken during the crisis years – from the Stability Mechanism to the Fiscal Compact, six-pack to two-pack and Banking Union – only to analytically assess the result. (Readers may refer to a recent special issue of *Journal of European Public Policy* for assessments of the Union's crisis measures from the perspective of among others liberal intergovernmentalism (Schimmelfennig, 2015),

neofunctionalism (Niemann and Ioannou, 2015) and historical institutionalism (Verdun, 2015)). In repairing the Monetary Union, leaders not only replaced old rules with better ones, with better compliance, they also realised that, as well as rules, steering a currency requires crisis mechanisms, permanent political guidance and a common understanding of its needs. The precise way to achieve all this is still under construction (see the inconclusive 2013 debate on economic policy coordination) and the new rules still have to ‘set’ themselves (as the skirmishes between the European Commission and France and Italy over their 2015 budgets showed), but at least the need for member governments jointly deciding on the overall direction *and* emergencies has been firmly impressed upon everyone’s mind. Following the latest stages of the Greek drama, new proposals to improve the functioning of the Eurozone are being developed between Paris, Berlin and Brussels.

Government vs. Governance

The French government long ago made the point that the Eurozone needed a *gouvernement économique*, an ‘economic government’ as opposed to mere ‘economic governance’. The Germans, traditionally reluctant to deploy such language as they feared the concept would undermine existing rules and would not sit well with the independence of the European Central Bank (ECB), have now accepted the need for *Wirtschaftsregierung*.⁷ This semantic shift took place between 2010 and 2012 and would be worth tracing in more detail⁸ – not for the sake of a history of the vocabulary, but because battles over words very often help us to grasp underlying political forces. In this case, it puts us on the trail of the ‘return of politics’. Famous earlier semantic battles in the European Union’s history include the stand of first de Gaulle and then Thatcher against the self-coronation of the Parliamentary Assembly as a ‘Parliament’, and the 2002–2004 collision of two visions of the Union’s legal and political order resulting in the uneasy (and in the end untenable) semantic compromise of a ‘Constitutional Treaty’ (van Middelaar, 2014, pp. 277–282 and 22).

Against this background it is striking that the word ‘government’, having been taboo in EU vocabulary ever since Walter Hallstein overplayed his hand in the run-up to the 1965–66 Empty Chair Crisis, is re-entering the semantic scene, albeit in *economic* disguise. It should be no surprise that it took an unprecedented crisis in the Union’s history to force this point. A crisis brings us to an essential aspect of political life: the capacity to deal with unexpected situations. In his magisterial *The Machiavellian Moment*, John Pocock – analysing the meta-political importance of the renaissance transition from a theological, pre-ordained universe to the partly man-made, partly fortune-driven world of politics and history – defines government at its moment of rebirth precisely as ‘a series of devices for dealing with contingent time’ (Pocock, 1975, p. 27). Politics is the authoritative form in which a society copes with the unknown, with historic change.

⁷ To be clear: this is not to say that Berlin now downplays the importance of rules; Germany’s acceptance of the term rather seems to point to an acknowledgement of the role of political institutions such as the European Council in enforcing compliance.

⁸ In such a reconstruction, it would also be worth pointing out that the Dutch government prudishly continues to refer to ‘economic governance’ (in English), avoiding the term ‘economische regering’ (government).

To conclude the point with a research question: could we assert that the crisis-induced experience of the limits of rules-based, invisibly-engineered policies brings with it a transition from *governance* to *governance-plus-government*? Could this possibly correspond with a passage from mainly *normative*, rule-setting policies to these plus hierarchical, *executive* decisions? (a point made by de Schoutheete, 2012; see also Curtin, 2009). I am aware of the contested nature of these concepts and the different ways in which they have been used in the EU governance debate since the 1990s. Yet while acknowledging the continuity of the 'normal', governance way of doing business in most fields, the euro-crisis has forced some unprecedented, stark decisions.

There is a wider point at stake here regarding the changing nature of European integration. It seems practitioners, academics and the wider public are just beginning to discover the formidable difference between *running a market* (the task historically assigned to EU institutions, with all the regulatory functions it entails) and *running a currency*, including from the point of view of public legitimacy. It is a watershed.⁹ The headlines, demonstrations and contested parliamentary votes on EU matters over the past few years unmistakably point to the presence of *political salience* – for better and for worse.¹⁰ Although we are used to thinking of change in European politics in step-by-step terms, with hindsight the introduction of the euro was a bigger leap than most people acknowledged then, or even do now.

Perhaps the painful case of the decision on Cyprus in March 2013 can illustrate the new type of stark decisions: to say, after an inclusive, legislative process, to *all* member states that *all* banks under their jurisdiction have to comply with certain rules by a given year is rather different from saying, after a tough poker-like negotiation, to the Head of State of a specific member state on the brink of default: Please close this bank within hours.¹¹

To date, this type of question has been studied more in the domain of foreign affairs, which by its nature requires executive decisions that go beyond normative approaches and in which the European Union has built up some experience as well. Of course, the sheer sophistication by which 'EU actorness' in foreign policy is being conceptualised in the political science literature might in itself be an indication of the real-life obstacles on that road. At the same time, the stark current geopolitical challenges – starting with that of Russia – will force Europe's member states to make further choices in the years ahead, the first signs of which can be perceived already.

⁹ In this context, Uwe Puetter has spoken of the 'post-Maastricht integration paradox': since two decades, we see the combination of powerful forward momentum in European integration and a marked lack of transfer of competences to the traditional supranational institutions. (Puetter, 2012 and Puetter, 2014). See also the current debate in *JCMS* on the 'new intergovernmentalism', with a lead article by the same author and two colleagues (Bickerton, 2015 Hodson and Puetter, 2015) and a reaction by Schimmelfennig.

¹⁰ Not even the most astute political scientists had foreseen this. In his landmark piece 'In Defence of the 'Democratic Deficit' (2002) – the *JCMS* 40th. Anniversary Lecture – Andrew Moravcsik 2002 made not a single reference to the potential consequences of the introduction of the euro for the Union's public legitimacy (except for the ECB's role in monetary policy). Thirteen years on, we live in a different Union.

¹¹ One could argue there is nothing unusual about EU decisions with a single addressee, as competition policy, chemicals regulation or aviation safety are all about that, but the Cyprus decision, which could only be negotiated by the country's President, in a full day of tense talks with its creditors – equally represented at the highest political level, with the heads of the European Council, the Central Bank, the Commission and the IMF – and just hours before a potentially catastrophic bankruptcy, had, to use a deliberately subjective term, a different 'dramatic' quality. This matters for the public experience and legitimacy of decisions (see also below, *sub III*).

All this has huge implications and opens up new sets of new questions: first about where the Union's executive power is located, or perhaps how it is being improvised, and second about how that power can best be controlled and made accountable – and in that order.

III. Daily Experience and Domestic Politics

The most crucial political experience of recent years has concerned the degree of interdependence of European countries. Since 2010, people across the Eurozone have found out what it really means to share a currency. They now know that what happens with debts in Italy, housing bubbles in Ireland or banks in Cyprus can have a direct impact on their jobs, their pensions, their savings in Germany, Portugal or Estonia (and vice versa). They are interlinked politically as well as economically. In recent years, national elections in Greece, the Netherlands, Italy or Germany have been followed intently across the rest of Europe, as were the 2015 UK elections – not out of exotic curiosity but as the tremors and rumbles of a now common political space.

It took political leaders about two years to come to terms with their discovery of this interdependence. (One could take the June 2012 European Council decision to go beyond temporary stopgaps and to address the euro crisis' systemic origins by building a banking union as the end-point of that period.) It is not surprising that public opinions are taking even more time than the leaders to digest what EU membership entails – the more so since for many people that discovery has been an unpleasant one. Today, through the currency and free movement, Europe is a daily experience for all citizens. The novelty of this situation should not be underestimated. As recently as twenty-five years ago, 'Europe' basically mattered to only a few groups: big business, farmers, the first 'Erasmus' students, plus those studying it in legal circles, universities and think tanks. Of course the 1992 Maastricht treaty referendum debates in France or Denmark constituted a first breach in the 'permissive consensus' on European integration, but for the Union as a whole the political intensity of these and later episodes clearly pales in comparison to that of the euro crisis. To take one electoral indication of the scale of the political difficulties: seventeen out of twenty leaders of national governments facing elections between May 2010 and June 2012 were defeated, and in at least half of these cases that was a direct result of the crisis.¹² Opposition parties thriving on proposals to leave the eurozone and/or the European Union itself likewise point to the greater salience of the political and economic bonds of EU membership.

European politics is more than ever domestic politics. During the euro crisis, national political leaders and parliaments played a central role. It could not have been otherwise. The central EU institutions did not possess enough financial firepower and competencies,

¹² One may interpret one or the other case differently, but the number of EU Heads of State or Government forced to resign following crisis-related electoral defeat or political pressure in the space of these 24 months would seem to include the following ten: Slovak PM Robert Fico (July 2010), Irish Taoiseach Brian Cowen (March 2011), Portuguese PM José Sócrates (June 2011), Finnish PM Mari Kiviniemi (June 2011), Greek PM George Papandreou (Nov. 2011), Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi (Nov. 2011), Spanish PM José Luis Zapatero (Nov. 2011), Slovenian PM Borut Pahor (Feb. 2012), Slovak PM Iveta Radicova (April 2012) and French President Nicolas Sarkozy (May 2012). In this period, only three EU leaders survived national elections (Donald Tusk, Andrus Ansip and Valdis Dombrowskis, in Poland, Estonia and Latvia respectively). Five other leaders were voted out of office in the period (the UK's Gordon Brown, Hungary's Gordon Bajnai, Denmark's Lars-Lykke Rasmussen, Belgium's Yves Leterme and Jan-Peter Balkenende in the Netherlands).

nor the legitimacy to change the rules on which they were built. Nevertheless, authoritative European voices such as Jürgen Habermas or Jacques Delors deplored the involvement of national leaders in the crisis management as a ‘renationalisation of European politics’, even comparing it to the 1930s (Habermas, 2011). Perhaps they misread the situation. Perhaps what we are seeing, instead, is a ‘Europeanisation of national politics’. Provided the right consequences are drawn from this state of affairs, it will strengthen the common adventure.

IV. The Nature of the Beast – Call It a Union

During the debt crisis, many US and some European critics claimed the euro countries faced a fateful choice: ‘Unite or die’; either jump to a federal Eurozone or see it collapse.

Two strands of thought ventured this critique. The first was based on economic thinking, expressed mainly by US commentators, ranging from authors of *Wall Street Journal* editorials to International Monetary Fund experts, focusing on Europe’s ability or inability to ‘deliver the policies’ that would ensure growth. The second strand was based on constitutional thinking, expressed mainly by European intellectuals (with a centre of gravity in Germany and around the Brussels institutions). Their key concerns were not economic growth and banking policies but rather democracy, identity and solidarity. Although their policy preferences were at odds, these two strands of thought shared a belief in a particular *logic* (of either an economic or constitutional nature) versus the *messiness* of Europe’s history. The euro crisis was a moment of truth, said both *WSJ* and Habermas *c.s.*. Indeed, but a glance further back into history suggests that European politics will retain a dynamism of its own. Nineteen states with one currency: perhaps unpractical, but a political fact of life. The euro is here to stay and so are the member states.

To take the tension out of the system there are two things one can do: abolish the single currency or dispense with national democracy. Neither is going to happen. There were deep motives for setting up the single currency that had to do with Franco-German relations after the *Wende* of 1989 and a vision of the political future of the continent; in recent years it has been saved by the main players in Berlin, Paris and Brussels for political reasons as well. As to national democracy, European nation states are first and foremost democracies. It is a requirement of joining the Union. More generally, democracy was invented to accommodate and bridge differences – by means of compromises and a permanent conversation. The latter is nothing to be embarrassed about; it is the noble, creative task of European politics.

A Proper Self-Understanding

This clarification is crucial for people’s trust in the joint enterprise. For too long the history of integration has been portrayed as a slow erosion of the nation-states by a new centre, the Union as a half-baked provisional entity on the way to a perfect federal future. This view is historically wrong and politically irresponsible. A *political* Europe cannot be built against the states, only *with* the states.

Indeed, the adventure’s sixty-year history can perfectly be described as the transformation of the brilliant founding idea of a new European beginning into a political space where all member-states – first their governments and increasingly their parliaments

and peoples – realise they are in it together (this is one of the storylines in van Middelaar, 2014; for other intermediate concepts, see e.g. Nicolaïdis, 2012 ('demoi-cracy') or Bickerton, 2012).

In the public debate it is hard to get this view across. The sterile opposition between a good 'Community method' and bad 'intergovernmentalism', between true Europe and national politics, still holds sway. Chancellor Merkel tried to break the conceptual deadlock when in 2010 she proposed the term 'Union method' to express the new political reality. But she hit some nerves in Brussels and within her own party and retreated from this semantic stand. A pity: if the Union is to retain the support of its citizens and member-peoples, it is urgent to fight the public's suspicion of a Brussels plot, while making clear Europeans do have a shared destiny.

Europe's political life would be helped by a proper self-understanding. The Union is not a 'normal' international organisation. This is not just a matter of legal analysis or of political science definitions, but also of public experience. Look at France or the Netherlands during their referendums on the constitutional treaty in 2005, or the United Kingdom today: would any country ever have such a passionate public debate about its membership of the World Health Organisation (WHO) or even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)?

Nor is the European Union a US-style federation or becoming one. Some enlightened minds keep hoping for a 'United States of Europe'. At every occasion, they shout their disappointment that this is not happening, thereby eroding further trust in the Union's necessarily imperfect achievements. The better is the enemy of the good.

A European public will not be created by asking people to step out of their German, Polish, British or Maltese clothes, but only by repeating time and again that it is precisely as Germans, Maltese etc. that they are European. The great French historian Jacques Le Goff once pointed out that the idea of a common European space gained ground at the same time as the kingdoms of France, Spain and England developed, in the fifteenth century. As he said: 'Europe was born as a federation of kingdoms' (Le Goff, 2004). Today we are shaping the continuation of this long, rich history of the peoples and states on our continent.

Conclusion: Binding Dissensus

Here lies the reason why the euro and Ukraine crises brought not just uncomfortable truths but some empowering clarifications: about Europe's invisible political glue, secreted in time of need; about its capacity to change its constitutional form as well as its policies; about its new-and-still-undigested relevance to all citizens; and about the Union's firm place in the longer timeline of the continent's political metamorphoses. This article proposed to bring these phenomena together under the umbrella of a 'return of politics'. Under the pressure of events, the EU institutions are learning that there are limits to what they have been so good at: defusing internal conflicts, depoliticizing issues, bracketing power. This unique pacifying endeavour must continue, but it is now clear that the rule-based approach cannot deal with all the challenges facing the EU, internal and external. Perhaps that should not have been a surprise, since ultimately, as Giovanni Sartori wisely wrote, 'politics cannot be taken out of politics' (quoted in Isiksel, 2015). This is why the 'return of politics' is neither a ghost from the past nor a temporary

anomaly. On the contrary, assuming it and understanding it may be the only realistic way to preserve Europe's unity and liberty in the future.

This assessment – to conclude – is not made *in spite of* citizens' unprecedented disenchantment with EU institutions, nationalist and populist tendencies in all member states and the loud if contradictory calls for a more democratic Union, but *because of* all these. The 'return of politics' *fuels* and explains the call for a more democratic Union. Whether on Greece, Ukraine, migration or trade: every day the 28 member states make joint decisions on Europe's destiny that are more than purely technical, treaty-bound steps, and the public perceives this perfectly well. It is not sufficient to say EU integration has moved on from the era of 'permissive consensus' to that of 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). We have moved on from that too. Democracy is not only a procedural ploy or decision-making constraint; it also uniquely allows a *symbolic staging of conflicts* in order to pacify and harness these, or even to turn them into a source of strength and liberty.¹³ In this sense the road for the Union is clear: not going back to 'permissive consensus', but forward to *binding dissensus* – to a self-understanding that does not snap as a result of tensions and conflicts, but entails them. Ultimately, this requires the confidence that that what binds Europeans is stronger than what separates them – nothing more but nothing less.

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¹³ Liberty and strength for the whole as a result of division among the parts: this was the deep insight, as regards the early Roman Republic, of Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* (1517), an insight elaborated upon in 20th-century political philosophy by Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort and others.

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