

06.10.2016 Europe. The clouds are gathering

It is difficult to find any good news in Europe today. From Brexit to the Hungarian referendum on immigration, from Poland, currently cracking down on women's rights to Italy, turning its back on its regions as France did with the Valls reform, via an anti-European hard right that's more threatening than ever - including in Germany - the warning lights are red everywhere we look. Not to mention still-growing unemployment, which could yet get worse because in the coming months the European economy will be faced with rising energy prices and interest rates. An economic downturn, political and ideological weakening: the clouds are gathering.

Of course, it could be worse. The Hungarian referendum failed by a substantial margin to reach the 50% turnout threshold, which robs it of any legal force. But it is extremely worrying to see a European decision, reached in accordance with the Treaties by procedures ratified by all Member States, challenged in this way. If this were to happen regularly, total paralysis would soon follow. The very credibility of the European Union is undermined by such votes. Migration is a favourite topic for demagogues, and the Hungarian President Viktor Orbán is among the most rabid. The far right is prospering in France and in Europe and the Brexit campaign won, both with the help of the poisonous fare of racism. In fact this last was a Pyrrhic victory, since migratory pressures persist in London as elsewhere.

Faced with between six and eight million migrants fleeing war in Syria and Iraq, who have flocked to Jordan, Lebanon, Kurdistan, and - in the case of a million of them - Europe, it is hard to think of a better solution than the European proposal to allocate these people across the 28 Member States in order to mitigate their impact and to help local communities to take care of their housing and literacy needs, the education of their children and so on. No political or economic consideration which ignores the importance of showing compassion can be acceptable. This is the very basis of our civilisation. The Hungarian referendum, therefore, in response to a refugee quota which is really rather modest in comparison with the population of that country, is unacceptable as a matter of principle. The low turnout is welcome, but that the referendum has been put forward by a government in power is a matter of great concern. On another problematic front for Europeans, the economic crisis has not done with us yet. Yesterday it was Greece, today - Germany! The German banking giant Deutsche Bank has yet to reach a settlement for its part in the 2008 subprime crisis in the United States, something which threatens its structural stability. Elsewhere, interest rates will soon start to rise: how will economies weakened by public debt - Greece, Spain, Italy, even France - withstand this new state of affairs, perhaps exacerbated by rising oil prices?

And at this crucial juncture, Europe is destabilised by the scandal of former leaders like José Manuel Barroso and other European commissioners, openly poached by lobbies that have a direct responsibility for the crisis, such as the US bank Goldman Sachs which was directly involved in the troubles of Greece, and has just recruited the former European Commission president with an enormous pay package.

The north and the south of Europe resemble the ant and the grasshopper in the fable, with the north as the ant, supporting the south via European funds and the solidarity mechanism that ensures the stability of the euro, and the south as the grasshopper, hard hit by unemployment. The temptation to seek divorce is running through Europe, and partly explains the British decision. How can the contagion be avoided?

The challenges awaiting the European Union are considerable. Will the democracies of Europe be able to find leaders able to confront them? This will be a serious source of concern in the times to come.