

ONLY A UNITED STATES OF EUROPE CAN MAKE EUROPE BETTER

Franco Frattini

THE fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 turned out to be the biggest challenge faced by Europe since its post-World War II inception. Across the world, that great event has come to symbolize the triumph of democracy and the voice of the people. We should never forget that two decades after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, Europe and the world have gained enormously from democratic and economic integration. The integration of European countries under the banner of democracy, from 2004 onwards, has proven that.

This was the only possible and morally right way to overcome the divisions originating in the Cold War: the only answer was to let Europe be unified.

I feel truly fortunate to have worked for Europe in those exciting times: both

during my commitments as Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs (2002-2004, 2008-2011); and Vice-President and Commissioner in Brussels (2004-2008).

Let us begin by recalling some recent solid achievements caused by EU integration: the further expansion of NATO in 2004 and 2009; the 2003 strategy reaffirming the European perspective for the Western Balkans launched at the Thessaloniki Summit; the Rome Constitutional Treaty, signed in 2004 (although it failed to enter into force); the great enlargement of 2004; the implementation of the EU's Balkans Strategy (e.g. the visa-free regime, the accession of Romania and Bulgaria); the 2007 expansion of the Schengen Zone; and the launch of the EU Migration Policy with the establishment of an EU Agency for external borders (FRONTEX).

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Photo: FoNet / Ebs

Franco Frattini during his tenure as Vice-President of the European Commission

These are commitments that European governments achieved because of courage, resolution and, above all, because Brussels was disposed to tackle real problems and, as a consequence, give hope for a better life to “old and new” citizens alike.

Then came the year 2008. The economic crisis erupted and expanded, undermining the political system whilst giving rise to popular euroscepticism. The forces of integration and disintegration—of European solidarity and national egoism, the centripetal and the centrifugal—entered into a tough, open confrontation.

MAKING EUROPE BETTER

Will we succeed in having a better Europe? I'm confident that we will. To make Europe better, to achieve the success to which we aspire, we should take a good look at ourselves, before pointing fingers at others.

During the last European election campaign, despite some signs of economic recovery across much of the EU, people spoke more than ever about how Europe is part of the problem, not part of the solution. As a consequence, we witnessed stunning victories in the European parliamentary elections by

nationalist, Eurosceptic parties from France and Britain, which left the European Union licking its wounds and facing a giant policy dilemma.

Across the Old Continent, anti-establishment parties of the far-Right and hard-Left more than doubled their representation, harnessing a mood of anger with Brussels over austerity and mass unemployment. In my opinion, the reason why Europe has not performed well, and why populist movements have gained influence and power, is a lack of effective leadership.

Does that mean we should surrender?

Or does it mean a new fight not to let the destroyers win? What I believe is that we cannot stay where we are. If we don't go forward, we will go backwards.

The way to strengthen our European community lies in two simple projects. First of all, to go on with enlargement, because in this globalized world we will be weaker if we close our door to fellow Europeans. We must not succumb to the false view that the EU's new Member States and candidate countries are "aliens"—for, like us, they really belong to the story, culture and values of Europe.

Secondly, we cannot have a Europe of the people without re-launching political integration. We need a United States of Europe. Europe must not turn into a cage of duties, rules and procedures which often end up restraining everyone's actions. There is general agreement today that the euro, when it was created, had a

serious birth defect: Europe's political leaders created a currency union without a political union. The hope was, of course, that over the years the countries sharing the same currency would come to harmonize their fiscal, economic and social policies. But this has not happened.

Monetary union is not enough. Not anymore. Without political integration and leadership, the future of European peoples remains a chimera. Europe's challenge today is to overcome this birth defect by building and establishing institutions and mechanisms essential for forming a political union. We will not build the United States of Europe anytime soon, but we will have to transfer political sovereignty from the national to the European level, and this is going to need to happen sooner rather than later.

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What does the United States of Europe really mean?

Let's be pragmatic and ask ourselves what we can really do to limit the damage caused by those who only want to destroy instead of build. Let's list how Brussels could stop being elite-driven and start working on issues concerning people and common policies first. The main goal must be to enable Europe to speak with a single popular voice—one our peoples can fully identify with.

We need to move forward in a decisive and practical way by not only discussing but acting on our views to set common, realistic, and implementable policies in a number of important areas.

Let's start by thinking about the Western Balkans: its integration should remain what the official Brussels wording defines as a "concrete priority." Yet in practice, we need to guard against what some EU Member States are considering, namely reviewing the existing visa-free regime—the most powerful and tangible magnet for the countries of the region to overcome nationalist and isolationist feelings!

Let's also think about the Ukraine crisis: the EU was divided and shy from the very beginning of the crisis. Some made the very serious mistake of presenting the EU-Ukraine association agreement as an instrument to counter Russia's aspirations or to promote a new "containment policy." In the meantime, the EU's offer of financial support to Ukraine was totally insufficient: the U.S. and the

EU together could not even cover the Ukrainian debt toward Russia on gas supply. Truth be told, on Ukraine, the EU gave over the initiative to the U.S.—including the proposal and decision on sanctions, and even the deployment of U.S. troops to the Baltics and in Poland.

Let's think seriously about the lack of an EU energy security strategy. How is it possible that we still don't have a common policy on this important issue?

Moreover, let's talk about our defense and security strategy. The last strategic document dates back to December 2003. Eleven years later, in a completely changed world, where is our new policy on EU common defense, on national and international security?

Let's talk about foreign policy, as well: where was the EU in 2013, and where

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is it now concerning the catastrophic situation in Syria or Libya? What does Brussels think and do in terms of fighting against the arc of terror extending from the Horn of Africa to the Sahel?

Where's the EU policy on immigration? Every day, on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, we see hundreds of thousands of children, men and women falling into the hands of criminals trafficking in human beings. This is not a slavery movie: this is really happening in the Europe of the twenty-first century. Do you know that when Italy established the "Mare Nostrum" mission (in this year alone, at least 30,000 lives have been saved) EU Institutions replied only with bureaucratic exercise?

During my term as EU Vice-President, FRONTEX was able to bring together 11 countries to help Spain address the 2005-2006 migratory crisis from Senegal and Guinea to the Canary Islands. After almost 10 years, the total funds of FRONTEX amount to less than what Italy spends in six months for the "Mare Nostrum" mission. That's incredible!

How can one explain to a Sicilian fisherman that Brussels dictates strict rules on fishing tuna, while turning its back when thousands of desperate people land on Lampedusa?

Last, let's take a decision on Syria and Egypt, and let's talk again about Libya. The main objective of foreign policy at the EU level is to use diplomacy—or talking, meeting, and reaching common agreements—to solve common problems, not advance national interests.

I can completely agree that everything is being stress-tested in the economic crisis—above all, Europe itself. But as the Chinese remind us, the word for 'crisis' is composed of two characters: one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity. Ideas and proposals—even if and when they are strong and well grounded—need to be transformed into concrete opportunities.

This is a lesson for Europe and its leaders. Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results. Leaders, as Alcide De Gasperi used to say, are people who think about the next generation, instead of the next election. People still believe in Europe, but they trust politicians and institutions much less. The new Parliament and the new European Commission president will only be able to reverse this scepticism, only if concrete issues close to the hearts of ordinary people become the EU's core business, while cutting the predominant influence of bureaucracy and technocrats. ●