

The European malaise and the failure of leadership

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Many worry about the legitimacy of the European Union. At a recent RECON conference in Vienna it was a principal topic. But why this concern for legitimacy? Presumably at the back of people's minds lie questions such as 'can we avoid riots and civil commotion?' and 'can we avoid the disintegration of the EU?'

With recent Greek events in mind, it seems that, to the first of these questions, we need to answer 'no'. Greece is a huge failure that should be seen as such in order to avoid worse failures. Why were there riots and loss of life in Greece in May 2010? One reason is because successive Greek governments had been allowed to use EU money to buy off social unrest. For years all that has been needed to see this policy in action has been to visit as a tourist and observe all the projects begun with EU money that were never finished because Greek matching funds were not spent. This was clear evidence of maladministration even if it were not possible to discover that Greek accounts were being cooked. The EU should not be permitting maladministration of EU funds any more than it should be allowing the misreporting of national accounts. The events in Greece point to a failure of administration in the wider EU.

Greek governments buying off political opposition through misuse of structural funds is only one aspect of a phenomenon that is all too common in the EU. Another is the sight of governments lying to their citizens about unpopular decisions made in Brussels and their role in these decisions. Claiming to have protected national interests (a favourite description of national actions in Brussels) quite misrepresents the role of national governments in EU decision-making where, even today, unanimity is a norm if no longer a rule. And the inconsistency of governments spinning around to defend the EU when anyone asks why their country should remain a member of such a union is evident to voters and con-

tributes to lack of trust in both EU and national institutions – raising the specter of a negative answer to the second of the questions I raised above: can we avoid the disintegration of the EU?

What maladministration by national governments has in common with blaming the EU for unpopular developments is the lack of any figure or figures in Brussels with sufficient stature to be able to blow the whistle on lies and

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to report such as can be found in national capitals where governments fight to survive in a battle for electoral support. For Europe to become interesting enough to be reported in national capitals we again require leadership: European leaders contesting over policy in the light of the television cameras, rather than making deals behind closed doors. Only transparency can bring publicity to European affairs and only publicity for the utterances of European leaders can contradict misleading statements in national capitals or reign in maladministration



Jean-Claude Juncker, Angela Merkel, Silvio Berlusconi, Nicolas Sarkozy, Gordon Brown, José Manuel Barroso and Jean-Claude Trichet (from left to right) © European Commission

maladministration in certain member states. There is no one who can speak for Europe and be widely heard in Athens or London. Moreover, there is no press corps in Brussels to report the whistle even if it were blown. European citizens learn whatever little they know about the EU from national media reporting national news. If the EU appears in this news it is generally through the lens of reports made by national figures that of course have their own axes to grind.

The reason why there is no press corps in Brussels is because most of the news that comes from Brussels is complicated and technical. There is no simple drama

of European funds and misreporting of national accounts.

The EU's member countries are democracies even if the EU itself is not. But citizens in these democracies cannot hold their governments to account when their doings regarding Europe are a closed book. It will take democracy in the EU to restore accountability to the EU's member countries. Yet, ironically, the primary reason why we do not

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have a democratic EU is because national governments do not want that. The riots in Athens thus signal something far bigger than just a time of reckoning for Greece. They also warn of a time of reckoning for the EU as a whole.