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Europe's crisis: unification without a unifying spirit

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For months, indeed years, headlines about the European Union (EU) have been adorning the world's leading newspapers, magazines and even the most advanced social media. The EU is popular! Finally! It took decades to achieve such attention. The sad thing is that it now comes in a negative way. "Crisis" is the word that keeps jumping off the page and never seems to lose its relevance to what is going on in the European network of states.

True, talking about the crisis in Ireland and Greece is already passé, and the same applies to other Mediterranean countries such as Portugal, Italy and Spain, but what now dominates the headlines are the flow-on effects — mainly, the crisis of the euro. The European currency, together with its acquired "parents" Angela Merkel and Nicholas Sarkozy, forms the axis of European interests, so that "Merkozy" now determines the course on which the EU will proceed. This implies more emergency money from the member states for the European Central Bank, even though member states themselves suffer from national financial crises. It also means budget control of the member states by Brussels, so that financial fiascos such as those procured by Ireland, Greece and other southern European countries can no longer occur.

But there is rebellion in the ranks. The European citizen for whose sake, in theory, the entire unification process exists, feels left out and, not surprisingly, turns against the whole project. Nationalism in the bad sense creeps in. Extremism, general confusion and xenophobia are ever more common.

What's happening to the EU? This is a question which the Europeans themselves and people worldwide raise in astonishment and even in despair. The answer is not easily given. Let us therefore turn to the thought of its main founding father, Robert Schuman, so

as to discover the field in which the appropriate response is to be found.

First of all, it needs to be made clear that Schuman regarded the unification of Europe as a necessity not only because of the threats of Communism, the East-West conflict and a possible third world war — over Germany, or even led by Germany once it had recovered. No, this deep thinker saw it as a necessary condition for the survival of Europe. The continent needed to become strong and healthy again so as to avoid disasters such as the many wars, especially the world wars, it had experienced in the past. According to him, Franco-German reconciliation was not enough. In order to achieve successful unification this reconciliation should be accompanied by effective solidarity and a moral order based on Christianity, products of the European spiritual and cultural heritage.

Schuman's strategy for unification was one of cautious small steps. He compared it with the process of crossing a shallow river: putting a foot carefully on one stone and making sure it is firm before taking the next step. He was particularly insistent on the need to restrain the desire to go fast towards the final goal. People would not be able to cope with a hurried process that, in fact, needed a careful preparation of the mind:

We are still at the start of things. We would do well to bridle our impatience. If not, we are likely to make the doubters more distrustful and, what is more serious, endanger not only the experiment but also the whole idea of a united Europe. (Speech at the Council of Europe, 1949)

According to Schuman, each step of unification needs to be guided by the European spirit. What he means by this is “the consciousness of belonging to a cultural family and the willingness to serve that community in the spirit of total mutuality, without hidden motives or the selfish exploitation of others.” (Schuman, Strasbourg, 16 May, 1949). For this to happen, the sense of belonging to a common European cultural and spiritual family, which entails brotherhood, needs to be fostered constantly. Such a spirit will encourage the willingness to share personal interests with those of others and the practice of solidarity. This again fosters the openness necessary for a unification of interests. On the level of states it will thus facilitate the necessity to do away with national interests that go against common European interests. However, allowing for human nature, the integration also implies that no common European policies should be adopted hastily. The mind of the people (and states), even though they do share the European spirit, needs to get used to the integration process, because at first glance integration seems to take away part of their ownership, even though it is said to be for their own good and prosperity in the short or in the long run.

Schuman's approach is comparable to feeding milk to a baby so that it might grow and later be able to eat solid meat. Eventually the European would mature and be able to deal with mankind on the basis of his own identity – the European spirit. Schuman was therefore not in favour of a rapid unification on every plane as this would neglect the necessary preparation of the human mind. It might kill the entire project unnecessarily. This is why he did not, on purpose, have a detailed plan or a timetable with deadlines to be achieved. He did, however, have a plan according to which he fostered European unification and encouraged cooperation across borders in politics, economics and military affairs. In all these things, this founding father of the EU focused constantly on the European spirit to facilitate precisely this preparation of the people's mind and therewith the process of European unification.

To come back to the initial question of what is happening to the EU: Following Schuman's line of thought we can see that the crisis is linked with the lack of a European spirit among member states, together with the lack of a moral order as the guiding principle for European policies – including in the field of finance. It is the speed of unification that has not allowed for the necessary preparation of European citizens' minds.

The solution? Europe, go back to your roots; make them known to your citizens and be reborn!

Margriet Krijtenburg is a lecturer at the Academy of European Studies, University of The Hague, the Netherlands, and a researcher in the Faculty of Law at Leiden University.

Illustration: A gold euro coin commemorating Robert Schuman and two other EU pioneers, Konrad Adenauer and Paul-Henri Spaak.

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Margriet Krijtenburg

margriet_krijtenburg.370@mercatornet.com

Margriet Krijtenburg studied Spanish philology at the University of Utrecht and wrote her doctoral thesis in Salamanca about the Spanish philosopher and writer Unamuno. To understand his thoughts... [More by Margriet Krijtenburg](#)

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