

Federalist replies to more diversity and unity in Europe

Overcoming the current sclerosis

In order to construct Europe, there is much to commend from a blend that mixes the experiences of old and new, large and small, richer and poorer, unitary and decentralised member states. Make a perfect mix with all these characteristics, and you would probably obtain a region like Catalunya. The region reflects by its past, its current situation in Spain, and the development of its society all the difficulties and contradictions of Europe.

If Catalunya were building material, it would be concrete. It is perfect for all uses in construction as it gradually transforms and increases its structuring capacities. As it hardens, it also shows its flexibility by adopting various forms. I have been analysing it as a neutral outsider, and have seen it responds to all the qualities. I hope I can convince that it can serve as useful material to construct the future of Europe.

History leaves it traces

History has left strong traces and makes itself felt at every point in Catalunya. First, being part of an ancient empire like Spain, with still vivid links to South America and a globally used language, puts it a par with other former European powers. At the same time, century long decline, bad governance, internal struggles, the power of the Church have closed the region from influences from the rest of Europe, and reduced its political clout. Second, Spain shares with other EU countries the memory of ideological conflict that led to civil war, as a consequence of which it shared the burden of totalitarian rule, just like the newcomers to the EU. Third, the rich regional differences in culture, language and habits are gradually recognised by decentralising the country. But it has also created local nationalisms that often conflict with a centralist knee-jerk reflex in Madrid. Spain has become a federalist country all but in name. But after failed attempts to construct a federal republic in the eighteenth century, and just before the start of the Civil War, the word Federalism is usually avoided in politics today. It recalls too many bad memories about the past conflicts within the country.

The current sclerosis

In practice, Spanish federalism is à la carte, with ever more difficult coordination between different regions and the government on overlapping competences. Regional governments – often from different political colours – put local politics first, and regional presidents increasingly create local power bases. They coordinate on different subjects between themselves on some points, or directly with the central government on other points, forming coalitions to outplay the central government. Spending and tax competences are under constant discussion, and do not apply in the same way in all regions. Given the wounds of the past, people prefer to keep the discussion on the development of decentralisation quite vague.. As a consequence, the constitution mentions decentralisation in very vague terms, and leaves open-ended the definition of the regional structure.

This sounds pretty familiar for students of the current European Union. The only difference is that Spain arrives there from a very centralised past, while EU countries struggle to transfer competences. National differences preceed over the political colour on issues that usually see a left-right division. Governments keep up the appearance of being able to decide on a national basis, even if they know that they need to agree with other EU countries. Bilateral side agreements lead to unclear compromises. Despite the steps to more integration, the tendency is to concentrate powers in the hands of country presidents in the European Council, instead of the Commission. A lack of political control causes the current confusion of citizens who are not aware anymore of where the important decisions are really taken.

An emerging Europe

This prolonged deadlock on a political Europe ignores that society at large is transforming much faster, and requires further moves ahead in integration. The first steps in European integration have been relatively fast, and perhaps have been leading some changes in society. But past steps in integration are now fully starting to show their positive effects. Economic integration has pushed companies across borders, and boosted trade. A common currency has strenghtened links across markets. Linking economies has also created new facts for people. Trade unions, corporations, interest groups are fastly demanding EU policies to answer labour questions, representation in decisionmaking, and consistent legislation across borders.

EU policies have also moved people. We are nearly all part of the Erasmus generation, and naturally share in different languages a curiosity for new cultures. Moving people means moving harts, and love and relationships know no borders. We also forget that immigration

has created a whole generation of new citizens, that rather than belonging to a country share a language, culture and family ties across Europe. These truly are new Europeans. Their importance will only increase in the future.

These effects are especially strongly felt in Spain. Integration in the EU has benefited enormously to the economic development of a rather backward country to a dynamic open economy. Participation in the euro has withered the country from a worse fate in the current crisis. EU membership has also firmly anchored democracy. Curiously, more than any other EU country, Spain has been attracting thousands of Erasmus students, and millions of migrants. The country is fastly becoming a melting pot of these new influences.

Federalist replies

This emerging Europe demands European answers to European problems. Society is moving faster than EU politics, faster than we are even able to recognise. The emerging Europe is one that will blur ever more national characteristics, not just in economic markets, but in the people living in Europe.

Our reply exists in showing a way to organise these various interests at different levels, respecting the diversity, but finding also the unity. We have a privileged position to play on these challenges, knowing which structure could fit these developments best. Federalists have a task to connect better to the current developments in society. It is necessary that we, federalists, go to talk to people, not so much to talk just about the EU, but about how federalism is an answer to their needs, doubts and questions. That does not require complicated institutional discussions, or hi-tech politics, but on the ground action to demonstrate what does work, and what does not function. More than ever in the past, we can rise up to the challenge to make Europe from the bottom up. Instead of fighting over current EU issues, we need to look ahead to recognise the challenges in the further integration of Europe. We must dare confront the current stalemate with audacious proposals that are a reply to the future challenges.

This also requires that we put federalism at work ourselves. We should reform old structures that resemble more a sclerotic EU than a performing federation. By strenghtening links between sections and members, we can create economies of scale and increase our reach.

More unity does not just mean centralised coordination with a common strategy, but multi-level cooperation, making use also of modern technological means. It also means recognising the diversity of local groups that can adapt the means of common goals to local needs and preferences.

The challenges ahead

Writing from Catalunya gives a good perspective on these developments. Catalunya feels itself often as a stranger to Europe, but knowing its past, it also understands the benefits of more integration. A region that feels ill at ease with its own local position, ambiguous between its international and local role, and aspiring to have more say in Spain and the EU. It is a region that more than others takes in more new Europeans, but sticks also to its own language and traditions.

I myself arrived here about 3 years ago as a new European citizen, moving from another country that is not the one where I was born, working in a language that is not mine, living day by day in a couple of other languages. Having a Belgian passport, and an Italian degree, you may say I have a europhile bias. Certainly, Spain experiences Europe in a very different way than Belgium or Italy. Much depends on historical facts, and the internal political situation. But I have not felt strange with my Spanish residence permit as I compared to friends and relatives that all underwent similar experiences, whether coming from the EU or not. I have always found common points by looking at what people share, what their common needs are, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. And we increasingly share a common future, despite the historical differences and the current divergences. The new European citizens are trying to construct a common life already. For me, federalism gives the right political answer to that challenge.

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