

The Europe barometer points to stormy weather

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The latest Eurobarometer survey showed that 29% of the European population had a negative or very negative view about the EU, representing an all-time high and a doubling compared to the pre-crisis period. At the same time, only 30% still have a positive view about the EU, down from 50%. Policy-makers were convinced that the path followed may have been the only way out of the crisis, but public opinion clearly did not share that view. This reinforces the need for further EU reform to strengthen democratic accountability and to achieve that elusive goal of a closer Union. However, with the sovereign crisis relaxing, the appetite at the top level for further reforms seems to be declining as well.

The sovereign crisis has not only dealt a huge blow to wide swathes of the European population, it also made a deep dent in the popular support for the EU. While a majority of the citizens still supports monetary union and the euro, according to the latest Eurobarometer survey, a majority has started to mistrust the EU institutions, which are seen to be largely technocratic. Rather than moving to an ever-closer Union, the EU is turning away from it, which should set off alarm bells in Brussels and European capitals. The economic governance reforms contained in the 'six-pack', the European Stability Mechanism and the enhanced powers of the European Central Bank (ECB) have strengthened the centre, but not necessarily the democratic control over it. The powers of national parliaments over the European Commission on matters of economic governance remain limited, and the ECB insists on retaining its hallmark trait of independence, now that it will also supervise banks in 24 of the 27 member states.

In the current environment, next year's European Parliament elections will at best be a repetition of the last round of elections in 2009, with very low levels of participation and appalling outcomes in several national contests, unless serious efforts are made to strengthen and effectively demonstrate democratic accountability of the EU. Several proposals to this end are currently circulating, all of which can be realised in the current environment, but none of them seems to be close to implementation. Inter alia, they concern the direct election of members of the European Commission from among members of the European Parliament (EP), the greater use of the right of own initiative by the EP and closer involvement of national parliaments in EU decision-making.

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Debate on these ideas should be launched now in a concerted action by policy-makers and Members of Parliament across the EU. The debate should seek to elucidate for the public what has changed in EU economic governance as a result of the crisis and what has most likely contributed to the current calm in financial markets. It should openly acknowledge the emerging federal (yes, that forbidden word!) model, in which, inter alia, the European Commission is empowered to directly impose fines on eurozone member states that do not respect the fiscal limits, and that the European Central Bank will directly supervise the largest banks in the EU. But the accountability in both cases is limited, too limited for any Parliament to deeply concern itself in the debate.

David Cameron missed an important opportunity in his 'Europe' speech last month to spell out more clearly his view of how better accountability could be worked out in practice. If the British Prime Minister had been more forthright in his assessment that Europe lacks a 'demos', he could have come up with concrete proposals to fill in what more political union means. But, as this would undoubtedly have raised the 'F' word, which he, but also other European leaders want to avoid, he would have undermined his own assessment.

The EU is politically on a track towards greater integration, but its leaders are reluctant to spell out in more detail what this means for the institutional structure. However, with a strong decline in public support for the EU and an emerging reinforced centre, it seems that the only way to keep the fragile equilibrium afloat is to summon up the courage to go forward with concrete proposals for political union. This should also strengthen the legitimacy of the EU model.