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The EU Crisis Seen through the Lenses of the Italian Transition

After two months of instability following the political elections that took place at the end of February 2013, Italy has now a 'grand coalition' government that brings together the two main parties of the centre-left and of the centre-right, plus some forces of civil society. This executive is led by current Prime Minister Enrico Letta. Such an agreement excludes the Five Star Movement created by Beppe Grillo, which is especially relevant since it was the first party, in terms of absolute votes, at the last elections. Berlusconi, who seemed to be in decline during the Mario Monti experience, is now dictating his conditions for political reforms to the current government. The Italian case is extremely revealing of the larger political processes that are going on at the European level. I will here focus on two aspects. The first one is the de-politisation of the political nature of the integration process and its effects, by reason of its specific character and history. The second is the geographical dimension of the crisis that the EU is currently facing and the differentiation this process entails, namely uneven spatial and economic relations, of which Italy, where the gap between north and south has been growing in the last two decades, is a poignant example.

I will start by recalling what has happened in Italy after the elections of February 2013 and the events that led to the formation of the Letta government. I will then show that the Italian case makes the tension between the deep restructuring of statehood at the European level and the simultaneous de-politisation of this political and long term process unsupportable. Phenomena such as Berlusconi and Grillo, even if they are extremely different, show us that this de-politisation can find its expression in populist and extremist terms. Moreover, there is a need to take into account the uneven social and geographical effects of European integration and of the single currency on Italy on the one side and at the level of the EU as a whole. Are these structural effects of EU integration? Or are they primarily the result of the neoliberal policies that have been dominant in the last twenty years at the level of EU institutions, or both? These considerations are important when trying to assess the role of Italy in the EU and what the situation in Italy tells us about the European Union.

The Letta Government or the (false) de-politisation of the crisis

The results of the last elections in Italy, that took place on the 24th and 25th of February, were the following: at the Chamber of Deputies, the centre-left coalition, that is the Democratic Party (PD) and SEL, had the majority of the votes (29.5%); the coalition led by Berlusconi, including the People of Freedom Party (PdL) and the Northern League, scored 29.15% and the Five Star Movement, led by Beppe Grillo, obtained 25.5%. Scelta Civica, the party led by former prime minister Mario Monti scored only 8%. At the Chamber of Deputies, the Five Star Movement was the first party in terms of absolute votes (the Democratic Party, taken alone, got 25.4%). According to the current electoral legislation, the coalition that has the majority has a premium number of deputies and, therefore, the centre left coalition has now a strong majority at the Chamber of Deputies. In the Second Chamber, the Senate of the Republic, the PD scored 31%, the PdL 30%, the Five Star Movement 23,8% and Monti 9%. This means that, at the Senate, no coalition has the majority. This has created a condition of ungovernability, which is why the only possible outcome so far was the grand coalition.

Three main points must be stressed concerning the results. The centre-left, that was expected to be the main force coming out of the current elections, after years spent in the opposition, clearly did not win. The Five Star Movement is the real surprise of these elections. We need to recall that this political movement was founded only in 2004 by Beppe Grillo, a former comedian and Gianroberto Casaleggio, an expert in marketing and information technology. Monti and his newly formed party, Scelta Civica, have no real role to play in the future of Italian politics, since they obtained too little preferences. The real winner of these elections is Silvio Berlusconi, who came out reinforced after the past scandals and defeats. Italians are willing to forgive everything to Silvio, and he gathers a consensus around his persona that goes beyond common political sense.

On the 27th of April, as a result of the constellation that came out of the ballots, Enrico Letta, a member of the Democratic Party (PD), presented to the Parliament a government composed of nine ministers coming from the centre-left, five from a right-wing party (PdL), three issued from the

centre (Scelta Civica) and three coming from civil society. Enrico Letta, aged 47, is one of the youngest prime ministers the country ever had and the average age of his government is 53, compared with its predecessor's 64, the executive guided by Mario Monti. For the first time, there is also a black woman, of Congolese origin, Cécile Kyenge, serving as the minister of integration. The present executive seems to most commentators as the best result possible considering the condition of political unrest that the country has been going through after the elections. It is indeed the newly re-elected president of the republic, Giorgio Napolitano, who gave Enrico Letta the task of finding a majority that would imply an agreement with the PdL and with Silvio Berlusconi. Napolitano is a key figure in order to understand the present institutional order. His trajectory is linked to that of the Italian left: he was a former member of the Italian Communist Party and a representative of its most moderate part. During his first seven years as president, he has acted as an element of equilibrium between the disruptive actions of Berlusconi and the requests of the European leaders and institutions. It is indeed Napolitano that, in November 2011, while Italy was the epicentre of the economic crisis in the eurozone, found a way out for Berlusconi and for Europe, calling for an emergency government led by Professor Mario Monti. And, one year and a half later, it is again 'King Giorgio', as he has been called, who proposed a grand coalition based on the model of the German 'Grosse Koalition'.

This time, though, the situation was more difficult. Indeed, the seven years of the first Napolitano presidency were coming to an end in May 2013 and it had never happened in the history of the Republic before that a head of state was re-elected. Despite his age (Napolitano is now 88 years old), and despite his previous refusal to accept a second mandate, Napolitano was elected President of the Republic on the 20th of April 2013 for the second time. The major political forces were unable to agree on another figure. The Democratic Party proposed various names, among which Franco Marini, a former member of the Christian Democrats and a moderate, and Romano Prodi, former Italian prime minister and former president of the European Commission. The election of both of these candidates was made impossible not only by the opposition of Berlusconi to the figure of Prodi, but especially by the internal divisions within the PD. Thus, since a part of the PD did not vote for Marini, those who sustained him prevented the election of Prodi, as an act of revenge. The Grillo's Five Star Movement proposed Stefano Rodotà, a figure of the left and a well respected professor of constitutional law. Here as well, the divisions within the Democratic Party prevented the election of one of the truly new and different political personalities. Indeed, the current Letta government is, on the one side, the consequence of the implosion of the PD as it was represented by the leadership of Luigi Bersani, whereas on the other side it tells the story of the unexpected victory and resurrection of Silvio Berlusconi. It also expresses the marginalisation, at least at the level of institutional representation, of the Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo. Let's take a closer look at these three aspects.

The Democratic Party, led by Pier Luigi Bersani, commanding the majority of deputies, had the possibility to look for a majority to form a government. Bersani's strategy, which was not shared by the whole of the PD, was to refuse and to oppose any alliance with Berlusconi and the PdL. He tried instead to get the support of the Five Star Movement: with their votes, they could have excluded Berlusconi and the PdL from the government. The agreement, nevertheless, was never reached. Grillo was very ambiguous on that point. As a consequence the most moderate part of the Democratic Party won, with the help of Napolitano, resulting in the current PD-PdL government. The failure of the possibility of a centre-left government entailed the resignation of Bersani from the leadership of the PD. One of the possible outcomes of the current turmoil is that the PD, which was built on the model of the American Democratic Party and was thus an attempt to introduce a two-party system in Italy, may now instead split up into two parties, one being more centre-left and the other one positioned clearly to the left.

Angelino Alfano, the secretary of the PdL and one of Berlusconi's closest allies, is now deputy prime minister and minister of the interior. The fact that Alfano has such a leading role is the symbol of the victory of Silvio Berlusconi. Before the elections, and during the Monti transition phase, Berlusconi and his party seemed to be defeated. It looked as if that page of Italian history had been turned for good. According to a survey conducted in October 2012, the PdL gathered only 15% of the preferences (<http://www.scenaripolitici.com/2012/10/sondaggio-ipr-pd-275-pdl-15-m5s-15.html>). The Democratic Party had over 27%. At the end of February, when the elections took place, the PdL scored more than 20% at the House of Deputies and over 22% at the Senate.

According to the media (see, for example, <http://www.fullpolitic.com/2013/05/sondaggio-ipsos-per-ballaro-pdl-al-30.html>), in May 2013 the PdL is given 30% of the preferences. The Democratic Party stabilises around 27%.

The main task of Enrico Letta is to realise the necessary institutional reforms, such as the new electoral legislation, and to limit the economic decline of the country through introducing measures for growth. The purpose of this political operation is indeed to neutralise the conflict between Berlusconi and his party, on the one side, and the centre-left, on the other, and therefore to produce a pacification in a country that has been profoundly divided for at least twenty years, since the entry of Berlusconi in the political arena. This is also an attempt to neutralise the disruptive force of the Five Star Movement, which has been completely excluded from the institutional level. Indeed, the success gained by Grillo and Casaleggio and their controversial positions on issues such as the euro and immigration have alarmed part of the national public opinion and the European allies. At the same time, their campaign against the corruption of the politicians and for social justice has raised the hope of a genuine revolution from below within Italian society. At the moment, Grillo and his deputies are not playing a key role, despite their great number in the Parliament. It is therefore too soon to tell if they will have a future in Italian politics or if they will be swallowed by the grand coalition. On the 14th of May, after a man committed suicide because he was being evicted from his house with his family in the Sicilian town of Ragusa, Grillo declared that, if they were not going to have the majority at the next elections, that may take place in the autumn, there were going to be barricades all over Italy.

In contrast to the Five Star Movement, which is very critical towards the European politics of austerity, the current government is in line with the demands of the European authorities and of the other European governments. Indeed, one of the main messages that Enrico Letta has been giving since the beginning of the government is precisely the need for a stable and peaceful European cooperation. The question one needs to ask is nevertheless if this operation of de-politicising the political conflicts traversing the Italian society is realistic and also if this will not lead, in turn, to the explosion of political extremisms both at the national level and at the level of the European Union. Is Berlusconi truly domesticated? And what shall be done about the rage and the anger represented by Beppe Grillo and his movement? Also, what kind of society lies behind an institutional scene that seems frozen, despite the nice maquillage of a moderately progressive establishment? The blind spots of the Italian compromise seem to be even more worrying than an open confrontation and a clear-cut opposition.

Europe, taxes and real estate

The position of Italy with respect to the European Union, the euro and the governance of the economic crisis was among the key themes that animated the electoral campaign and the difficult phase that followed the elections. These issues, together with fiscal and tax policies and the labour legislation reform, are the main challenges that the present government needs to face. In the speech Letta gave when asking for the approval of the Parliament, he expressed a strong commitment towards a politically integrated Europe. The destiny of the whole continent is strictly connected and, so he continued, if Europe as a whole is unable to respond to the current defeats and to give a common answer, there will be no winners and losers but only losers, from the north to the south. Thus, according to Letta, if the macroeconomic policies of the euro, the Central Bank and Mario Draghi are the main guidelines for reviving the economy of the continent, it is also time to support growth with specific measures. For the prime minister, "[The destination of our journey is the United States of Europe and our boat is called democracy \[...\]. We have the right to a dream that is called political union and we have the duty to make it more clear](#)". In his speech, Letta expressed his desire for a direct election of the President of the Commission, for having truly European parties and a more important common budget. As it is shown by this discourse, one of the main tasks of this executive is to strongly anchor Italian politics in Europe and to strengthen the position of the country in the eurozone. This is why Emma Bonino, a feminist and a former European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Consumer Policy has been chosen as minister of foreign affairs. If the words of the prime minister sound wise in the current crisis of the European Union and if it is reassuring, both for the EU partners and institutions and for a part of the Italian public opinion, to know that Letta wants to keep Italian politics and economy firmly grounded in the

EU and in the eurozone. On the other side it is possible to doubt the feasibility of such a programme. There are two main threats to the credibility of the position expressed by Enrico Letta. One is Silvio Berlusconi's regain of power and its significance. The other danger is the unwillingness, at the level of the European Union, to recognise the already deeply political nature of the integration project. Both of these dangers are linked to the process of de-politisation of political conflicts that is one of the key features of the European Union institutional setting.

Let us start with the first threat: Silvio Berlusconi. First of all, we need to ask ourselves how Italy went from the scene that could be witnessed outside of the Quirinale, the house of the President of the Republic, on the 12th of November 2011, to the present moment, when Berlusconi can be considered the real winner of the 2013 elections? In 2011, Berlusconi had no other choice than to resign as prime minister, under the pressure of Napolitano on the one side and of Europe on the other. And, while he was going to the Quirinale to hand over his resignation to the President of the Republic, a large number of Italian citizens had gathered in front of the building, massively demanding that Berlusconi should go to jail, because of all the accusations he is charged with before Italian tribunals. Most of the people were also singing chants of liberation, happy to see that an epoch of Italian politics seemed to be ending forever with the resignation of its main actor. A few months later, the scenario is totally different. The agreement between the centre-left and the PdL is the solution Berlusconi has been asking for right after the elections and he got what he wanted. Moreover, Berlusconi can also rejoice about the defeat of one of his main adversaries, Pier Luigi Bersani and he prevented the return of Romano Prodi as President of the Republic. In addition, if Italians had to go to elections in the next months, the PdL would be the winning party, despite the responsibilities of its leaders in the economic, social and civic crisis that the country is undergoing.

Finally, the duration and the stability of the Letta executive are strictly dependent on Berlusconi's will, as is shown by the "IMU question". In the context of the economic crisis and of the Italian public deficit rise in 2011, the Monti government re-introduced a tax on real estate (IMU). This tax needs to be paid by all the owners of real estate properties, be it the house or apartment where one lives, second houses or other kind of properties. The tax increases exponentially the more properties a person owns. Indeed, a similar form of taxation on real estate existed in Italy until 2008, when Berlusconi abolished it. Of course, abolishing this tax caused a further impoverishment of the state and contributed to the growth of public debt. Mario Monti re-introduced a form of taxation on real estate in December 2011 in order to start reducing part of the public debt. Part of the gains of the IMU went to municipalities, providing them with the much needed resources for being able to provide public services at the local level. Italy is a country of property owners in contrast to other European countries such as Germany, for example. In general, Italian families own the house they live in. This is why the reintroduction of the tax on real estate has been the most unpopular of the decisions taken by Monti. It is also the reason why Berlusconi centred his campaign on the abolition of the IMU. Now, one of the first actions of the Letta government will be precisely the abolition of the tax on real estate. Berlusconi made it clear that, if Letta would not comply with this proposal, the PdL would withdraw its support to the government. We can clearly see how fragile the current executive is and how little autonomy Letta has due to the populist way of doing politics that characterises Berlusconi and his party. Another reason why Berlusconi could shorten the life of the Letta executive is the sentences he is awaiting on his trials. He has been judged guilty of tax fraud in the Mediaset trial and he has been condemned to four years of imprisonment. If the verdict is confirmed by the appeal court, the Cassazione, he will also be disqualified from holding public offices. He then faces a second trial concerning the "Ruby affair", where the former prime minister is accused of being involved in a network of prostitution organised for his pleasure. The deputy prosecutor, Ilda Bocassini, asked for six years in jail for Berlusconi. In this case as well, if the judges confirm Bocassini's request, Berlusconi will be able to launch two appeals. One thing is sure, he will execute huge pressure on Letta and his government to influence the judges and the duration of the proceedings.

A first conclusion could then be that the apparently reasonable character of the coalition between the PD and the PLI hides a darker aspect. The neutralisation of the disruptive elements of populist politics and of the peculiar brand of right-wing liberalism that is represented by Silvio Berlusconi looks, to say the least, extremely fragile. It could even lead to the reinforcement of the less democratic sides of Italian politics. It is not by accident that the tax on real estate is a key element

in understanding the failure of Monti and the comeback of Berlusconi. The social and economic block composed by small property owners, the owners of large assets and speculators has always been central in the orientation of the political future of the country. The tax on real estate was determining an important inflection in the house market prices and in the construction industry. The association of the big investors and constructors with myriads of individuals who possess their own house and for whom this is the main symbol of their social status makes it impossible to rule the country without their approval. Moreover, since 1994, the date of the first Berlusconi government, and after three amnesties for illegally built houses, the PD and the left completely abandoned any engagement and even any claim for a more just urban policy (see Vezio De Lucia, *Nella città dolente*, Castelvecchi, 2013). Despite Enrico Letta's good intentions, it is difficult not to worry on the future of Italy, which is once again firmly in Berlusconi's hands.

The dissolution of the left, be it the centre left or the radical left, is especially problematic in a country where the social question has reached a level of alarm. The future of the Democratic Party is uncertain. The former leader of the largest trade union, the CGIL, Guglielmo Epifani, has been elected as temporary secretary of the Democratic Party, waiting for the general assembly of the party in the autumn. The radical left wing party SEL, guided by his leader Nichi Vendola, a former member of Rifondazione Comunista, has chosen to withdraw from its alliance with the Democratic Party and not to support the current government. The next months will be crucial to understand what could be the future of progressive politics in Italy and if there will be the possibility of uniting the votes of those who do not want any compromise with Berlusconi and his party. This challenge is even more relevant in a country where social inequalities have raised impressively in the last years. As economist Mario Pianta has shown in a recent book (*Nove su Dieci*, Laterza, 2012), nine Italians out of ten have experienced a deterioration of their economic and social condition in the last ten years. One person out of ten has seen his or her income and wealth increase, meaning that there has been an exponential concentration of resources in the hands of a few people. This has happened in a context of economic decline. According to Pianta, real national income in 2012 is back to the levels of a decade ago. Such a decline is unique among the most advanced countries and in Europe only Hungary had a comparably low income growth over the last years. Moreover, in Italy the average wage, that is the earning per worker, has constantly fallen over the last two decades, and the shift of income from labour to capital, even if it is common to the whole of Europe, [has been especially large in Italy](#). Not only is Italian economy declining, this process is paralleled by an important growth of social and economic inequalities. All this is happening at a very fast pace. Therefore, the data coming from the [European Central Bank report](#) on household wealth need to be read in the light of Pianta's reflections on growing inequalities in the countries at the periphery of Europe. According to the ECB report, the median net wealth of a German family is inferior to the one of the countries that ask for Germany's help. The median net wealth of an Italian household is 173.500 euro, in the case of Cyprus it is 266.900 euro, for Spain it is 182.700 euro and for Germany it amounts to 51.400 euro. By median net wealth is meant the value that is it at the middle: half of the households will have a larger income and half of them a smallest one (source *Internazionale*, n. 998, 3 May 2013). The data of the ECB report have fuelled a large debate in Germany and Chancellor Angela Merkel has contested its validity.

Certain is, nevertheless, that Italy is witnessing a deep process of uneven development and of growing inequalities among its citizens as well as among its regions. The gap between the north and the south of the country has widened again in the last two decades and similar dynamics are at work at European level as well. The Italian case, therefore, can be seen as particularly revealing of trends and phenomena that are taking place in the EU as a whole. So far, I have identified two of the dynamics that are more relevant for understanding the current Italian situation. The first one is constituted by the dangers of a neutralisation of the darker, less democratic and more populist sides of politics without openly dealing with them. The second risk is the one represented by the incapacity to describe and find an answer for the rising social, spatial and economic inequalities within Italian society. In the next paragraphs, I would like to show how these two issues are crucial at European level as well and how Italy can be read as an anticipation of issues and trends that will determine the future of the European project. At the same time, I will illustrate how acknowledging these processes lead to a partially new description of what European integration is.

Europe and uneven development

The process of European integration is often depicted as an adjustment of relations among the various Member States. If we look at the mass media, the main conflicts seem to be between the EU institutions – the Commission, the Council, the ECB (the Parliament is rarely mentioned) and the Member States on the one side and among the Member States – southern countries versus northern ones, core Member States against more peripheral ones, etc. Even though national governments and Brussels institutions are obvious key actors in the current phase of European integration, we need to acknowledge structural transformations on the level of the Member States as well as the long-term processes of statehood restructuring that are taking place at the various scales –regional, national and continental – and we have to reallocate the current EU institutional actors and mechanisms within these dynamics.

Let's start from the first point. European integration needs to be understood in relation to processes of socio-spatial restructuring at the national and at the continental level. A growing part of the current research in political sociology and in geography points to the profound redefinition of political space within the EU. The eastern enlargement of 2004 and 2007 has been only the most visible process of macro-regional adjustment at the continental level. The creation of the eurozone has also entailed profound recompositions concerning the level of economic development of regions and of nation states. A key feature of the European project has been the idea of a common European citizenship. This status has been introduced by the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and, twenty years later, 2013 has been proclaimed the European Year of Citizens. The promise of the European project was the one of a supranational or of a post-national democracy, where the free market would bring better economic conditions to the majority of the continent. What we are currently witnessing is exactly the opposite. Instead of equalising the living conditions among the different member states, European integration has been accompanied by a widening of regional gaps.

The current economic crisis has shown that the monetary union can't be only dealt with as a technical issue, but touches at the very core of citizenship techniques and strategies, that is the way in which statehood functions is currently being restructured and qualitatively transformed across the continental geographical and political space. The euro has been a factor of acceleration of a process of differential restructuring of spatial relations across EU regions, but not its cause: "This restructuring is based on pre-euro conditions of uneven economic and geographical development within the EU, which have been accelerated and intensified since the euro's introduction to become the crisis-driven restructuring we face today" (Hadjimichalis, 2011, *European Urban and Regional Studies*). In this respect, Italy is a very good example. The southern question is a vexed one in the history of the country. Nevertheless, current analyses, such as the one by Italian journalist Angelo Mastrandrea (<http://www.eddyburg.it/2013/03/il-contagio-meridionale.html>) that draws on the work of the historian Francesco Barbagallo (*La questione italiana*, Laterza, 2012), show how the Mezzogiorno is the largest underdeveloped area of the whole EU. The question Mastrandrea asks is: can the European Union allow itself to leave such a huge part of its territory and of its population in such a condition of semi-poverty and in the hands of the powers of the Mafia? The south of Italy is also a strategic region, since it is one of the main gates linking Europe with Northern Africa. The southern question of Italy points to the problems of the southern parts of Europe, such as Greece, Portugal and parts of Spain. These areas are becoming the peripheries, the suburbs of Europe. Again, can Europe afford such a waste of resources? To think about solutions to the current state of imbalances and uneven spatial relations, it is at first important to understand that these profound processes of restructuring affect Member States as well and, therefore, it is not possible to consider them as immutable and unitary actors on the EU arena. Thus there is a need to decouple national boundaries and the processes of spatial differentiation that are at work within these boundaries and across them. In this sense, even if the eurozone would dissolve, even if the EU would fall apart, this will not erase the current processes of state and space redefinition at the scale of the continent. This is also why thinking that there are solutions to the current economic crisis that are practicable at the level of single Member States ignores the profound and long-term structural processes of uneven development that are at work at the national and at the continental level, and it is therefore only a form of wishful thinking.

Recognising and reframing the political nature of European integration

If the process of European integration responds to structural and long-term adjustments of the key elements of its nation states, the vision that sees economic and political decisions as imposed from the top, from elitist technocrats, to the populations of Europe is only partially true. I would like to distinguish here among three different levels. There is the most visible level, which consists of the EU institutional actors that are currently in power and of the political decisions and choices they make. Even if it would be wrong to represent even this narrower institutional arena as monolithic, it is true that neoliberal policies and orientations largely determine the present political orientations of these institutions. We need then to distinguish this level from the history of European integration, again defined in a narrow sense as the core of EU institutions. Neoliberal policies have not always been dominant at the EU level, as they have not always been dominant at the level of the nation states. At the same time, institutional policies are only one element of a broader political, social, economic and historic dynamic. This is the third sense we can give to European integration as a long term structural process affecting the whole of national societies at European scale. This process brings together the complexity of national histories, the entangled nature of the national and of the supranational levels that make up Europe today as well as the structural dynamics affecting not only political and governmental institutions but, and this is more relevant, the main social and economic relations that compose Europe as a social community.

Therefore, there is a need to recognise these three different levels at which European integration is happening. To be able to act on the narrower level of institutional actors' political decisions, and to change the current predominance of austerity and neoliberal measures at the EU level, we need to understand the wholeness of the societal, political and economic dimension of European integration. This issue brings back the question of the de-politisation of the political dimension of integration at the continental level. If we consider the economic dimension of Europe, we can see that the dynamics of restructuring that operate in the long run at the level of the nation states cannot be reduced to decisions taken by the ECB or by the Commission. For analytical purposes, it is thus vital to separate austerity measures and the politics of the monetary union from the more structural process of economic and political redefinition taking place within and among the Member States. To get back to the Italian example, north-south inequalities existed and were an issue much before European integration or austerity measures. In the present moment, though, they acquire a different intensity because they are placed within a political and economic context of rising spatial inequalities among regions and states and on European level. The meaning of these structural tensions is also altered by the existence of the euro and by the role that southern borders play at the geopolitical level not only as the borders of Italy, but as the borders of the European Union.

European integration is thus a deeply political process and the result of structural transformations of the nation states as the main framework of political life. At the same time, because of the peculiar history and structure of the European Union, the official political discourse of the EU and the main political categories that used to frame it always pointed at the neutral character of European integration in terms of political and social relations. This is shown by the whole rhetoric about a 'technocratic and elitist Europe'. There is indeed a voluntary obscurity in the way in which EU politics are designed and carried out, that makes it opaque to a large majority of its citizens. At the same time, the effects of EU decisions and politics on the life of these citizens are enormous, as we can clearly see with the current crisis. It is therefore urgent for the public European sphere to invest into tools for describing and appropriating it that are different from the de-politicising rhetoric of EU institutional actors themselves. This work of description and of reframing needs to include an analysis of the structural dynamics of social and economic redefinition that are operating beyond Brussels and Frankfurt buildings and institutions. If the political and social forces of European society do not take up this challenge they risk to share, at a larger level, the Italian destiny. They will end up empowering anti-democratic and populist forces such as Silvio Berlusconi, his party and the phenomena of corruption and provincialisation that they entail at the level of European society. The de-politisation of the huge political challenges that our societies, at the national and at the continental level, are facing, will not only impede to solve the crisis, but it

will strengthen those who, even in a much distorted way, can give a voice to the fears of the citizens.

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"This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."