European Governments and Populist Challenge: Towards an Institutional Reform of the EU?

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This paper argues that the debate about a possible reform of the EU (or, at least, of the Eurozone) is strictly connected to the role populism plays within the European political systems. In particular, the national governments are inclined to modify the European governance in so far as they perceive the populist movements as a threat for their consensus among the citizens. This interpretation is confirmed by three different approaches emerging in 2010-2015, which are examined in the article: the UK welcomed a part of the populist propaganda and tried to take advantage of it to carry out a radical reform of the EU, re-nationalizing a series of functions; Germany did not focus on the populist rhetoric and defended the current EU model, but recognized the federal goal to which the integration process was addressed; France and Italy, in spite of theoretical divergences about the idea of Europe, shared a strategy meant to defeat populism by strengthening the European institutions and reducing the gap with the citizens. This heterogeneous scenario prevented any agreement on the future of the EU, but the effects of recent events—such as migrations and terrorism, potential causes of a new populist offensive—might convince the Member States to rethink their positions.

Keywords: European Union, populism, Institutional Reforms, Federalism, national sovereignty

Introduction

The European Union (EU) is one of the favourite targets of populist leaders and movements operating in the national democracies (Hayward, 1996; Mény & Surel, 2000; 2002; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Berezin, 2009; Martinelli, 2012). This situation confirms the thesis according to which populism idealizes the goodness of the people, that is considered source of political legitimacy not against a general “other/s” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 391), but against the “rulers” (Taggart, 2000, p. 109) or a “corrupted elite” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). The gap between the EC/EU institutions and the European citizens—descending from the functionalist conception in the 1950s and living through the following political and institutional evolution—is a weakness often denounced even by the actors interested in a democratic and federal development of the integration.

On the contrary, populism generally attacks the European institutions on the basis of nationalist values: it aims at depriving the EU of the powers it received from the Member States, dreaming a mythic Europe of independent and sovereign peoples. Since the populist criticism is not just addressed to the European integration as a practical outcome, the concept of “Euroscepticism”—even if refined through the distinction between “hard” and “soft” forms (Taggart, 1998; Szczерbiak & Taggart, 2008; Leconte, 2010, pp. 4-8;
Usherwood & Startin, 2013, pp. 5-6)—does not express its real nature. Indeed, populism shows an anti-European attitude, i.e. the hostility to the very idea of European unity qualifying its supporters as “Europhobes” or “Eurorejects” (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002, pp. 299-304; Mudde, 2007, pp. 159-165; Malandrino, 2006, pp. 29-34).

The economic and financial recession starting in 2007-2008, with its dramatic effects on some segments of population, fostered the populist propaganda. But the EU was really involved only in 2010, when the Greek crisis redirected the attention to the sovereign debts within the Eurozone and raised doubts about the future of the single currency (Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia, 2013, pp. 56-61). The press described the political implications of these dynamics by evoking the image of the European “centrist elites under siege from anti-EU populist on the right and on the left everywhere in Europe” (Traynor, 2011). On the one hand, this representation could be judged a rhetorical construction the moderate parties fuelled in order to present themselves as reliable and reasonable subjects against extremist and radical movements. It was an attempt to recover people’s consensus about the political and economic orthodoxy regulating the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (Stavrakakis, 2014).

On the other hand, the nationalist populism is a real phenomenon the EU and the governments have to face even in the future: the migratory crisis and the new wave of jihadist terrorism are detonators of further populist impulses. This paper aims at examining the period from spring 2010 to summer 2015, underlining three main approaches to the populist issue with three corresponding views on the reorganization of the EU: (1) the UK welcomed some populist requests and took advantages of them for renegotiating its role in a Europe deeply modified and based on different levels of integration; (2) Germany was inclined to overlook the populist threat and strenuously defended the EMU original logic, but in the long run it acknowledged the perspective of a union founded on solidarity only within a federal framework; (3) France and Italy, that historically had supported alternative visions of Europe, claimed a series of economic and institutional reforms of the EMU, connoting them as the fulfilment of a European spirit able to defeat populism. This clear discord among the most important Member States caused the EU stagnation on the field of the institutional reforms, despite the large number of declarations in the last years.

Appeasing Populism: Cameron’s Gamble

To some scholars, during the last decades the British politics was marked out by a “systemic Euroscepticism” to which the well-known speech by Margaret Thatcher in 1988 at the College of Europe in Bruges had powerfully contributed (Usherwood & Startin, 2013, p. 3). Nonetheless, the Liberal Democrat Party maintained an authentic Europeanism and the New Labour realized the convenience of the European integration. Even with reference to the traditional critics of the EU, a difference emerged between the mixture of Euroscepticism and anti-Europeanism within the variegated universe of the Conservatives, and the actual anti-Europeanism of the UKIP. The latter did not contest only certain European measures or policies, but wanted the UK to leave Europe and inveigh—with a populist language—against the Labour or Conservative political class defending the status quo (Gifford, 2014, p. 516; Tournier-Sol, 2015).

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-2015) appeared in this context. Since Clegg’s party had not indicated Europeanism as a precondition for the agreement, at the beginning Cameron ruled on the basis of his “instinctive Euroscepticism” (Lynch, 2012, p. 88). He did not deflect, however, from the recent EU politics of the UK. This tradition was respected by adopting the European Union Act, according
to which any further transfer of the national sovereignty would be submitted to a popular vote, and by vetoing
the introduction of a stronger financial regulation in the EU law, with the consequent signature of the Fiscal
Compact beyond the treaties (Lynch, 2012; Geddes, 2013, pp. 100-111). Cameron put aside the most radical
proposals, e.g. a referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon that had already entered into force.

This scenario completely changed when UKIP’s consensus increased and the PM tried to “capture” the
European issue (Copsey & Haughton, 2014), shifting from Euroscepticism to anti-Europeanism. He explained
that “people’s concerns” about Europe would drive the UK in a struggle for reforming the EU in a way more
favourable to the national interest and consistent with the typical mind of the “practical Eurosceptics”
(Cameron, 2012) or “Europragmatics” (Kopecký & Mudde, 2002). Cameron connected the British position to
the “growing frustration” of other peoples towards the European integration, that he identified both in the
popular demonstrations against the austerity policies in Greece, Spain or Italy and in the doubts emerging in the
parliaments of the Member States forced to allocate economic resources in favour of the countries involved in
the debt crisis (Cameron, 2013).

In January 2013, Cameron detailed his project by means of a fundamental speech reaffirming the
cornerstones of the British view (Daddow, 2015, pp. 78-84). In the light of its insular nature, resulting in the
vocation to independence, the UK passionately defended its sovereignty and looked at Europe with “a frame of
mind […] more practical than emotional”: the British considered the EU as “a mean to an end”, but they did not
appear therefore “somehow un-European” (Cameron, 2013). Moreover, Cameron maintained that the Member
States wished different degrees of integration. While the idea of providing the Eurozone with more binding
rules was desirable, other countries—including the UK—did not pursue “an even closer union” and focused
just on the single market. As a consequence, the PM stressed the opportunity of establishing an institutional
flexibility welcoming “that diversity instead of trying to snuff it out” (Cameron, 2013).

At the legal level, Cameron claimed that “power [would be] able to flow back to Member States, not just
away from them”, especially where the national peculiarities seemed to be precious: “We cannot harmonize
everything”. This relied on an iron philosophy: “There is not, in my view, a single European demos”
legitimizing a European democracy centred on a supranational parliament; the basic principle of accountability
could be restored by strengthening the national parliaments as the guardians of the identities of the peoples
(Cameron, 2013). It was not surprising that Cameron criticized the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker as the
president of the European Commission, since that was not an autonomous decision by the European Council,
but the result of a designation by the European Parliament on the basis of the 2014 elections (Cameron, 2014).

In November 2015, the PM confirmed his position emphasizing the large number of EU workers moving
to the UK to benefit of its generous welfare state, and announcing his intention of tackling this misleading
freedom of movement across the EU internal borders (Cameron, 2015). But the most explosive element of
Cameron’s argument lied in the idea that the British membership to the new Europe—a Union composed of a
more supranational Eurozone and a group of States, like the UK, taking part in the single market and
cooperating in some other areas (energy, climate, terrorism, etc.)—would be ratified by a referendum. To
Cameron, appealing to the people would be the coherent conclusion of a process triggered by the populist and
anti-European milieu. He was convinced that the citizens would approve his ability in reducing the EU control
on their country and, in the same time, safeguarding the advantages coming from the European economic
integration.
Cameron’s challenge—exploiting the populist protest in order to obtain a differentiated integration, by virtue of which campaigning for the UK to stay in the EU against UKIP’s extremism (Vail, 2015, p. 118)—contained many risks, both in the negotiations with the European partners and in the final referendum. A series of details might transform this path into an historical success, capable of revolutionizing Europe, or into a fatal collapse, implying the “Brexit” as a consequence of Cameron’s hubris (Matthijs, 2013; Copsey & Haughton, 2014, p. 86).

Neglecting Populism: German Europe

For historical and political reasons, the German conception of Europe was very different from the British one. They shared few elements, such as the idea that the European economy was embedded in a system of cruel global competition, within which only the strongest actors could survive (Cameron, 2013; Merkel, 2014a; Merkel, 2015d). On the contrary, the analysis of populism was one of the signals pointing out the British-German divergence: while Cameron used the populist protest as the root of his “reform-renegotiation-referendum” program, Angela Merkel eluded that issue. Her speeches left no room for the rift between the EU and the public opinion, that was widely ascribed to the implementation of the German budget policy on a European scale (Beck, 2012a, pp. 5-9). Merkel’s main concern, especially during the crisis of the Eurozone, was the commitment not to transmit any financial burden to the future generations, that constituted the favourite spokesmen of her political rhetoric (Merkel, 2011; 2015a).

The first Merkel’s government (2005-2009) showed a pronounced Europeanism, promoting the agreement on the Lisbon Treaty that overtook the impasse provoked by the French and Dutch referenda in 2005 (Paterson, 2011, pp. 63-64). Nevertheless, in 2010 the opening of the Greek dossier pushed the Kanzlerin to adopt a line more cautious and devoted to the national interest. This decision was criticized by some eminent German intellectuals: Ulrich Beck (2011, p. 4) accused Merkel of aspiring to a “re-nationalization” of the European politics; Jürgen Habermas (2012) noticed that the centrality of the European Council reduced the EU political system to an unprecedented “executive federalism” dominated by the largest Member States.

This tendency emphasized the behavior of the single countries and was confirmed by a series of Merkel’s reflections during the most difficult phases of the Euro crisis. She connected the troubles investing the single currency to the internal weakness of the EMU, in particular its incapacity of sanctioning the Member States when they violated the existing rules (Merkel, 2015b). The EU was still the “community of destiny” (Schicksalsgemeinschaft) theorized by her predecessors, but Merkel resorted to this phrase in order to stress the responsibility of each State—whose action produced positive or negative effects on the whole EU—rather than a sense of collective solidarity (Merkel, 2010b). These elements referred to the idea of Europe as a community of law (Rechtsgemeinschaft), where the covenants and the treaties had to be respected without exceptions, and a community of responsibility (Verantwortungsgemeinschaft), founded on the axiom according to which the possible European economic assistance to the countries depended on the adoption of specific policies at the national level (Merkel, 2015f).

The EU, thus, appeared solid in so far as each Member State did its own duty, in the light of the fusion between the community and the intergovernmental method, that Merkel defined as “Union method”. In particular, the European institutions—starting from the European Council directed by the French-German axis—were charged to outline, through different legal instruments and procedures, the basic objectives the States had to achieve (Merkel, 2010a, p. 7). The investment plan defined by the Juncker Commission, interpreted by
the *Kanzlerin* as a simple incentive for the national societies to mobilise public and private resources (Merkel, 2015b), was a good example of this attitude. The governments were judged not only by the EU authorities, but also by their partners: Merkel—who was sarcastically pictured by Beck (2012b, p. 2) as a “queen without a crown”—lauded the responsible countries (Merkel, 2014b) and censured the defaulting ones, that were guilty of making an attempt to the confidence among the States (Merkel, 2012b; 2014c; 2015f)—i.e., the cement thanks to which the German ruling class had built the ordoliberal thought and the social market economy after the II world war (Merkel, 2015c; Nicholls, 1994; Van Hook, 2004).

The German position was usually related to some structural factors: ordoliberalism always prevailing over Europeanism when they conflicted (Art, 2015); the verdict of the Federal Constitutional Court about the compatibility between the Treaty of Lisbon and the Grundgesetz (2009), which enhanced the powers of the Bundestag in controlling the transfer of sovereignty towards the EU (Paterson, 2011, p. 67; Art, 2015, pp. 186-187); the “normalization” of a country that rediscovered the value of the national interest after decades of extraordinary European vocation (Bulmer & Paterson, 2010). At the same time, Merkel’s biography played a relevant role: she was considered less federalist than Helmut Kohl and her predecessors grown up in the Western Germany seemed to be emotionally more involved in the European project (Paterson, 2011, pp. 65-67). Furthermore the *Kanzlerin* was accused of wavering between the intergovernmental and the supranational side (Garton Ash, 2013), mixing elements coming from the former and the latter in a pragmatic approach aimed at silently establishing the German hegemony over Europe (Beck, 2012a, pp. 45-50).

The framework was actually more complicated, not just because in the autumn 2015 Merkel appealed to the principle of solidarity and supported the perspective of welcoming migrants and refugees moving towards Europe. Even in the previous years her action was characterized by two aspects denying any unilateral interpretation. On the one hand, though in 2010 Nicolas Sarkozy’s capitulation forced France and the EU to join the ordoliberal paradigm, Merkel agreed on introducing some mechanisms and measures—e.g. the onerous funds assisting the States affected with debt crisis—which Germany had opposed as conflicting with that theoretical model (Crespy & Schmidt, 2012; Schmidt, 2013). On the other hand, Merkel’s speeches carefully avoided the federalist lexicon, but sometimes they revealed a federal horizon for the development of the European integration. The *Kanzlerin* elaborated a strategy articulate in two phase: in the short term, reinforcing the EMU was a compelling necessity in order to end the financial turbulence and to prevent a possible relapse; in the long term, a new and “sympathetic” Europe could be realised (Merkel, 2010b).

During the first phase, the Member States had to give the EU the competences it required to improve the fiscal rules, with a supranational control over the national budgets; in the second phase, it would be “the time to try and find other forms of co-operation and shared liability” (Traynor, 2012). With these words Merkel alluded to the possibility of introducing the Eurobonds and the transfer union set aside in 2010 (Merkel, 2015e). The process would have a political dimension, resulting—after many steps—in a federal institutional structure: for the EU subjects, the Commission would act as “a government of Europe”; the European Parliament would cooperate with a second chamber, i.e. the evolution of the European Council; the Court of Justice would obtain the powers of a real supreme court (Traynor, 2012; Merkel, 2012a).

After those reforms, the European politics would show the nature of “inner politics” (*Innenpolitik*), furnished with an arena of discussion and a public opinion working on a continental scale. Even in the current phase, however, each Member State had the right to monitor the political decisions taken by its partners and to express its opinion (Merkel, 2012a). This federal-like EU was an indirect response to Merkel’s critics: the final
scenario would not be the re-nationalisation of what was already European (Nationalisierung des Europäischen), but the “Europeanization of the [national] level” (Europäisierung des Nationalen) (Merkel, 2012b). This statement did not satisfy Habermas, who commented: “in times of crisis the timid and short-sighted incrementalism of small steps personified by Angela Merkel is no help” (Habermas, 2015, p. 67).

In conclusion, Merkel’s idea of Europe corresponded to a political path that was not exactly linear, but to some extent directed to a federal goal. In the German debate, a federalist tendency had been substantially formulated—with various features and objectives—in a well-known document published by the CDU/CSU in the 1990s (Schäuble & Lamers, 1994, pp. 4-5), and later confirmed by the liberal politician Guido Westerwelle (2012, p. 9), who coordinated a working group composed by the Foreign Ministers from 11 Member States, and by Martin Schulz (2013, pp. 249-264), the socialist president of the European Parliament.

Reforming the EMU Against Populism: French and Italian Positions

The history of the last 65 years drew a broad chasm separating France and Italy when they dealt with the European integration. The former was substantially imprisoned in the Gaullist heritage including a mere intergovernmental vision of Europe, which often depressed alternative options; the latter generally conveyed a supranational and federalizing message.

Nonetheless, their positions could converge on the populist subject. More in general, the crisis in the Eurozone was able to change and mix—at least partially—political ideas and cultural traditions, as the crisis “Merkozy” clearly demonstrated (Krotz & Schild, 2013, pp. 206-208). It was used in 2010-2011 to highlight the harmony between Sarkozy, who formally approved the German austerity, and Merkel, who embraced in the short run the largely intergovernmental practice France had always supported. The idea that their accord deleted the classical distinction between German federalism and French souverainisme (Borriello & Crespy, 2015, p. 520) lied in the regular consultation between their governments, which elaborated a common document about the EMU development, postponing to a remote future the most radical reforms of the European institutions (France-Allemagne, 2015).

On the other hand, the differences between France and Germany persisted, especially when François Hollande won the presidential elections against Sarkozy (2012). Even Merkel acknowledged that they had diverging opinions about some central issues, e.g. the third Greek bailout (Merkel, 2015f). Focusing on details, Hollande utilized the phrase “community of destiny” (communauté de destins) to designate the relationship between the two sides of the Mediterranean, rather than the EU as such (Hollande, 2015c); moreover, he stressed the public dimension of the resources the Juncker Plan had to mobilize (Hollande, 2015b). But a fundamental difference about the European policy emerged when the French president invoked some concrete innovations in the path towards a budget, bank and social union, consistent with his rhetoric based on solidarity, and the strengthening of Eurogroup and European Council (Kauffmann, 2012; Schild, 2013); at the same time, although he was more receptive than previous French statesmen to the institutional debate (Klau, 2012), Hollande’s discourse did not contemplate the perspective of a European federal union, that Germany considered the necessary framework for the other reforms.

Some French requests, such as the revision of the Fiscal Compact, quickly succumbed to the German resolute hostility (Lequesne, 2013, pp. 44-48). But Hollande did not renounce the reorganization of the Eurozone, that he suggested as the way for remedying people’s distrust (Hollande, 2013a), the resentment of the young unemployed and the “distance between citizens and European construction” (Hollande, 2013b). The
socialist president was aware that the EU-scepticism, due to the European bureaucratic features and complex rules, could be exploited by the movements inclined to transform objective problems into authentic phobias, aiming at demolishing Europe (Hollande, 2014a).

The French analysis took cognizance that the EMU had different interests and orientations from the other EU Member States, but this split was not expressed through the concept of two-speed Europe. Hollande resorted to the idea of differentiated integration Cameron introduced when he publicized his project for renegotiating the British membership of the EU. While the UK focused on the countries interested in loosening the European obligations, the French president reflected on a “government” for the Eurozone (Hollande, 2013a). It would be centered on the European Council, provided with new functions and powers within an intergovernmental model: coordinating economic policies, harmonizing fiscal systems and social standards, etc. (Hollande, 2013b). This scenario was quite different from what Merkel imagined as the final goal of the European integration, where the Commission would become an actual federal executive.

Hollande’s institutional reform, however, was conceived in order to neutralize the populist threat and its architrave was a substantial progress in the process of integration, at least with reference to the EMU. The strategy was clearly defined after the 2014 elections of the European Parliament, when the Eurosceptic and anti-European parties—such as the National Front in France—obtained relevant results (Hollande, 2014b). In Hollande’s opinion, the EU needed a social soul completing the new economic and financial policies, to present itself as a “protective Union” (Union protectrice) capable to reassure the citizens and recover their support (Hollande, 2014c; 2015a).

In 2015 two further elements were added to the French plan: a supranational budget and a specific parliament would be created within the Eurozone (Hollande, 2015d). The first condition was doomed to annoy Germany, that would unlikely agree to share the public debt without the guarantee of a whole political union. The second proposal was immediately refused by the European Parliament, jealous of its own role (European Parliament, 2015, p. 4). The terrorist attacks in Paris (November 13, 2015) suddenly shifted Hollande’s attention to the security issue, with important consequences for the French domestic and foreign policy: at the EU level, the debate was dominated by the opportunity of rethinking the Schengen system, which had often been a core argument of the populist propaganda.

The French approach to the EMU reform, however, showed some similarities to the Italian one. A document adopted in May 2015 by Matteo Renzi’s government could not eliminate the historical heritage dividing the French and Italian ideas of Europe, but noticed that the “dissatisfaction in the European project [was] widespread among citizens and it [was] leading to the rise of populist political forces” (Italy, 2015, p. 1).

As a reaction to this phenomenon, Italy pointed out a short-term agenda aiming at improving the governance of the Eurozone by means of enhanced cooperation and a wide restriction on the method of unanimity, but a series of medium-term and long-term measures were also included. On the one hand, the transformation of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) into a European Monetary Fund; on the other hand, the final goal would be a fiscal and transfer union, together with a federalizing tendency (unlike France): the progress in the economic and financial sphere would require “further transfers of sovereignty, drawing nearer a true political union” (Italy, 2015, p. 7).

This position actualized the influential reflection the former president Giorgio Napolitano illustrated during an unstable period of the Italian politics. His speeches renewed the recent tradition of the Italian Europeanism—that of Carlo A. Ciampi and Romano Prodi—and outlined the “uncertainty” and the
“despondency” about the EU in an era of “mutual resentment” and “nationalistic and narrow-minded visions” (Napolitano, Komorowski & Gauck, 2012); the “crisis of consensus” connected to the doubts on the promise of economic and social progress the European adventure had formulated (Napolitano, 2012); “the new generations’ growing disenchantment with the idea of Europe and the institutions into which it [had] evolved over time”, as a consequence of the “serious social question” appeared with the economic and financial turbulences, without any solution by the national and EU actors (Napolitano, 2013).

According to this analysis, Europe needed a new institutional architecture. Napolitano suggested to resume “the ‘constitutionalization’ that we [had] attempted, imperfectly, in 2002-2003” through a “gradual transformation” or “an ad-hoc conference” resulting in “a true ‘Founding Law’ for the Union” (Napolitano, 2013). He did not specify the institutional form the EU would assume after this process, but his federalist attitude was known by the public opinion (Napolitano, 2005, pp. 306-331; Maggiorani, 2014, pp. 438-446). It was confirmed by some considerations about the political system, since Napolitano was convinced that the turning point would be the birth of a European discussion involving not only the economic or social policies—where, however, the austerity model would be replaced by an alternative paradigm—, but also the political dimension as such. The European integration would be accomplished and irreversible just with a “European public space” where the political parties would bring “to life, on a European scale, democratic political debate and competition between various ideological currents and organized political movements” (Napolitano, 2014).

The supranational nature of the political struggle would clearly correspond to a federal institutional structure, within which a number of European parties would fully carry out their initiatives, even after a phase dominated by the general split between a federalist and an anti-federalist coalition, as Andrew Duff—a prominent member of the European Parliament—reminded in the light of the American history (Duff, 2013, pp. 151-152).

In spite of the differences emerging in their paths and the caution of the official speeches, thus, France and Italy agreed on the idea that populism was fed by the institutional deficiencies of the Eurozone. They claimed a more efficient and advanced governance for the EMU in order to tackle the movements attacking the European project and to bridge the gap between citizens and institutions.

**Conclusion**

This paper underlines the connection between worry of populism and inclination to reform the European institutional framework. The UK aimed at taking advantage of the populist wave to call into question the commitment for “an even closer union” stated by the treaties. To Cameron, the Member States which refused it and wished a lower level of integration—the access to the single market and delimited forms of co-operation—promoted a legitimate request: it was as respectable as the one supported by the countries open to further transfers of sovereignty. The success of the concept of differentiated integration could not be taken for granted, but it would allow the British PM to re-nationalize some sectors and powers (flattering Euroscepticism and anti-Europeanism) without any preclusion for a more integrated group of States interested in pursuing the political union.

To some extent, the French and Italian projects were complementary to Cameron’s strategy. The idea of strengthening the EMU governance—in an intergovernmental way by Hollande and with a supranational objective by Renzi and Napolitano—arouse from the growing trend of the populist parties. Their alarming
escalation would be contrasted by improving the decision making within the Eurozone and facing at the European level the concerns the citizens had denounced during the long-lasting economic crisis. The “protective Union” invoked by Hollande and the response to the “social question” theorized by Napolitano were meaningful even in so far as they appeared rational means destined to reduce the popular consensus in favour of anti-Europeanism.

Germany occupied a marginal position in this debate. Merkel’s priority was the defence of the ordoliberal financial and budget policies, ensuring that the provisions of the treaties would be fully implemented. In the short run, the Kanzlerin did not consider a great institutional reform, because she did not explicitly acknowledge the populist challenge worrying the British, French and Italian statesmen. Although she postponed the reorganization of the EU institutions, Merkel was the most meticulous leader in describing the features of the future political union, very close to the federal archetype.

A radical restructuration of the EU remains particularly complicated as long as Germany is inactive. This situation might change thanks to new elements—the epochal dynamics of the migrations from Africa and Middle East or the threat by the jihadist terrorism—showing the deep inadequacy of the European institutions, caused by the nationalist ideologies prevailing in a large number of countries. Even when a reform process could start, a series of risks would emerge as a consequence of the populist concern: on the one hand, as the British case demonstrates, the perspective of a transformation potentially out of control; on the other hand, the temptation of favouring incidental interventions, without a clear and wide reflection on the political and institutional horizon the European integration has to reach.

References


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