



GLOBALIZATION OF CRISES AND THE CASE FOR A EUROPE – WIDE REFERENDUM ON THE LISBON TREATY¹

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Europe is facing a stalemate. The financial crisis has made it clear that we cannot afford anymore to keep *talking* in academic circles about governing globalization without *doing* what it takes to develop the policy making processes necessary to solve the problem. The paradox is that both the demand and the opportunities for the European Union are increasing, yet the Union, like other international organizations, seems more paralyzed than ever.

It is the very coordination promoted by Mr Sarkozy at the European level and followed up less successfully by the President of the United States at the global level that shows what is badly needed to govern our world: political *leadership* and specific *frameworks* capable of reinforcing the decisions that leaderships may express.

The financial meltdown dramatically demonstrated that crises require a rapidity that is beyond the timing of ad hoc meetings. In some instances they may even require costly investments that would be sub-optimal and exposed to free-riding if left to individual governments. Investments that – as nasty as this may sound – would even have an impact on *taxation* and this would hardly be accepted without some *representation* of a constituency that is already beyond national boundaries, just as the scale of the problems that impact on its welfare.

This is the paradox that most analyses fail to acknowledge. Ideas of global democracy may still be too futuristic. But the impact of global problems on people's lives is already very immediate and concrete. And as these problems require some form of supranational decision making, this in turn also require the promotion of international political arenas.

The European Union is already – notwithstanding its many and notorious contradictions - the most sophisticated framework of international governance and thus the best case for moving forward. This is why *Vision* and *Prometheus*, two European think-tanks, *will convene an event on the 5th of December in Brussels calling for a European-wide referendum on the Lisbon Treaty*. The most recent global crisis may, in fact, open a window of opportunity to experiment new forms of public debate beyond the specificity and narrowness of national confines and ultimately reverse the decline of the European project.

The concept of a European-wide-referendum however faces three major objections. The first comes from the *eurosceptics*. *They see the EU mostly as an ever larger market, and so they insist that Europe should focus on delivering citizens' needs*

¹ The Vision and Prometheus work group on the project for “Europe Wide Referendum” includes Francesco Grillo (Vision and LSE), Koert De Boeuf (Prometheus), Kamilah Khatib (Vision and LSE), Stephen Benians (Vision) , Flavius Stan (Vision and Bocconi), Filip Buntix (Prometheus).

instead of wasting time on institutional matters. To them, “the treaty of Lisbon is dead” and we simply need to find a dignified way to bury it. It is a valid point to suggest that Europe should focus on providing what its “clients” ask for. However the not trivial point that this position fails to address is how could Europe possibly deliver on matters like jobs, savings, the cost of fuel, climate change without the power to do so. We may not like it, but it should be evident that a more relevant Europe can not avoid becoming also a more powerful one.

Secondly, resistance comes from European *federalists*. They suggest that *we should go ahead with the Treaty through ratifications of national parliaments regardless of what the outcome of some referenda might have been.* Some even elaborate further with a negative note on the very idea of referenda saying – on the basis of recent rejections - *that people are not equipped to have a proper opinion on the Treaty that is too long.* Now, leaving alone that research shows that elected politicians’ knowledge of the Treaty provisions is only marginally better than the one of ordinary citizens, europhiles overlook the fact that a Europe - wide referendum would imply a narrative very different from the ones we saw in national consultations that were hijacked by national themes and local fears. Moving the debate on the future of Europe beyond the walls of national politics would endorse people to act, vote, and talk about European problems as European citizens and this would itself be a success. Finally, the technical objections from the *experts* on Europe (a professional breed that has played a significant role in the development of the Treaty and of the Europe we have today) revolve around the possibility that a European-wide referendum is illegal, or that *it is legally unfounded to expect that its results could be binding on everybody.* It is true that we cannot force a country whose people said no, to stick with others who said yes. However, it is not less true that alternatives to the Europe-wide referendum are not more binding. What if the treaty was approved by a (say British) parliament and then one year later a different parliament, perhaps with a different majority and thus a different government, finds itself forced to accept a decision (say, on foreign policy) only on the basis of the ratification of a parliament that does not exist any more? It is, in fact, the nature of the European *construction* to be – by definition – not exactly “legal” against national legislations, yet it is for this reason that Europe will never be a nation state at a larger scale and an institution more capable to adapt and survive. A Europe-wide referendum may not be legally binding, as none of the alternatives really are, yet the truth is that it would create important political consequences for the future of Europe.

Ideologies and technicalities aside, there is one fundamental reason for raising a debate on a Europe –wide referendum on the future of the Union which is beyond the possible results of the consultation: *democracy*. Democracy is what the project is built on and it is what we ask applicants to demonstrate when they queue to join the club. But for some reasons, most of us – as experts, policy and opinion makers, think tankers – have been starting to accept the assumption that in order to increase economic performance and efficiency of governments, you need to sacrifice a bit of democracy. History teaches us that in the long run the opposite is true. The ultimate paradox is that we all stood for our way to govern societies as the best (or the less inefficient), until the moment when the history of the centuries long clash between democracy and authoritarian regimes was not believed to have arrived to its end. It is probably time to go back to the basics and ask ourselves: do we still believe in what got us here?