

European interview
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“It is high time to light up Europe’s stars again”

You grew up in Rome and have lived in Paris for several years, you are Italian and resolutely pro-European. How do you reconcile these different identities?

My three identities, Roman because in my country you are first and foremost linked to your city, but also Italian and European, are completely complementary. They are the same roots, the same culture that I find everywhere. In Paris everything speaks to me of Rome and in Rome everything speaks to me of Athens; when I see the Madeleine church I think of the Parthenon and the temples that were later built in Italy. There are, of course, differences between us, but these differences are our wealth because they are based on a foundation of common values. It is the same civilisational movement that began with Plato and has been passed down to us; you cannot sing the praises of Rabelais without knowing Dante, you cannot sing the praises of Kant without knowing Plato. I have been fortunate enough to travel a lot in Europe and I have seen that what unites us is much more important than what divides us. It is up to us to carry the message of Simone Veil who, after having lived through the horror of the camps, made the choice of Franco-German reconciliation and of European hope. With Putin’s war, the ideal of the European Union - «*never again war*» - is in now jeopardy. We cannot remain indifferent: it is up to each of us to defend the values that that are ours. The twelve stars of the European Union must show us the way.

What do you include in this set of common values?

Freedom, Equality, Fraternity, the values of the Enlightenment that have spread far beyond Europe’s

borders, our Judeo-Christian roots. I would add secularism, pluralism, gender equality, protection of minorities and democracy, which is our most precious asset. The new generations who were born with it, who have grown up with it, must know that nothing can ever be taken for granted. It is like the air we breathe - we realise how vital it is when it starts to run out. This foundation of common values also covers a certain «*approach to life*». The culture of sharing, the taste for debate, the critical spirit are part of a European tradition. The cafés, the squares, the human-sized streets, our rich and changing landscape in such a small geographical space, the attention to quality rather than quantity, all of this defines us and forges our identity. We need to awaken this European consciousness: not to recognise it means we are denying a part of ourselves. And we must ensure that the European project is accessible to as many people as possible, through education, schools, exchanges, Erasmus or the European civic service. Umberto Eco said: «*It’s crazy, when I go to New York, Japan, China, I am treated as a European, the only place where I am not recognised as such is in Europe*»! The problem also comes from those who use the European Union as a scapegoat. It is a mechanism that may have a political interest in the short term. But in the long term, you are shooting yourself in the foot, to the benefit of other major powers.

The European Union is often wrongly perceived or misunderstood. How can the citizens’ sense of belonging be strengthened?

At a certain point, we stopped being ourselves, perhaps by admitting countries such as the United Kingdom that did not completely share the same approach, and we lost our way. From the 1970s and 1980s on

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and until 2014, we built a liberal Europe inspired by an Anglo-Saxon model that did not really correspond to our initial project, and we turned it into a huge market. But the European project cannot be solely economic. Alongside a market, we need a political space, a spiritual and cultural dimension. To rekindle the European flame, we must return to the original spirit of the Founding Fathers. Europe is the cradle of the social state, a state that leads the way to reducing inequalities. But the state cannot do everything; it is also up to civil society to contribute to this edifice by forging transnational links. With new technologies and the democratisation of transport, this is becoming progressively easier. Europe is a great orchestra in which each country is a kind of instrument: all of these instruments must be tuned to play the same music. There is one thing that always strikes me: on Rue de Verneuil in Paris, passers-by constantly take photos of Serge Gainsbourg’s house, but nobody stops opposite, at number 6, where Robert Schuman once lived. Yet Schuman was just as brilliant as Gainsbourg: he was a musician in a way, he created harmony and concord in Europe, he set the tone through *de facto* solidarity. 77 years of uninterrupted peace against 1000 years of fratricidal wars.

Can the current crisis really strengthen the European Union?

History tells us that every crisis heralds a renaissance. Despite the difficult times we are currently experiencing, I remain optimistic in the sense that the pandemic has been an accelerator. It is as if we have finally woken from a sleepwalk. There is great hope. The structure of Europe is stronger than we had previously thought. The adoption of the Recovery Plan on 21 July 2020 was a historic moment. After thirty years of a much-maligned ‘*hypermarket*’ Europe, we have finally laid the foundations for what looks like a new form of European brotherhood. A Europe that is more political, social and united seems to be emerging. A taboo has been broken! One thing surprises me: as a journalist, I have covered demonstrations against austerity in Paris, Rome and Athens in recent years. Nobody managed to change the situation. Now Europe has succeeded, but nobody is grateful. At this stage,

however, it is a trial balloon, the recovery plan is linked to the pandemic; the real challenge will be to make it a structural instrument that will be applied in all areas. For Italy, it is a kind of litmus test because it is the main beneficiary with € 200 billion and it has an interest in spending the money well. The «*frugal*» countries are watching closely: if it works, we might be able to consider making this new form of solidarity permanent on a continental scale, otherwise it will remain a one-shot deal. But it is in all our interests to stick together, as France and Italy did during the pandemic. After going through one of the most serious diplomatic crises in their history, these two founding countries of the European Union acted as if they were one republic and managed to convince their partners, including Germany, that it was time to put an end to an overly austere Europe. Of course, public finances are important, but they cannot be the cornerstone of our project, which is, above all, a humanist and civilisational project.

Can the Franco-Italian couple be an alternative to the Franco-German powerhouse?

There is no Europe without the Franco-German couple. It was built on the reconciliation between Paris and Berlin, and it is no coincidence that the seat of the European Parliament is in Strasbourg, this pivotal city between two countries that fought each other so fiercely and which are now reconciled. But although this cog in the European engine is fundamental, it will not suffice to meet the challenges set for us by this new millennium. As the second and third largest economies in the euro area, Italy and France can provide an impetus for the construction of a Europe that is more empathetic and closer to its citizens, while trying to strike a balance with the budgetary sobriety that is equally necessary. The signing of the Quirinal Treaty at the end of 2021 or the re-launch of the historic twinning between Rome and Paris reinforce this approach. The union between the Eternal City and the City of Light, signed in 1956, anticipated by a year the Treaties of Rome signed on 25 March 1957 by the Europe of the Six in the Hall of the Horatii and Curatii at the Capitol. The exit of the United Kingdom, which never really wanted to participate in this political

project, is an extraordinary opportunity to reconnect with our deepest identity.

As a founding country, Italy has long been one of the most Europhile member states. But in recent years its European sympathies have had their ups and downs.

Italy experienced a Eurosceptic shift in 2013 with the economic crisis, and this mistrust then reached a crescendo, with the debt and then the migratory crisis, when it felt abandoned and «betrayed» by its historical allies. She, who was so Europhile, who had contributed so much to the construction of Europe with great personalities such as Alcide De Gasperi or Altiero Spinelli, felt a great frustration, like when one is betrayed by a lover. This was reflected in the ballot box by the victory of the populists, namely the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the League. Following the adoption of the recovery plan, the Italians, rallied around Mario Draghi, are partly back to being the Euro-enthusiasts they once were. But all this remains fragile. The political crisis of the last few days, with the resignation of Draghi, immediately rejected by the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella, is a stark reminder of this. In such a delicate context for Italy and for Europe, unity should prevail over electoral calculations and political-politics, which is a boon for Vladimir Putin. Even Matteo Salvini, who was the most anti-European for political expediency, has dramatically revised his positions and supports the national unity government. It has to be said that his voters are also the small and medium-sized businesses of northern Italy, whose first customers are France and Germany! The only one who continues to hold a very nationalist discourse is Giorgia Meloni, a rising star of the far right, the leader of Fratelli d'Italia and a convinced post-fascist. The problem is that the nationalists would like to take us back 70 years: they are trying to sell us nations in «mono» against a Europe now in «stereo». I understand the fashion for second-hand clothes and vinyl: but you can't turn vintage into a model of society. The next Italian elections will be held in 2023 and nobody knows what will happen. Instead of splitting, we should take advantage of the coming months to carry out two

reforms that are crucial to our future: the revision of the Stability and Growth Pact and the end of the veto in Europe. European autonomy is not possible with the unanimity rule, because then we will always run the risk of having a Trojan horse, like Viktor Orban for example. I support the idea of transnational lists at the next European elections in 2024 to strengthen our democracy and to participate in the advent of a real European public debate.

New threats are looming over the euro area - inflation, risk of recession, rising interest rates. What are your recommendations for the reform the Pact?

The current rules, 3% deficit - which contribute to fuelling anti-European frustration - and 60% debt, are too rigid and now obsolete. More flexible rules, more oriented towards the DNA of Europe would be more appropriate to unlock its potential, through growth and investment. This reform of the Stability and Growth Pact and the end of the unanimity rule on several issues are a question of survival; either we do it, or each Member State will become a mere satellite of the United States, China or Russia in a few years time. It is now or never, in the sense that we have really reached the end of a cycle. In many areas, Europe is making a comeback: there is no reason why it should not be a great power. It is the richest continent in the world, a model for many countries. Europeans are stronger when they are united, when they stand together, when they show solidarity. The European Union is «*the greatest political project in the history of mankind*», said Antonio Megalizzi, a young Italian journalist who was killed by terrorists in 2018 at the Christmas market in Strasbourg. Europe is often criticised because it is often seen as a finished product. But Europe is a work in progress, with its flaws and shortcomings. It is a project under constant construction. Each generation can and must contribute to it because all the battles of the moment, whether it be climate, digital, industry, etc., are more effective on a European scale.

Ukraine and Moldova have just been granted official EU candidate status. What do you think

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of the European political community project, which would allow countries engaged in lengthy accession negotiations to be more closely involved?

The structure of Europe is complex and at times can be a real headache to grasp how it works. So, there is no need to complicate it further and I am not over convinced by this idea of a European political community. On the other hand, it is important, and it is a strong signal, to have granted Ukraine candidate status, even if it will take time to complete the 35 negotiation chapters. Ukraine’s European destiny was decided long before, in mid-March, when the country was disconnected from the Russian electricity network and connected to the European one. Shortly after the start of the Russian invasion, Ukraine and Europe physically joined hands and held on to each other.

But won’t this rapprochement eventually pose a huge challenge to the European Union?

It is obvious that we will not be able to have the same ambitions or achieve the same results with 27, or even 33 or 35, members as with 6 or 12. This does not prevent the creation of a community of values and destiny, with the existing institutions. But if we want to survive, we will have to establish a hard core capable of building a political Europe, with the founding countries, Spain, Portugal and Greece, or at euro area level. These countries have the necessary maturity; they are ready to take action. They can begin to think about a form of federalism and to act as pathfinders, to show the way, as new pioneers, taking up the path indicated by the Founding Fathers at the end of the Second World War. Other member states are welcome to join, provided they share not only the benefits of membership, but also the duties and values, particularly in terms of the rule of law and pluralism. It will also be necessary to ensure that those who remain outside do not block those who want to move forward, because there is no reason why those who are reluctant should prevent those who would like more integration. Italy is ready for this federal leap because it has already done it at home: Italians are convinced that if you can bring together a Turinese and a Palermitano, you can bring together an Athenian and a Parisian, a Berliner and a Roman. My ideal Europe is not at all a mega-structure, a technocratic

mastodon where everything would be decided only in Brussels: it is to delegate powers to the European Union where, together, we can be more effective, but it is also to give more power to the territories and the regions. This could help to calm frustrations. A compromise will have to be found between the different cultures and sensibilities.

«The Europe of June 2022 is very different from the Europe of January 2022,» said Emmanuel Macron in Brussels at the European Council. Do you agree?

The real shift in European integration began long before the war in Ukraine. A first step took place in July 2012, during the economic and financial crisis, when Mario Draghi, then president of the European Central Bank (ECB), said he was ready to do « *whatever it takes* », i.e. to protect the euro against international speculation. From then on, the single currency was saved. A second phase of acceleration took place during the Covid pandemic, with the *NextGenerationEU* recovery plan and the rise of a European Health Union. Despite a complicated start, the vaccination plan was a success and was implemented dramatically and quickly. The third stage is the one we are currently experiencing with the return of war to the heart of our continent, which shows that peace can never be taken for granted, and the realisation that we must be more united than ever before. The defence of our values is more important than anything else. At this moment, the future of Europe is being decided for the next century: we have the choice between overcoming our divisions to form a block, or taking the risk of breaking up permanently.

This war has also signalled the return in force of NATO and the transatlantic shield, particularly in the East. Does this not weaken the European defence project?

No. The Trump years have shown that America is a fundamental partner but one that can change its priorities at any time. Take for example, last summer when the US left Afghanistan. It would therefore be short-sighted to return to the *status quo* and not create a stronger European defence core. This is the condition to be a real power that is respected in the world. It can be complementary to NATO, but the Atlantic Alliance is no longer enough, Europe has to break out of its naivety and become master

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of its own destiny, including from a military point of view. In this field, very complex industrial stakes are at play. It is a challenge that must be taken up.

It has been a recurring theme since the failure of the European Defence Community project in 1954.

The European army will certainly not be created overnight: it will be created through «*de facto solidarities*». The Ukrainian crisis will have a major accelerating effect on European defence. It was already necessary to rationalise the sector, reorganise it, develop synergies, avoid duplication and identify the areas in which each country could be most effective. France was in the vanguard in the nuclear and fighter sectors, while Italy might have other assets, for example in the naval sector. Each country could act according to its own strengths and place them at the service of the European community. This would lead to economies of scale and greater efficiency, even operational efficiency. But this requires trust. Joint military exercises are regularly organised between France and Italy. There should be the same level of trust between all member states.

The next few months are going to be very difficult, with Russia threatening to turn off the gas tap and the risk of a food crisis. What response can be made?

Europe will still have to stand as one and create common energy stocks to ensure its strategic long-term autonomy.

In the medium term, the only way out of Russian dependence will be to import liquefied natural gas (LNG); Italy has succeeded in reducing its deliveries of Russian gas from 40% to 25%. All this fits in perfectly with the Green Deal and the development of renewable energies. History is sending us powerful signals about the need to think about a new model of solidarity and sustainability. The mutualisation of the debt is the surest instrument to face all this turbulence, including the loss of purchasing power. As long as we are aware of this and share the same values, there is no reason not to move forward together, hand in hand; because our division would be to play into the hands of our international rivals who do not share our values. In times of war, we must pull together and seek to overcome divisions and to free ourselves for a moment from our respective egos to participate together in the construction of something stronger than the sum of our individualities. Today our destiny, national and European, is at stake. All forms of patriotism have a European dimension. To defend Europe is to defend one’s country. «*One for all, all for one*», the motto of the Three Musketeers, has never been so relevant. The European Union means strength. It is high time to light up its stars once more!

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