

The multiple crises of the 2010s have undoubtedly plunged the EU into its worst existential crisis, casting a shadow on the future of the integration project. These crises, according to Fabbrini, cannot possibly be understood by just observing what is in plain sight — their effects — while ignoring how the past legacy of the Union has contributed to the current situation.

Our story begins with the Maastricht Treaty: at this critical juncture, European leaders made possible the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) at the cost of three fundamental compromises. In the first place, Maastricht was predicated on an institutional bargain on the method for dealing with collective problems: while some Member States conceived the EU as a loose intergovernmental union, some others strove towards an “ever closer union”, involving growing policy integration at the supranational level. The second compromise was political in nature, concerning the substantive contents of the Maastricht Treaty: the UK was allowed to “opt-out” from EMU and the Social Protocol since its leaders mainly conceived the EU as an Economic Community based on the Single Market. Finally, an economic compromise undergirded EMU: while the Germans aspired towards a centralized monetary policy in the mould of the *Deutsche Bundesbank*, the French favoured a decentralized monetary policy that would leave a large leeway for Member States to determine their own fiscal policies. Hence, a generous degree of flexibility was allowed in order to soften the blow that adherence to the Maastricht convergence criteria would have inflicted on low-income Member States of the Eurozone.

On the one hand, intergovernmentalism and parliamentarism, individually, are not able to reconcile European democracy with the democratic process of the individual Member States. On the other hand, the solution proposed by the sovereigntists is not able to reconcile the states’ sovereignty with the interdependence that the Single Market has created.

These Faustian bargains started to unravel during the last decade. The

contradictions in monetary policy showed during the European debt crisis: while the southern European Member States invoked “solidarity”, asking for more flexibility to the Stability and Growth Pact, the northern European Member States answered by [imposing financial “stability”](#). The British opting-out created a contradiction in economic governance which strained the relationship between the UK and the Eurozone. The UK itself, during [the negotiations that preceded the Brexit referendum](#), demanded that the rules that apply to the Eurozone do not encroach on the non-Eurozone countries. Lastly, the EU intergovernmental bargaining, when facing the dilemmas of collective action, [has made it structurally difficult](#) to provide a prompt and effective answer to the European debt crisis.

These anomic effects, by dramatically weakening European integration, have created a window of opportunity for two opposite political families to come together: populist parties are, in fact, starting to align with nationalist parties on their “sovereignist” preferences, as demonstrated by the Five Star Movement-Northern League government in Italy. Sovereignism, according to Fabbrini, is a public philosophy which contradicts the Europeanist belief that has guided the European integration project since the end of the Second World War. However, it is not its complete negation: it does not imply the disintegration of the EU, rather its reconfiguration along the lines of a “negative” market-based integration, mainly based on the voluntary cooperation of its members.

The Europeanists’ response

When confronted with these challenges, the Europeanist field finds itself conflicted on the response that the EU should provide in order to solve its political crisis. **The first proposed solution follows the traditional approach of the European Commission to weave coalitions in support of European integration by promoting public policies that can foster a large consensus, based on the concept of “output legitimacy”**. According to Fabbrini, this solution alone cannot mend the aforementioned Europeanist-sovereignist schism since it disregards, at a fundamental level, the politics which animates it. While the material well-being of European denizens is certainly necessary for the resolution of the political crisis, to only focus on these aspects would be myopic. Symbolic aspects imbue the sovereignist discourse and are, arguably, equally as important as the EU’s policy failures in drawing discontented citizens to the Eurosceptic camp.

The [second solution](#) is to promote European parliamentarism: the EU should evolve in the direction of a traditional federal state, following the blueprints of German

federalism. In this way, it would be able to overcome the “democratic deficit” whose importance is underestimated by the “output legitimacy” solution. This conception, however, tends to disregard the enormous cultural and institutional differences across the Member States. These very differences, according to Fabbrini, could undermine the very possibility of having a functioning democracy in the EU. Just thinking about the formidable variety of European legal and political systems makes us realize that there is too vast a gulf between the European Member States for them to conform to a unitary model.

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The last solution proposed is to reconfigure the EU as the union of European governments, by strengthening the existing intergovernmental component, especially the European Council. According to its [proponents](#), the European Council is, by proxy, a democratic institution: the peoples of Europe, either directly or indirectly, elect its Members, since they are government officials. Following this logic, the decisions taken by the Council are democratic too. However, some fundamental democratic issues emerge when considering the existing asymmetries between the Member States: the preferences of powerhouses such as Germany or France do weigh more than smaller states in the decisions taken by the EU.

It goes without saying that this dilemma is aporetic: on the one hand, intergovernmentalism and parliamentarism, individually, are not able to reconcile European democracy with the democratic process of the individual Member States. On the other hand, the solution proposed by the sovereigntists is not able to reconcile the states’ sovereignty with the interdependence that the Single Market has created. This interdependence is managed through the policies of the EU, but these policies are not sufficient to overcome the political crisis. What is to be done?

Federal union as a possible way out

In solving this contradiction, Fabbrini makes a fundamental distinction between two types of federation: the federal state and the federal union. A federal state is created from the disaggregation of a unitary polity; such is the case of the Federal Republic of Germany. A federal union, instead, proceeds from the voluntary aggregation of composite polities — multilinguals, as in the case of the Swiss *Willensnation*, or unilingualist, as in the case of the United States. **Fabbrini argues that the EU resembles more a composite polity since it is composed of different people with different cultures, languages and institutional traditions. Hence federal union should provide the blueprint for European integration and not the federal state as it is now.**

EU Member States have to give up something now for the benefits that a federal union will allow them to reap in the future.

In this sense, one of the fundamental steps that this type of union would allow is the overcoming of national egoisms and the reconfiguration of national interests in terms of enlightened interests. According to Fabbrini, this is what happened at the Philadelphia Convention in 1787. One of the necessary conditions in the creation of the Federal Union was the political equality of its members: each of the States had to have equal representation in the Federal Senate. Powerhouses such as the State of Virginia, which Fabbrini likens to today's Germany in the EU context, had every interest to oppose such a bargain. However, they did not: the Founding Fathers of the US clearly understood how such opposition would have hindered or even prevented the creation of a federal union. In this sense, they preferred to sow the seeds for the future rather than pursuing immediate political gains. In doing so, they renounced the use of their economic and political power to occupy a central position in the nascent Union. But by doing so, they allowed the creation of a federal union that survives and thrives to this day.

Analogously, **the EU's Member States have to give up something now for the benefits that a federal union will allow them to reap in the future.** Since the late eighties, the EU has managed the intricacies of economic integration by relying on an

intergovernmental method. This method, in turn, has allowed the EU to avoid some of the urgent questions about its ontology. Fabbrini, to his credit, is putting ontology back into the debate. By describing the EU as a composite polity, he argues that it should strive to become a federal union. This path allows us to understand how one of the most fundamental elements is still severely lacking from the European construction: political equality.

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