

What I want in 2012: Europeans and Europe to get the respect they deserve

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The word "crisis" is on everybody's lips. But nobody knows what this word means anymore because it has been bandied about so much. But the reality is there: unemployment, companies going bankrupt, Member States struggling. National governments are attending to the most urgent things first in a certain degree of confusion because the crisis is also sharpening competition between the Member States and emphasising the rivalry of the "big chiefs". During the 9 December European Council, the British refused to sign up to a new treaty which Germany and France were calling for with several good reasons, but with rather too much bossiness. Powerless to act, the European Commission witnessed this breakdown. Neither did it propose anything really useful, in parallel with the initiatives of the major States, to support growth. In this context, there is a lot that is discouraging. Can we expect any improvement in 2012?

After decades of blindness and everything working smoothly, the only way to come out of the crisis is very steep. The political class owes its citizens the truth. But, if it is going to achieve this objective, it would be better if these efforts were supported with much greater respect. Respect for the weakest. In our societies, the inequalities are becoming dangerously more engrained, as the OECD has recently reminded us. Should there be a more rigorous management of public finances? Yes – but not to the detriment of people who, being unemployed or poorly paid workers, find it hard to make both ends meet. Efforts made by those who are better off should not be symbolic only. It's a moral issue and it should be mobilising all our available resources.

Respect for the European institutions built up patiently since 1950. Our leaders are going too far in their race against the clock to meet the markets, in their petty electoral games of "Who's the best captain in the storm?" Their mistakes, ever since 2009, do not give them any right to run the whole show. For example, one cannot criticise too much the disastrous nature of the Franco-German pact concluded at Deauville in October 2010, behind the backs of the other European partners, against the wishes of the European Council President Van Rompuy and against the advice of the European Central Bank. This 'brilliant' agreement has precipitated the crisis to the point where Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy retracted it on 5 December 2011! But quite a bit of damage had already been done.

The euro is the crowning achievement of Europe as a community. Its future depends on the credibility of Europe as a community, that is to say, of a Community with a future defending its values and relying on its institutions, not sacrificing democracy to efficiency. Europe without the European Parliament, Europe without debate, without

controls, where national Governments take decisions behind closed doors – that is not what Europe is about. What a lack of respect for a hierarchy whose existence people claim to be defending in other contexts, when they are talking to the world!

Respect for economic reality. The “markets” have definitely abused this. Over the past few years, technological innovations, together with a culpable absence of regulation and supervision, have given powers to the financial sector that are out of all proportion. Some governments have also committed serious errors in the management of their public finances or by indulging in unsustainable growth based on property bubbles and indebtedness in the private sector. But economics is not ethics. By heaping too much abuse on “the Greeks” in general, we have also discouraged those who wanted to see their country develop. Through our wish to punish “the markets” we have pushed out of the door not only funds from greedy investors and speculators, but also the funds of insurance companies and European savings banks which manage, for example, the life insurance policies for ordinary people.

This crisis has many forms. There is no easy solution. But the worst obstacle lies perhaps with certain national leaders who are trying to control everything without seeing the inequalities which are hitting Europeans hard, without admitting either their own mistakes or the value of democracy. It is a strategic mistake to ridicule the citizens and the institutions. Europeans and Europe deserve more respect.