

# Opinion Article

No 7  
April 2013

## "A Hymn to Sorrow" for Europe

by **Ambassador (retired) Alexandros Mallias**

former Ambassador of Greece to Washington D.C. (2005-2009)

I was honoured and humbled to serve the (then) European Community, the European vision and ideals, since 1970. Indeed, my first job was at the Information Centre of the European Communities in Athens (1970-1972). In the late sixties and early seventies, while Greece was ruled by the military junta, the European institutions stood for the oppressed Greeks. I am proud to be a pro-European activist throughout my life.

As a diplomat, till my retirement as Ambassador of Greece in 2010, I was privileged to work in the shadow of true European leaders whose vision and action for Europe was beneficial to Greece, to Europe and to the South East Europe at large, notwithstanding their different ideologies, tactics and political agendas.

It is fair to say that from a political as well as from an institutional point of view, Greece's accession opened the door to further enlargements and memberships.

Many in Greece, in Cyprus, in Spain and elsewhere are upset with the prejudice colouring some comments and statements regarding Europe's South; in fact regarding the peoples of the South. Well, I witnessed myself their existence even from an institutional point of view when Greece applied for membership to the European Union. Greece became the first EU member from (in) the periphery. Yet, we were still considered somehow "different".

The concept of "L'Europe a deux vitesses" was elaborated and indeed publicly proposed already in 1977-79 during Greece's accession process. I still recall Gaston Thorn and Leo Tindemans expounding this idea.

My account of the ongoing European crisis, not to use the term debacle, is that:

- it is deep, divisive and grass-rooted,
- it turned the South against the North, and the North against the South.
- it is political and institutional,
- it is more about the EURO value and less about Europe's values.

From a geostrategic perspective, Europe's South East including two EU members Greece and Cyprus, should normally matter more, due to its immediate vicinity to the Middle and Near East, as well as to North Africa and to the ongoing historic mutations and changes.

Whatever is the outcome of the present circle of this mega changes one thing is clear: Europe's Near East neighbors will be different. Definitely in politics; probably also in territory. Yes, it is also clear that the era of

**"A Hymn to Sorrow" for Europe**

By Ambassador (retired) Alexandros Mallias, former Ambassador of Greece to Washington D.C. (2005-2009)

"stability" in Middle East guaranteed by tyrants and dictators is over. Furthermore, this transformation, still in its early phase, will be unpredictably long. I anticipate the moving sand will progress to the Persian Gulf and beyond.

In fact, what is currently happening in the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean has some similarities with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the totalitarian regimes in the former Soviet Union and the authoritarian regime in the former Yugoslavia. Few are still nostalgic of the era of this inconvenient "stability".

South East Europe is also the energy gateway and the cross-point of routes from the East to Central and Western Europe. It is this part of Europe's forefront that links the old continent to Asia and to North Africa's Egypt and Libya.

Yet, the European Union as such is still remarkably absent from the Middle Eastern stage.

A rhetorical question: does anyone argue or believe that the present political division between the North and the South or if you wish between the South and the North makes Europe more palatable to its immediate neighborhood?

Well, we have all realized that membership in the European Union is not tantamount to perfection. Yes, indeed, we are far from perfection. This assessment is not related exclusively to a single country; it applies also to many in the European Union, including those who pull the reigns.

Furthermore, it is clear that the alignments, sacrifices and compromises that are the prerequisites, the conditionality, for joining the European Union cannot simply stop on the day you are in. Greece, Spain, Portugal and recently Cyprus are learning their lesson the hard way.

It is not just a failure of economics. It is a failure of politics. The present European crisis coupled with the collapse of the personal dignity of Greeks, Spaniards and Cypriots, all holders of the European passport, proves also that it is not just enough to work and "deal" with the established political elites, or simply with the establishment.

Yes, we as part of this system also bear responsibility for our own mistakes and failures. The political elites, either in office or in opposition, should display more humility and show a higher degree of accountability. Yet, their political "logos" is that of arrogance and bickering. On election day, fear and despair are determining our vote; not the perspective of "change" or of "better days".

Moreover, there is a dramatic public information -communication deficit within the European Union's institutions as well as within our own democratic systems. Think for example of the way party discipline, often in an irrational way, prevails over personal conscience.

The gap between the average citizen from one side, the European institutions and the political elites from the other side has never been deeper and wider. It is not surprising that the message does not get through; It is not understood; it is not tolerated: in fact, it is rejected by society. Europe must reach the people; reach the jobless and the unemployed; reach the dispossessed; reach those who cannot buy their medicine or feed their children.

Definitely, the "polis" (πόλις) and the "politis" (citizen -πολίτης) are not able to understand why painful economic measures or countermeasures are imposed to them, while their democratically elected archons themselves are not often the best (the "ἀριστοι"). If ethos and accountability are not the code of political conduct, then we are failing our own country and our Europe as well.

**"A Hymn to Sorrow" for Europe**

By Ambassador (retired) Alexandros Mallias, former Ambassador of Greece to Washington D.C. (2005-2009)

The Aristotelian concepts of "catharsis" and "metron" should be the rule and not the exception to the rule in politics, both at a European as well as at a national level. Yet, the same "metron" is also necessary when austerity or rather impoverishment measures are prescribed as remedies.

The path to Europe and the path of Europe is our common Odyssey. There is no credible alternative.

We owe an apology to those European citizens, in Greece in Spain and elsewhere, who lost their right to dignity. Democracy is not simply holding fair elections. It is above all about preserving our own personal dignity.

A lesson learned from the ongoing crisis and the decline of Europe's fundamental values is that the European Union is losing ground. Furthermore, we lose our faith in our Europe.

Politics and policies are a marathon run; not a 100-meter dash. I am afraid that the European Union, our Europe, while focusing on the first kilometer risks of losing the marathon race.

This is why on May 9, in Athens, in Nicosia in Madrid as well as in Brussels, in Berlin, all over Europe, "A Hymn to Sorrow " for our Europe should replace the "Hymn to Joy".

**Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)- CRISIS OBSERVATORY**Vas. Sofias, 10676 Athens, Greece | Tel. +30 210 7257 110 | Fax +30 210 7257 114 | E-mail [info@crisisobs.gr](mailto:info@crisisobs.gr)**Learn more about our work** - Visit our website at [www.crisisobs.eu](http://www.crisisobs.eu)

*ELIAMEP offers a forum for debate on international and European issues. Its non-partisan character supports the right to free and well-documented discourse. ELIAMEP publications aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge and to provide policy relevant analyses. As such, they solely represent the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Foundation.*