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Can the European Center Hold?

MILAN — My father is 97 years old. Angelo Severgnini — Gino to his friends — was born during a world war, fought in another (first with the Germans, then against them) and witnessed the subsequent Italian civil war. He saw the coming and going of Fascism, Nazism and Communism.

And he adores the European Union. He has seen it bring former enemies together, create lasting peace across the Continent and enable his children and grandchildren to make friends abroad and move freely from Italy to Britain, the Netherlands and Poland.

Sadly, my father is in a minority these days.

Europe's narrative is in the hands of its foes. While the friends of Europe chat busily among themselves in the narrow circles of government, business and the media, anti-Europe parties are gathering momentum across the Continent.

The list is long: Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy. Nigel Farage's U.K. Independence Party. Alternative for Germany. The Danish People's Party. True Finns. The Sweden Democrats. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Front.

Although sometimes lumped together as the "European Tea Parties," they make a somewhat motley political crew. But they share the conviction that the European Union must go.

Which would be a shame. The European Union may grind out far too many regulations, but it wasn't responsible for the current economic slump. And it has brought good things to its member countries. The "four freedoms" — free movement of goods, capital, services and people — help member economies, as Britain would soon find out if it left.

Without a common agriculture policy, Europe would be swamped by cheap imports, and farmers would go out of business. From competition to food safety, the environment, safety at work, the length of court proceedings and conditions in prisons, it is the European Union that sets the standards. Even soccer's Champions League would be a shade less exciting without the 1995 Bosman ruling, which allowed footballers, just like any other European worker, to move freely across the union.

Europe's voters take all this for granted. Instead, they blame the union for budget restrictions and austerity measures. Europe may be slowly sorting out its banking mess, but the European Union still gets the blame for youth unemployment. The European Commission's Eurobarometer, which has kept tabs on public opinion since 1973, shows that a record 60 percent of respondents "tend not to trust the E.U."

The European Commission is worried. Last April its president, José Manuel Barroso, introduced "A New Narrative for Europe," inviting the union's artists, intellectuals and scientists "to engage with and contribute to a reflection on the European 'story.'" Last month in Milan, Mr. Barroso said that Europe should again become "an object of desire."

But rekindling enthusiasm for Europe with new banking regulations, which is where the big focus within the union lies today, is like attempting to boost libido by reading the instructions on a packet of condoms: possible, perhaps, but something of a challenge.

All bleak on the European front, then? Not necessarily. If a political storm is on its way, that is good news: Europe needs a good fright to find its courage. The European Union functions by transforming fear into energy. When things go quiet, Europeans tend to sit back and bellyache.

Over the last century, there have been four major, salutary scares, each of which has pushed Europe closer together.

The first followed World War II. Fearing another war might be possible, the former enemies linked together their coal and steel production, in 1951, and then their economies, with the 1957 Treaty of Rome.

A second scare followed the oil crisis and the economic slump of the 1970s. Brussels started to construct a single market, which was initiated in 1992 and has worked well ever since.

The third scare came with the fall of Communism from 1989 to 1991. Having no idea about what to do with all those new democracies on its eastern borders, the European Union panicked, as usual. Then it took a flier and significantly enlarged its membership.

The fourth scare followed the financial crisis of 2008-9. Many in London and the United States predicted the collapse of the euro, which didn't happen. New rules for national budgets avoided a major crisis. Today, banking and fiscal unification are on the way.

Now another Europe-bracing scare looms. Those Euroskeptic parties are likely to do well in European parliamentary elections in May, which will serve to concentrate minds. Do we care about Europe? Then let's say so, loud and clear.

The so-called Erasmus generation — the millions of young men and women who spent their 20s sharing offices, labs, lecture halls, apartments and beds across the European Union — is coming of age. They have a duty, and a privilege, to stand up for Europe.

It cannot be left to Ukrainians protesting in favor of integration with the West, or Africans risking their lives on rickety migrant boats, to tell us that Europe is a nice place to live because the rule of law is upheld and its welfare-protected citizens can enjoy agreeable cities set in lovely countryside. We take all this for granted, but we shouldn't.

In 1919 William Butler Yeats wrote, in "The Second Coming," that "the best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity." Anti-Europeans are not necessarily evil people, yet their passion is driven by regrettable intentions. They are out to dismantle what we, and our parents, have put together.

My father, who is older than Yeats's poem, has seen Europe disunited and united. That's why he likes the European Union, and he won't give it up without a fight.

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