



Honor if not power: EU trying a new tack

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Aweek's notes on power- lessness:
Europe, Romano Prodi.

1. The idea of the European Union achieving world heavyweight status through playing the doeskin-gloved conciliator - soft solutions to dangerous situations offered up at good hotels in pleasant locations - is dying an obvious but perhaps promising kind of death.

The causes are self-incriminatory.

In house, the notion of an EU with sufficient unity and prestige to actually exercise some kind of global soft power was decimated in 2005 by its failure to approve a constitution. The loss of political credibility by governments in Paris, Rome and London this year has buried the conceit even deeper.

Peeked at through the Brussels curtains, the view of what lies beyond is now one that makes untenable the old EU approach of hedging, neither-norism and willfully playing the contrarian to whatever the American position might be.

A nuclear threat that Iran no longer whispers but screams; Hamas's stated will to destroy Israel; Russia's distaste for anyone building democracy at its borders and comfort with oil boycotts for those who believe in energy alternatives to Gazprom: Europe could not hide from taking sides.

An official Brussels-dated death notice has not been published. But delusional thinking about how Europe can have a say in the world's problems without risking trouble or confrontation is growing fainter. At the very least, the EU's powerlessness is no

longer coming as virtue wrapped as the equivalent of effective policy.

Rather, an acceptance of the old methods' failure as a real lever for world influence has seemed to emerge. Some indicative things have happened.

In the last month, the EU has banned contacts with Hamas's Palestinian leadership and cut off its cash flow to the Palestinian Authority through the new Hamas government. At the same time, it placed a travel ban on the election-rigging leaders of Belarus, protégés of Putin's Russia. It even signaled EU sanctions against Iran are in order if current United Nations efforts to stop it from making nuclear weapons fail.

These steps in no sense turn Europe from an imaginary player in the Middle East into a real one, or mean a combative policy aimed at checking Putin's desire to make Russia's energy resources a factor in all the EU's policy decisions. They don't say, either, that this or that European foreign policy voice won't soon try to rationalize away Hamas's will to violence or Iran's attempt to build nukes.

But they do show a changing view within the EU of how it can stop looking absurd. This mirrors Angela Merkel's refusal to regard America's notions of reality as suspect, and Poland's prominence as a force among the organization's new members. It also reflects a diminished role for a France that sees no gain in confronting the United States for now, and cannot afford crossing a renewed German vision of how the world works.

In its weakened state, the EU can't talk seriously about pan-European armies to replace NATO, or, junior high guidance counselor-style, call for new multilateral conferences to win the confidence of repulsive rulers and regimes.

Nor is it portraying itself any longer as the Counter-Answer. For difficult months to come, you could call that promising.

2. Not promising: the way the chief economist of the International Monetary Fund sees Italy's economic situation. With Raghuram Rajan's description of the circumstances - diminishing productivity and competitiveness, massive debt, 1.6 percent growth this year and an incapacity to meet the EU's deficit targets - Prodi would need something like economic war powers to right the situation.

According to Reuters, that was exactly Rajan's metaphor: "The challenges for Italy are tremendous and need to be taken up almost on a war footing." Drastic spending cuts and deep structural reform were described as the only meaningful line of attack.

But while Prodi, who is without the muscle of a party affiliation, fell into squabbling about who gets what job in an eventual government, his left-wing allies were fencing off no-go zones that made clear how little power he'll have to make the necessary changes.

Example: The Communist Refoundation Party said it was supporting the insistence of Guglielmo Epifani, head of Italy's biggest trade union, that

Prodi scrap a Berlusconi- initiated law aimed at opening up the job market.

This is a kind of provocation because the law is timid, representative more than anything else of Berlusconi's years of flight from tougher reform, and previously designated by Prodi as so inoffensive as to be maintained in modified form.

Before getting to Square 1 of an operating government, we're at this station of descent: While Prodi needs a long suspension of disbelief regarding his associates' built-in contradictions, they actively undermine his position. The message to the leftists' clientele is: Relax, forget about anyone cutting the size of public sector expenditure and, with it, your hold on Italy's army of petty bureaucrats and entitlement-holders.

Prodi didn't leap to challenge his friends' pre-emptive barriers. Leaving economics vague, he has been talking instead about foreign affairs, where powerlessness, in the case of Europe and Italy, can give politicians a momentary shield of microphones and press conferences from the strikes, ruined credit ratings and falling governments that come with trying to battle economic impotence.

So last week, Prodi, perhaps to win a farthing's credit with his problemati-

cal left, took a congratulatory phone call from Ismael Haniya, the Hamas leader, who is on the EU's and United States' we-don't-talk-to list. Prodi also made a statement (later denied) that excluded the Netherlands from a small group of countries he said could form an eventual pioneer unit within the EU.

Here was an industrial-strength demonstration of powerlessness. Not only did Prodi grab at refuge by talking about things that have nothing to do with Italy's real issue - how to create deep reform - but he sought escape in an anachronism, an EU world that is almost no more.

Recognizing the limits of its old soft power ambitions, the EU, at least for the moment, is past picking up the phone for politicians with agendas of murderous intent, or chewing over plans that would create a back-of-the-bus role for three-quarters of its members.

There's a kind of honor in saying who you are, what you really can do. The EU may be moving in this direction.

Prodi will not find it for Italy in talking about what doesn't count from behind the crumbled wall of Europe's foregone illusions.