

# COMMENT

## EuropeanVoice

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### Erosion of Italy's European tradition is a crying shame

**T**he gap between potential and reality was on stark display in Italy this week. In Milan, the great and good gathered at Bocconi University to remember Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, an Italian who served the European Union well, in many guises and over many years, and who died just before Christmas.

Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, Jean-Claude Trichet, the current president of the European Central Bank, and Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission, were among those paying tribute. In thanking them for their tributes, Giorgio Napolitano, the president of Italy, observed that they were paying homage to Italy and the best of its people, to its cultural tradition and to its Europeanism.

Even if Napolitano has to stay above party factionalism (and he must, given the fragility of Italy's political scene), his audience cannot have failed to observe that the country's current political leadership is not in the same tradition as Padoa-Schioppa.

Silvio Berlusconi, the prime minister, is embroiled in lurid allegations that he paid prostitutes, including minors, to attend sex parties at his villa. He denies the charges, defying calls to step aside and let the president appoint a caretaker prime minister.

Berlusconi last week phoned a TV chat-show to protest his innocence; meanwhile, newspapers publish transcripts of other telephone conversations, procured by phone-tapping of the prostitutes.

None of this is really in the cultural tradition to which Napolitano alludes – but it fails on more than just on grounds of taste.

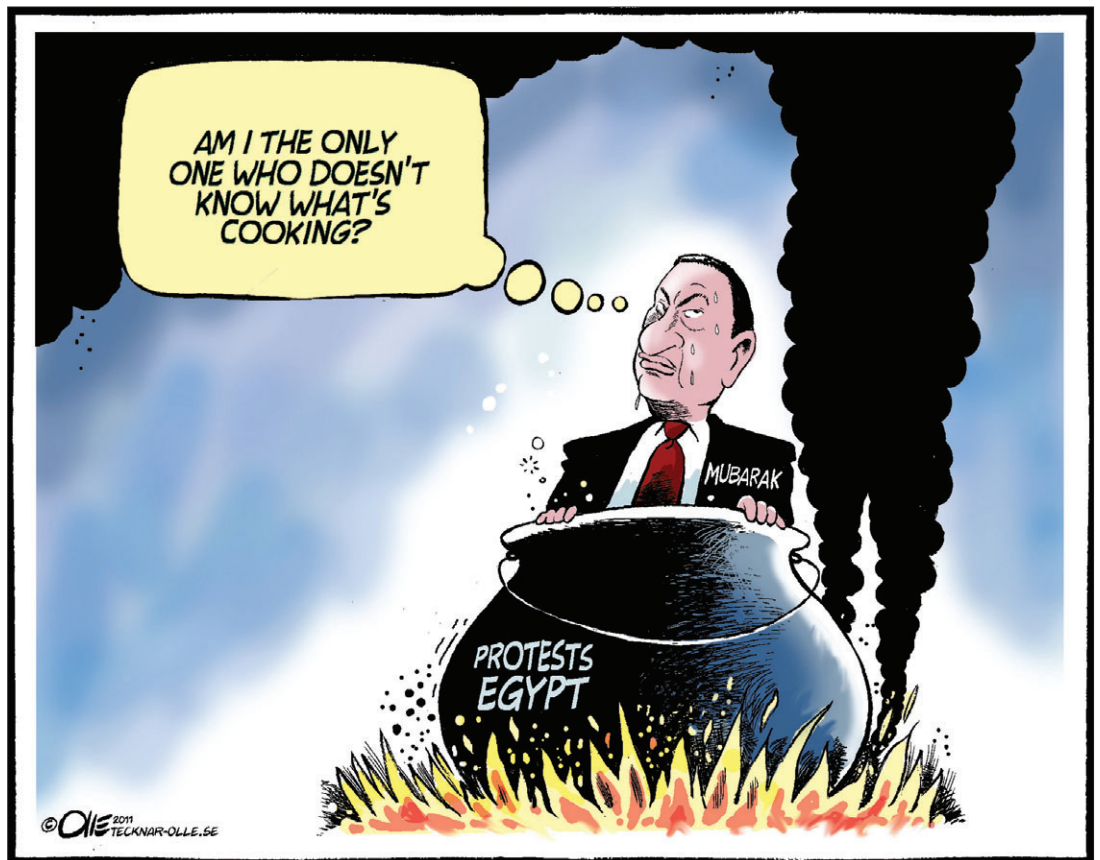
One of the ironies of Berlusconi's present situation is that the Mediterranean region is now the focus of world attention. The uprising in Tunisia has been followed by a near-revolution in Egypt. Europe waits, unsure of how things will develop. In years gone by, and perhaps in years to come, Italy's partners in the EU would recognise that this part of the neighbourhood is one in which Italy has a special interest, where spheres of influence have overlapped for decades. But the current Italian government is now in such a mess that its influence on the Mediterranean is limited. In this policy area, as in so many others, Italy's voice barely registers.

That is a crying shame, and the unfolding history of bunga-bunga parties at Berlusconi's villa is more than just titillation to be laughed about. Underneath, there are insidious developments that corrode what Napolitano would call Italy's European tradition.

The European Union is, most importantly, rules-based. When the EU was founded – with Italy as one of the founding nations – it was as a rules-based organisation. One of the most disturbing aspects of Berlusconi's time in power is that he has weakened the rule of law (which was not, in any case, the strongest in Europe). The battles that he has fought over the decades with the public prosecutors in Milan are only a sideshow. The amnesties and the rule changes are arguably worse.

One case with which *European Voice* is familiar, because it has been grinding on since before this newspaper began, is that of the *lettori*, the foreign lecturers at Italian universities. The discrimination against them has repeatedly been ruled illegal by the European Court of Justice, but those judgments were long ignored. Hundreds of cases were brought, claiming compensation. The Italian government has now passed a law, which took effect on 29 January, which sets out new rules for the lecturers' pay, but it also includes a dubious clause that retrospectively wipes away any pending claims. "From the date this present law comes into force, all pending court cases relating to these matters are extinguished." Even by the standards of Berlusconi's government, this appears to be a particularly flagrant breach of EU law.

Napolitano, in his oration at Bocconi, told his audience that once again what was expected of Italy was a contribution of passion, ideas, energy and political will to the European cause. Between the idea and the reality, as the poet once remarked, falls the shadow. In this case, the shadow is Berlusconi. The sooner he leaves the stage, the better for Europe.



CARTOON BY OLLE JOHANSSON, SWEDEN © OLLE/CAGLE CARTOONS

TEN YEARS AGO Brussels, 1 February 2001

### De Palacio to fight bid to probe commissioners

Loyola de Palacio, the European Commission's vice-president, says she will fight proposals that would make European commissioners accountable to the EU citizens' watchdog in cases of suspected mismanagement.

Ombudsman Jacob Söderman says that commissioners, as heads of the EU's administration, should have the same obligation to testify as their officials.

But De Palacio told the European Parliament last week that empowering the ombudsman to summon commissioners to provide evidence would blur the line between good administration and politics.

"A commissioner is not a civil servant; it is up to the Parliament to directly control or scrutinise

our actions," she said.

The proposal is one of a series of measures pushed by Söderman currently being considered by MEPs.

The Ombudsman also argues that he must be given full access to secret documents and that some restrictions currently placed on Commission staff who give evidence are "unacceptable". Under existing rules a witness could be required to lie if instructed to do so by his superiors.

De Palacio has offered a lukewarm response to all of Söderman's requests. She says there is no need to change the rules on access to documents because in reality the Ombudsman has never been refused a paper.

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### Arab spring?

The wave of unrest in the Middle East is likely to highlight two potential models of political development for the Arab world: Turkey and Iran. If the revolutionary wave that began in Tunisia spreads, how many countries will be tempted by Turkish openness, and how many by Iranian fundamentalism?

What is clear is the West's preference for the Turkish model, writes **Dominique Moïsi**. Turkey is demonstrating that Islam and modernity are compatible. But the Turks are the Ottoman Empire's heirs, and the Arab world may not be ready to exchange frustration for the humiliating admission that it requires its former rulers' model to progress toward modernity.

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### Europe's time to act in Bosnia

In the 15 years since the guns of war fell silent in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the international community has overseen the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords, with the US and the Office of the High Representative (OHR) playing leading roles.

This should be the year the EU takes over, writes **Sabine Freizer**. Today, Bosnia needs EU technical assistance and political guidance to become a credible candidate for EU membership, more than an international overseer like the OHR to legislate for it or maintain security. EU foreign ministers should agree on the details of a

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stronger EU presence. They have already pushed their discussion into February; they should delay no longer.

Since 2005, the EU has offered to take over from the OHR and pledged to reinforce its mission but has been stymied largely by the international community's unwillingness to close the OHR. In 2008, a set of five objectives and two conditions were set for OHR's closure; so far, Bosnia has met three objectives and one condition.

Dividing state property between the country's central and entity-

level governments, one unresolved objective, may take years.

It appears that the OHR will not close until this is done. The EU should not wait. Further delay will only undermine the Union's credibility. This month, the EU can agree on a plan to reinforce the EU delegation, choose a single EU representative, and give him or her tools to encourage reforms and, if necessary, impose sanctions. The EU should take advantage of its positive pull while it still has it.

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