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ITALIAN COMMUNIST BLUEPRINT FOR EUROPEAN UNITY

by Kevin Devlin

Summary: Altiero Spinelli, a former European Commissioner elected to the European Parliament as an independent deputy on the Italian CP's list, has produced a program for strengthening West European integration through a federated "union" to which member states would surrender part of their sovereignty. His draft has been approved by the European Parliament in Strasbourg, although implementation of the project will depend on ratification by national parliaments, which seems unlikely. The PCI strongly backs his proposal, in line with its commitment to this cause, which has developed gradually over two decades (in part as the regional counterpart of its national political strategy). This is in contrast to the stand of the French CP, whose Eurodeputies voted against a plan described as "a dangerous Utopia."

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With the support of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), an ex-Communist who represents the PCI in the European Parliament has produced a program for strengthening West European unity, through a new "European Union" that would eventually replace the present EEC. He is Altiero Spinelli, a former European Commissioner (1970-1976), who has dedicated himself to the cause of European unity for more than four decades: in 1941, as a political prisoner under Mussolini's fascist regime, he helped to write the Ventotene Manifesto, which led to the formation of the European Federalist Movement. (1) The draft treaty that he presented after a special commission of "Eurodeputies" had worked on it for two years was adopted by the European Parliament by a substantial majority (2) on September 16, after two days of lively debate.

Despite this historic step, however, Spinelli's vision of a West European federation seems to have little chance of becoming reality in the years ahead, because it depends on existing EEC institutions being persuaded to make way voluntarily for ones quite different in character and (even more of an obstacle) on the national parliaments being persuaded to surrender much of their sovereignty to a new European Union. (3)

Instead of the present arrangement, with executive power in the hands of the Council of Ministers representing the 10 member states, the parliament having no supranational legislative function, Spinelli's project would give to the European Parliament (with a Council of the Union to function, in effect, as a second chamber) and to the commission much of the powers now held exclusively by the Council of Ministers. Legislation adopted by the parliament with the agreement of the Council of the Union would take precedence over national laws, would deal in principle with all matters on which the community would act better than an individual country, would not need ratification by national legislatures, and would be passed by an absolute majority.

Giving Up Sovereignty. This last is one of the most controversial points in the proposed reforms. Spinelli is concerned about ending the system whereby member states have the right to veto any proposals that they consider against their national interests; if states are to have the economic and social benefits of federation, they must pay for them by freely giving up a certain degree of sovereignty. Under his plan, national representatives in the Council of the Union could delay a majority decision on the grounds of national interest but could not block it permanently.

- (1) Spinelli was a member of the clandestine Italian CP during the 1930s but broke away from it during his political imprisonment under Mussolini. In 1976 the PCI persuaded him to run for the Italian Parliament as an independent candidate on its list, and in 1979 he was also elected to the European Parliament as an independent on the party's list.
- (2) The draft document was adopted by 210 votes to 37, with 72 abstentions and more than 1/3 of the parliament's 434 members absent.
- (3) For details of the draft project, see the report in The Times and The Guardian of 15 September 1983 and in the Süddeutsche Zeitung of 17 September 1983.

The Spinelli report spells out this surrender of sovereignty. It foresees a union with power to levy taxes; conduct a collective foreign policy; procure arms and negotiate disarmament; develop a coordinated energy policy and an industrial strategy; and fund research. There would be common citizenship within the union and a common currency (the European Currency Unit, or ECU). "A new value, the concept of union, has been added . . . to the conventional values of democracy," it proclaims.

The proposal to move from the present community toward a federated union originated in "the Crocodile Club," named after the Strasbourg restaurant where Spinelli and some 20 other Eurodeputies of various nationalities used to meet and discuss the need for greater integration in Western Europe. Adopted first by the Italian communist faction to which the independent Spinelli belonged, it gained wider support until the assembly voted in July 1981 to set up a special "institutional" commission to consider it. One year later the European Parliament adopted, by 257 votes out of 315 voting, a report calling for the draft treaty of the European Union to be drawn up. The next stage will involve the commission's writing a more complete draft treaty, amounting to a draft constitution for a European Union. As the Italian Socialist chairman of the commission, Mauro Ferri, explained, this would be submitted to the Strasbourg assembly (and presumably approved) in the early months of 1984, before the present parliament is dissolved for direct elections next June, so that the project could become a factor in those elections. The rather vague hope is that, with increasing popular support in various countries, the plan could then be presented to the various national parliaments. An Italian communist comment put it optimistically:

Here lies the novelty of the solution worked out, because, the national governments of the 10 countries having shown little or no sensitivity to the problems of the union, and all efforts to make the EEC stronger and more coherent having come to nothing among the games of national diplomacy and ministerial bureaucracies, the European Parliament will now address itself directly to the freely elected representatives of the member states, presenting a text that the parliaments of those countries should impose on the governments. (4)

This commentary in the PCI's newspaper remarked that the creation of a "European democratic bloc," with economic potential comparable to that of either superpower, would contribute to the stabilization of East-West relations and the development of North-South cooperation. The writer added an observation that could not be well received in the Kremlin (or in the Paris offices of the French CP): "That is why, alongside a [collective] policy of security, one cannot but also wish for a common defense policy."

(4) Felice Ippolito, "How To Proceed Toward the European Union," l'Unità, 14 September 1983.

PCI Secretary-General Berlinguer strongly supported the Spinelli project during the Strasbourg debate, declaring that "the old policies and methods are leading the community toward paralysis." (5) He went on:

We think that the principal cause of the crisis affecting the community and its member states lies in the prevailing short-term attitude that has led governments to put the defense of restricted, immediate interests before the more profound interests of Western Europe as a whole. . . .

It is precisely the definition of common, supranational interests that can represent the best defense of individual nations and countries.

PCI's Regional Commitment. The Italian Communist Party's support of moves to develop West European integration can be seen as part of a wider regional option (6) that includes acceptance of Italy's NATO membership, efforts to develop relations with social-democratic and Christian parties throughout Western Europe, and the refusal to attend pan-European communist conferences like the one on peace and disarmament held in Paris in April 1980. Commitment to the European Community is, however, the strongest strand in that regional option: it is now almost a quarter of a century since the PCI first broke with Soviet policies by accepting the EEC as an irreversible reality, one that it would later seek to promote. Five years ago, at a two-day PCI conference on West European integration held in Rome, Luigi Berlinguer, a member of the Secretary-General's family, presented what can perhaps be seen as the first sketch of Spinelli's draft project for a European Union. Noting that the European Parliament had "merely consultative functions and only limited powers of control," he said:

Integration needs democracy, and democracy leads to the political institutionalization of the processes of integration. That is why the balances of power within the bodies of the community must be changed. . . . The parliament must become the body vested systematically [sic] with responsibility for deciding fundamental questions for the community; it must dispose of true legislative functions on important subjects, even if this is through joint decisions with the Council [of Ministers]; it must be able, on occasion, to make binding judgments. (7)

Other speakers at that conference in November 1978 stressed that the PCI's commitment was to the political and not merely the economic integration of Western Europe and that this should extend even to the controversial area of foreign policy. Sergio Segre, now a leading

(5) Ibid.

(6) For a perceptive analysis of this "regional option," See Heinz Timmermann, "Die Verwestlichung der KPI," Osteuropa, July 1983, pp. 519-529.

(7) L'Unità, 9 November 1978.

Eurodeputy, described the EEC as "economically a colossus but politically a dwarf" and deplored the fact that "a common foreign policy has been slow to take shape, because of national preoccupations and the lack of will." (8)

It is, however, clear that the PCI's commitment to West European integration, though it may be based upon convictions developed over two decades, is at the same time a matter of political calculation. It can, in fact, be regarded as the regional extension of the party's national strategy: a "long march through the institutions" of both Italy and the EEC, in an effort to promote its political influence and goals in every area open to it. Italian Communists freely admit that the united Western Europe they have in mind would, ideally, be one dominated by leftist forces, because "it is only the Left -- overcoming its own divisions, which also concern the choice of the European terrain as the base for its own initiative -- that can be the protagonist of an autonomous Europe, economically strong, committed to a policy of détente, and capable of contributing to the construction of a new international economic order." (9) This would also, by the same token, be a Western Europe standing to a certain extent between the two superpowers -- and more capable of resisting pressures from the Western one.

But that is a distant and uncertain perspective. Up to now, the PCI has made only limited progress in its approaches to the noncommunist parties of the "Euroleft." West European CPs have been even less receptive to its proposals. It was, for example, significant that the organizers of that Rome conference on European integration in November 1978 invited delegates of other Italian parties to attend, but that no foreign CPs were invited. Gian Carlo Pajetta was expressing the obvious when he stated on that occasion that the PCI's commitment to West European integration was demonstrated by the fact that

It has led us to have polemics and differences -- sometimes profound -- with other communist parties, whether regarding the enlargement of the community to include countries where the communist party opposes membership (10) or on other questions, such as the disagreement over the negative, and some downright hostile, judgment [on the EEC] that one often finds in the communist press, including that of the CPSU and other ruling parties. (11)

(8) Ibid.

(9) Draft theses for the PCI's 16th Congress, L'Unità, 28 November 1982.

(10) This applied to Portugal; in Spain the PCE favored entry; and in Greece the pro-Soviet KKE opposed entry, while the independent "Interior" CP favored it.

(11) L'Unità, 9 November 1978.

Disunited Communists. At that time the PCI's stand on the EEC set it at odds with most other West European communist parties, to say nothing of the East European regimes. (12) Today it still does. This applies particularly to the French CP, even though its Eurodeputies formally form a communist faction with those of the PCI in the Strasbourg assembly (together with a delegate of the Greek "Interior" CP and one representing the Danish Socialist People's Party). In 1983, as in 1978, the PCI favors the extension of the community, while the PCF opposes it; and the PCI wants the European Parliament to be given supranational powers, while the PCF is vigilantly ready to denounce any infringement on French sovereignty by the institutions of the community.

The Spinelli blueprint for European unity is no exception to that pattern. The PCI and its Eurodeputies strongly supported it from the first, in fulfillment of the pledge given at the Milan party congress, (13) and joined every other Italian party in voting for it. The French communist deputies in Strasbourg voted against it. L'Humanité, the party newspaper, failed to report that fact. The few paragraphs devoted to the subject said that this project, "drawn up by Spinelli (PCI)," aimed at imposing on member states "a single policy with regard to international affairs, notably security." (14) It added: "Adopted by a majority, although with many reservations on all sides, the Spinelli project appeared to a good number of deputies to be a dangerous Utopia."

That, then, is the Spinelli blueprint for a West European Union: for the Italian Communists, a promise and a possibility; for the French Communists, a dangerous Utopia.

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(12) See Kevin Devlin, "United Europe's Disunited Communists," RAD Background Report/148 (World Communist Movement), Radio Free Europe Research, 17 November 1978.

(13) The resolution adopted by the Political Commission at the 16th congress called on the PCI to work "to give new impulses to the building up of European unity; to develop this process further through the strengthening of the common character of European policies in the areas of energy, agriculture, industry, and cooperation with the Third World; . . . and to confer on the European Parliament greater democratic rights within the framework of a renewal of EEC institutions."

(14) L'Humanité, 16 September 1983.