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Open discussion series: the Founding Fathers of Europe



What would Jean Monnet do today?

To ask how Jean Monnet would have reacted to the aggression against Europe is to question the European Union's response, whether this response has been effective and, above all, whether the EU is being faithful to the principles and reasons for which it was founded.

As the conference and the article promoted by AFE will make clear to anyone who wants to dive deeper, the point is that the European response does not live up to the expectations of European citizens. The main criticisms are that it has been late, insufficient and, above all, that it repeats the mistakes of European diplomacy when it tried to appease Hitler.

For Jean Monnet, hardened in two world wars and the occupation of his country by the Nazis, such a response would not only have hurt his pride as a European and as a democrat, but would show how dangerous is the European tendency to forget one of the main lessons of our dramatic history: one cannot compromise with despots like Hitler, Mussolini or Stalin. The spectacle of Ursula von der Leyen showing the trade agreement with Trump was just as embarrassing and regrettable as Chamberlain's brandishing the paper that Hitler signed when he returned to London.

Jean Monnet was a pragmatist who solved problems in real time, who preferred the anonymous effectiveness of a phone call or a personal interview instead of orchestrating summits and making statements to the press. In charge of organising supplies to the Allies during the two world wars, he saw European fragmentation as the root of inefficiency and waste of public resources. He considered that, in addition to being an insult to the sacrifices of soldiers at the front and civilians in the rearguard, they put at risk the victory of democracies over totalitarianism. His 1943 words are more relevant today than ever:

"There will be no peace in Europe, if states are rebuilt on a basis of national sovereignty (...) The countries of Europe are too small to ensure their peoples the prosperity and social progress they need. This means that the States of Europe should group into a Federation."

There will be those who downplay the threat posed by Trump or Putin to European security. There will even be those who believe that the European institutions and nation states are doing enough to ensure such security. Finally, there will be those who say that we cannot do more because we are facing formidable giants. They ignore that the aura of invincibility of the Wehrmacht was once greater than that of the American Marines or Russian mercenaries. Monnet would have read this crisis as a historic opportunity to wake Europe up from its reverie, overcome the limitations of the intergovernmental model and move towards the *United States of Europe*.

European leaders today agree that Europe needs to be able to defend itself autonomously but the agreement ends in the diagnosis. The Commission has proposed more of the same: to pour money into the problem without any concern about the inefficiencies or the legitimacy of such a solution.

Jean Monnet was not a traditional politician but an institutional strategist. He would believe that the amount and symbolism of the resources needed required European institutions with more democratic legitimacy. This legitimacy can only come from the election of the President of the EU Commission in direct elections.

The EU is the starting point, not the final destination, as the current institutional architecture is insufficient to meet the challenges that overwhelm us. Fragmentation and slowness are symptoms of a Europe that is still incomplete. The time has come, as Monnet said, when collaboration is no longer enough. The AFE, aware of this moment, calls the European public with this series of essays and conferences on the founding fathers because, as Jean Monnet said: *"It is not a question of coalitions between states, but of the union of men."*

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