Politics and Institutions in Europe

Mr Julius Sen

The political atmosphere in Europe is undergoing a dramatic change with a combination of forces at work in different ways in different countries. At the same time, this has triggered a profound rethink about the institutional and organizational character of the European project. Both centrifugal and centripetal forces are simultaneously evident in these debates about the future of Europe.

The current process began with the financial crisis, more particularly from 2009 onwards, with unemployment surging and social disruption looming. Banks – widely perceived as being the cause of the crisis - were being bailed out while workers across the continent – widely seen as being victims of the crisis - were being laid off. Quantitative Easing, designed to help revive asset values and to encourage growth, succeeded only in the first of these objectives further exacerbating the sense of division in society. Politically, these divisions were reflected in the growth of extreme left and right movements, but institutionally these measures prompted a rethink of the institutional architecture of the European Union, leading rather paradoxically to suggestions for deeper integration.

In the meantime, government debt soared as a result of the bailouts and increased welfare payments, to which the chosen policy response was to impose harsh austerity measures. This only served to delay recovery and further intensify the unemployment problem and the social distress that this was causing. Greece and Cyprus were emblematic of a strongly held sense of European policy failure in this regard.

Into this toxic mix was added the refugee problem, which has further divided European opinion and exposed serious fault lines across the whole system. Founding principles of the separation of religion from politics and of solidarity have been exposed to a reality that no one really wanted to face: namely that the founding principles of secular liberalism and the spirit of solidarity were being questioned as never before.

The Idea of Europe is thus under attack from many sides and with an intensity never seen before.兴趣 and rather paradoxically however the policy response at the institutional and organizational level has actually been to strengthen European institutions and to deepen policy coordination and policy cooperation. These parallel realities, where public anger
would suggest a fragmentation of the system but where policy compulsions actually require greater sharing of sovereignty, is causing further tensions within the European system.

Understanding the extraordinary mix of social and political dynamics that is currently evident at the European, national and regional levels, will form the core of this programme. Focus within this range of issues will be on major countries within the EU taken from three categories: founding members (France, Germany and Italy), later entrants (UK and Spain) and post-communist entrants (Poland and Bulgaria). Events within these seven economies will further be analysed with reference to the emerging institutional structure within the EU, with particular reference to the European Council, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union (the Consilium) and the European Parliament.