# CIDOB'S Conversations with ...

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## JOAQUÍN ALMUNIA
Vice-President of the European Commission and European Commissioner for Competition

## Who's Afraid of Complexity?

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Joaquín Almunia is a squarely-built man with a broad, remarkable forehead, and clear (blue, grey, hazel?) eyes, stylishly framed by his almost ethereal glasses. Surprisingly, he smiles more often than you would expect in a top senior official with a reputation for being rather demanding. He conveys soundness and resilience. An economist by training, he made the decision to devote his skills to politics early in his life: his political career took him to the Spanish Congress as an MP first and as the Leader of the Opposition later, to the Spanish Government as Minister (twice), and to Brussels as EU Commissioner (twice) and as Vice-President of the European Commission. He is a no-nonsense, business-meaning Social-democrat who believes in emotions-free, cool-headed dialogue as the only means to go forward amid complexity.

In the State of the Union debate at the European Parliament on 11 September 2013, many MPs expressed their concern over the prospects that the forthcoming elections (due on 22-25 may 2014) will produce a more fragmented chamber, with a larger Eurosceptic representation. It is a fact that, as the crisis unfolded, parties critical with or directly opposed to the EU have been gaining ground in several member countries. Almunia points out, however, that the EU and EU-related questions are currently at the very center of political debate in most European countries - and this centrality, he hopes, can be turned into an asset. The issue at the elections, he says, should be how we get out of the crisis (answer: through greater integration) - not imported national debates.

Almunia believes that "the European *demos* is nearer today than it was forty years ago", but that we are still far from "the supra-nationalization of Europe" - i.e., single candidacies headed by candidates chosen to visualize European leadership. He thinks integration is deepening ("we are having now better, more care-

fully prepared nominations from all the main European political families"), and favours the idea that candidates to preside the European Commission could be the ones presented by the European parties, and hopes the European Council will accept the proposal, even though it is not obliged to do so. While it seems obvious that "aligning the winner at the elections with the European presidency" would boost the perceived legitimacy of both institutions, to him it would be wrong to say that the EU currently has a "democratic deficit" (he draws a comparison of the European Council with the German Bundesrat) - but it is clear that this is not widely perceived by European citizens ("we have failed here", he admits). So, "a President emanating from a parliamentary majority (and not from member state governments) and a Commission arising from and controlled by Parliament would be the answer". So far member states, Almunia recognizes, have been going in the opposite direction, pressing for weak leadership.

The re-nationalizing tendencies currently at play (decisions are taken, increasingly, in the capital cities of member states, particularly Berlin, rather than Brussels) have awakened the ghosts of division and nationalism. Almunia admits that although there has been a speedy progress towards more integration in some fields, "significant reluctances have not been defeated". He remarks that the confidence gap between citizens and institutions (European and not European) is happening throughout the continent, in all member states "except in countries less hit by the crisis or that have crossed over to the other shore, like Germany, Denmark or Austria. What this comes to show is that the difficulties to face the crisis are enormous, and nobody was quite prepared for it". To this should be added the difficulties of decision taking at EU level: "It is said that the EU does too little, too late. Some very important steps towards deeper integration (and thus improved decision-making processes) have been taken, but this has not reached European citizens. A political reflection is needed on how to reach them". Here is some of his own: "Originally, there was an enormous desire for peace and cooperation in the EU. Its decision-taking system was designed for practical, not substantive (i.e. political) questions."

Foreign affairs is a sensitive area: do we really want to play a role in the world as EU, or do we just leave the old powers at it? Almunia is convinced that precisely one of the biggest breakthroughs of the Lisbon Treaty is the setting up of a common foreign policy framework (initiated by Javier Solana as High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy). But the framework in itself is of no use if the EU does not have a role and a voice in the global stage and does not relate, as a Union, with the top players there. "This we achieve in areas where member states manage to agree, like the Balkans - where the EU is still central, as shown in the Serbia-Kossovo agreements of April 2013. But not Syria. In the last G20 (5-6 September 2013), Germany was wavering between the two sides on Syria - which meant that the EU had no common position." This, Almunia believes, is a very serious question: "In the global stage, the other players are extremely active. If the EU shies from action, they will go forward anyway".

When asked what he makes of some opinions pointing out that the world economic governance is shifting from the old "Washington Consensus" into a new "Beijing Consensus", the Commissioner looks a bit puzzled. "Times are difficult for everyone, and for everything", he admits "but this not to say that people should fall for China! China had no crisis in the first place and what is needed to get out of a crisis is politics: a vision, a strong leadership. This is true both in democratic and non-democratic countries. How are we going to take our decisions in the democratic countries? As we usually do. So let us not idealize China."

Today the European economy is in a (however slightly) better shape than it was a year ago: some countries have come out of the crisis, and there are signs of improvement even in those who have not; the Eurozone has not fallen apart and un-

certainties over it produce much less tension in the bond markets; and the banking union has been launched. "We hope the recovery (now frail and meager) is confirmed, so that we can go on with our to-do list. There is a long list of questions which require political courage both on the part of member states (local reforms) and the EU (decisions that can only be made in common and that member states, so far, have shown an iron will to maintain that they cannot be made). We are taking some steps, but we are not there yet."

As to the question of whether the EU is evolving towards a two-speed or a multi-speed Union, Almunia does not mince his words: "Europe is a union, but a union with different elements. The Commission is capable of keeping the various speeds under control. The situation is: we are going at full speed; if somebody wants slower, it is up to him". In any case, he adds, "let us not be afraid of complexity."