

EUROPEAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY – REVIVAL OF AN UNREALISED IDEA FOR EUROPEAN CONFEDERATION?

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Abstract:

Challenging times stimulate the emergence of new ideas or the revival of existing but unrealised ideas. Such an idea is the creation of a European Political Community, launched by the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, during the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe on May 9, 2022. On October 6, 2022, the inauguration of the European Political Community took place in Prague with the participation of 44 heads of governments – EU Member states, candidate countries, countries that are not members and do not wish to be members of the EU, as well as the United Kingdom, which left the EU in 2020. Will Francois Mitterrand's idea of a European confederation be revived? Can we learn from the failure of this proposal in the 1990s? In this analysis, answers will be sought to questions related to the idea of creating a European Political Community – is it necessary, does it really have a future, what would be its purpose, which countries would be members of such a construction, what would be the criteria for participation in it, how it could function institutionally, etc.

Key words: European union, European Political Community

1. Introduction

On May 9, 2022, the Conference on the Future of Europe ended with a solemn event at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. In his speech Emmanuel Macron – President of France,¹ made a proposal that was worth to reflect on. He proposed a new space of political collaboration, security and cooperation in important areas between the democratic countries of the European continent – the establishment of a European Political Community.

¹ France held the rotating presidency of the Council during the period January-June 2022.

On October 6, 2022, the inauguration of the European Political Community took place in Prague with the participation of 44 heads of governments of EU Member states, EU candidate countries, countries that are not members and do not wish to be members of the EU, such as Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, as well as the United Kingdom, which left the EU in 2020.²

In this analysis, answers will be sought to questions related to the idea of creating a European Political Community – is it necessary, does it really have a future, what would be its purpose, which countries would be the potential members of such a construction, what would be the criteria for participation in it, how it could function institutionally, etc.

But before reflecting on these important issues, it is necessary to cast a historical glance at the idea of European Political Community. In fact, this not a new idea. It appeared in 1952. The initiative was French-Italian – by Robert Schumann and Alcide di Gasperi. The Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community was called upon to prepare by March 1953 a draft treaty establishing a European Political Community. The treaty on European Political Community remained only on paper after the refusal of France to ratify the European Defense Community treaty.

2. The idea of a European confederation

Let's now go back to 1989, which marked the beginning of a period of profound changes on the European continent. Enrico Letta – President of Jacques Delors Institute „Our Europe“ and former Italian Prime Minister summarizes the situation during this period: „After 89 we proceeded without vision. At first – great promises; then years of cold showers. The result? The resentment in some – the newcomers, and the distrust of others – the old members.“³

But in complicated times, new ideas are born. In his New Year's speech on December 31, 1989, the President of France, Francois Mitterrand, proposed the rapid inclusion of the new democracies in a European confederation, built in concentric circles and including as many European countries as possible: „Europe will no longer be the one we have known for half a century. Yesterday dependent on the two superpowers, it will, as one returns home, return to its history and its geography. (...) Either the tendency to bursting, to

² The following participants were invited to take part in this first meeting of the European Political Community: the 27 EU Member states, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Iceland, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, as well as the President of the European Commission and the President of the European Council.

³ Letta, E. (2022), A European Confederation: a common political platform for peace, Foundation of European Progressive Studies, <https://progressivepost.eu/a-european-confederation/> (This article was originally published in the *Corriere della Sera*.)

crumbling will increase and we will find the Europe of 1919 (...) or else Europe will be built. It can do this in two stages, first thanks to our community of the Twelve, which absolutely must strengthen its structures. (...) The second stage remains to be invented: from the Helsinki agreements, I expect to see the birth in the 1990s of a European Confederation in the true sense of the term which will associate all the States of our continent in a common and permanent organization of trade, peace and security. This will obviously only be possible after the establishment, in the Eastern countries, of party pluralism, free elections, a representative system and freedom of information. (...) The liberated peoples do not ask us for alms but for reasons to believe in a regime of freedom and justice“.⁴

At this key moment, answers to important questions were sought: what will be the architecture of future Europe and who will be the real architects? There were different probabilities – the USA would act through NATO, or the already united Germany would take strong positions in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, or France, which has always played an important role in European integration? Naturally, the USA preferred NATO to be in the foreground politically, while Germany relied on the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). François Mitterrand, through the European confederation project, through a pragmatic and flexible architecture, tried to answer these questions. François Mitterrand's vision was in a different direction – according to him, there was a need for a new and original construction, focused on the future, associating on an equal footing and with flexibility the old and the new democracies. The idea was to create a framework and forum for the implementation of dialogue and for the development of cooperation with the new democracies without a transfer of sovereignty. This confederation, according to Mitterrand, had to have three main objectives – to change the dependencies imposed by the Yalta and Cold War decisions, to build what General Charles de Gaulle called „European Europe“ and to overcome nationalism and the fragmentation of states in Europe, as was happening in former Yugoslavia. The core of this construction was supposed to be the 12 Member States of the European Community. According to the vision of François Mitterrand, the Confederation would be both a forum for political dialogue and a framework for cooperation to deal with concrete issues which could only be dealt with effectively at Pan-European level, such as economic and cultural exchanges, transport and communication networks, the environment, energy, free movement of people, youth exchanges. (Musitelli, J.) It should be stressed that military and disarmament issues were not part of the project of Mitterrand and were not included in the discussions for the establishment of the European Confederation.

Mitterrand also proposed the first practical steps towards the establishment of the European Confederation – he suggested to launch the project with a

⁴ Allocution de M. François Mitterrand, Président de la République, à l'occasion de la présentation de ses vœux, Paris, dimanche 31 décembre 1989. <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/139496-allocation-de-m-francois-mitterrand-president-de-la-republique-loc>

meeting bringing together personalities from civil society and the political world, on the model of the Congress of Europe in The Hague in 1948.⁵ To add something very important: Mitterrand chose to have as co-organizer the president of Czechoslovakia Vaclav Havel. The conference took place in Prague at 13 -14 June 1991 with 150 guests and with the participation of the French President François Mitterrand and the President of Czechoslovakia Vaclav Havel. The conference itself can be described as a success, but with no real result of creating a European confederation.

The proposal for the creation of a European confederation was perceived as a substitute for full membership of the European Community and a diversion from true integration. Both researchers and politicians admit that the changes were so dynamic and unexpected that, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, „politicians cannot catch their breath.“

It becomes clear that the political context of 1989 is different from that of 1991 – the war in Yugoslavia, the unification of Germany, the failed coup against Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the adoption of the Paris Charter for a new Europe⁶. But even in this changed context, the main reason why this proposal remains only in the realm of ideas and does not receive any development is its perception by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as a means of postponing EU membership or of completely replacing it with a ‘consolation prize’ of the outermost concentric circle – the periphery. Researchers of the history of European integration point to the weakness of the French-German tandem at that time as the reason for the failure of the project, as well as fears of institutional duplication. (Marciacq, Parmentier).

The Member States of the European Community decided to deepen the integration among them and started the preparation of the Treaty of Maastricht, in order to anchor a unified Germany in the new Union. Thus the idea about the European confederation and new Pan-European architecture was abandoned.

3. 30 years later – the idea of European Political Community

With this brief background, the analysis of the current period can begin – no less complex and full of changes compared to 1989. As in 1989 also in the current period, the European Union must respond in the most appropriate way to the aspirations of countries from the European continent towards integration, while at the same time taking into account the opinion of the individual Member states of the Union. In this environment, the proposal of French President Emmanuel

⁵ François Mitterrand participated in Congress of Europe in The Hague, held from 7 to 10 May 1948. The Congress of Europe was attended by over 800 pro-European activists who determined the political, economic, social and cultural frameworks for the establishment of a united Europe.

⁶ The Heads of State or Government of the participating States of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in Paris, 19 - 21 November 1990 signed the Charter for a New Europe

Macron to create a European Political Community appeared. This is how he explained its essence: „This new European organisation would enable democratic European nations adhering to our set of values to find a new area of political cooperation, security, cooperation in energy, transport, investment, infrastructure, and the movement of people, especially our young people. Joining it would not necessarily prejudice future membership of the European Union, just as it would not be closed to those who have left the latter.“

European Political Community – Why?

What is the need to create a European Political Community and will it be able to meet the historical challenges facing Europe? At the present moment, the unity of all democratic states on the European continent is more than necessary. It is clear to all those tempted by European issues that rapid acceptance of new countries and expansion of the European Union is not realistic and practically feasible. As is already known from the „great expansion“ in 2004-2007, this process takes about 10 years; for the countries of Western Balkans, as well as for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – possibly several decades. Obtaining the status of a „candidate country“ is only the beginning of the integration process, and it is likely to take a long time for the countries to prepare and fulfill the membership criteria. At the same time, there is an obvious need to stabilize the continent, to cooperate in important areas such as security, energy, health care, infrastructure, etc., to consolidate the relations of all European countries that share democratic values. It is clear that there is a geopolitical vacuum that needs to be filled quickly, and this can be done through the establishment of a European Political Community. According to Arancha Gonzalez Laya of the School of International Relations, a former foreign minister of Spain, „the European Political Community is a response to Putin’s threat“.⁷

Thus, on the one hand, the geopolitical influence of the European Union will be expanded, and on the other hand, a clear signal will be given to countries outside the EU that the future of the European continent lies in its unification and all those who wish, will have a place in it. The European Political Community can also play a preparatory role for countries that aspire to full membership in the European Union. For those that do not wish to join the EU, this community will be a platform for coordinating and solving geopolitical and strategic problems. This approach can provide a new mechanism for cooperation, prioritizing the political over the economic element. It can stimulate the countries that wish to join the EU to speed up the implementation of the necessary reforms and to prepare more actively for joining the European Union. On the other hand, the creation of a European alliance of democratic states, in the core of which the European Union will be, will make it more authoritative and more influential on a global scale.

⁷ Interview of Arancha Gonzalez Laya - <https://news84media.com/world/here-brought-europe-arancha-gonzalez-the-european-political-community-is-a-response-to-putins-threat/>, published on 15 July 2022

European Political Community – Who?

When discussing the idea of creating a European Political Community, a very important question arises: which countries should be invited to participate in it?⁸ The answer can be very short - all democratic European countries. In this spirit, the President of the European Council Charles Michel proposed that the Political community „extends from Reykjavik to Baku or Yerevan, from Oslo to Ankara.“⁹ If all the democratic European countries sit around one table and try together to deal with all the challenges that are not only on a European but also a global scale, then indeed Europe will take its rightful place in the world order.

However, it is worth reflecting more specifically on the question of participation in a political community. Naturally, in the first place is the desire of the countries outside the European Union to join this community, and the conditions could include the fulfillment of the first so-called a political criterion from the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership, the adoption and ratification of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, i.e. a clear commitment to the Union's fundamental values.

Of course, not everything is as easy as it seems. There are a number of problems that must be discussed and even solved. Some of the countries outside the EU, especially countries like Ukraine and Moldova, would seek guarantees for their security when participating in the European Political Community. Could the European Political Community provide guarantees similar to those arising from Article 47 of the EU Treaty? It is doubtful.

A number of the countries participating in the European Political Community meeting in Prague have unresolved problems with their borders – there is still no clarity with the borders of Ukraine, the borders of Moldova – Transnistria, Georgia – Abkhazia and South Ossetia are problematic, problems also exist in connection with Kosovo, which is not recognized by several EU member states – Romania, Spain, Greece, Cyprus and Slovakia. These are hot questions that should find their final answer before these countries join the European Union, but also to reach to a certain progress in solving them within the participation in the European Political Community. Another fundamental question is that each country that wishes to become part of the European Political Community should determine its purpose by becoming a member of it – whether it perceives it as a preparatory phase for full EU membership or as a platform for Pan-European cooperation between democratic countries without desiring future membership.

⁸ Unlike Mitterrand's project for a European confederation, which envisaged the participation of Russia, Macron's proposal does not envisage an invitation to Russia and Belarus under the current circumstances.

⁹ In fact, it happened in Prague inauguration meeting with 44 participants - „from Iceland to Azerbaijan and Armenia, from Norway to Turkey“.

European Political Community - How?

The question of how to institutionally build the European political community is also not less important. It would hardly be wise to build and maintain a large institutional structure. The EU institutions could serve as the organisational structures of the European Political Community and thus strengthen the inclusion of candidate countries for membership. It is important to find suitable tools and formats for including representatives of the EU candidate countries in the work of the institutions. For example, they could have observers in the European Parliament, who would have the opportunity to participate in the debates on all topics, without the right to vote. Incorporating political parties into European political families and participating in their forums would also be helpful for their inclusion. When holding a European Council, it would be possible to envisage a format in which the heads of state and/or government of the countries of the European Political Community participate in part of the meeting. Participation in the work of some formats of the Council, as well as the European Commission, would also contribute to the inclusion of the countries of the European Political Community, including in some of the EU policies. (Chopin, Macek, and Maillard) Thus, this community will not only be a forum for discussions, but will acquire much more concrete dimensions. In reality, this approach is the opposite of the one applied until now during the enlargement of the European Union – participation in the institutions took place at the end of the accession process.

The participation in appropriate formats of representatives of the countries of the European Political Community would be positive in two directions - on the one hand, the countries and their citizens are included and attitudes of participation in a democratic community are created, and on the other hand, this participation could give impetus to accelerate the necessary reforms. This approach would be acceptable for the EU candidate countries, but less acceptable for countries like the United Kingdom.

Apart from the institutions, the countries of the European Political Community should be included in some of the EU policies and in the European programs. This will give density to the organisation and it will not be just a forum for the exchange of views between the leaders of the countries. Reaching out to citizens is a key element and prerequisite for the positive perception of this new formation. A number of European countries outside the EU participate in some of the programs, but it would be appropriate to expand and consolidate this participation in Erasmus Plus, in Horizon Europe, etc. This will help the integration in practice and will create a feeling of belonging to the European family among the citizens of the countries, participating in the European Political Community. As shown by the previous enlargements, the activation of academic and cultural exchanges is a very important factor in bringing countries and their citizens closer together. Participation in the European Political Community should help to create a Pan-European political culture, but also to educate the

young generation in civic activity and turn them into „Generation E“. It is no accident that some researchers place European citizenship at the core of the European Political Community project.¹⁰

4. The communication of the idea and clarification of the essence of the European Political Community

Another important issue should also be addressed, namely the communication and clarification of the idea of creating a European Political Community. One of the main reasons for the failure of Mitterrand's idea of a European confederation was the lack of information and clarification of this proposal in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. A similar fate awaits Macron's idea if the potential members of this organisation are not convinced of its necessity and usefulness at the present moment. The candidate countries for EU membership should be convinced that the participation in the European Political Community will not distance them from it, but on the contrary, would prepare them for the future accession to the EU. Without clarity, transparency and clarification, doubts will remain that the EU candidate countries will remain forever in this „waiting room“ and will become a permanent periphery of the EU without the possibility of becoming full members and participating in the decision making process. This is the reason why it is necessary for the leaders of the EU countries to have a common vision on the European Political Community, to clarify its essence and specify its goals. Without this clarity and transparency, the idea will hardly find a favorable reception in the countries for which it is intended. For example, President Macron's statement that „we may not all live in the same house, but we share the same street“, however figurative and well-intentioned it may be, feeds to some extent the attitudes that sharing the same house would never happen. Most of the leaders of the countries of the Western Balkans expressed their concern about „blocking the accession process“.

Therefore, it is necessary to categorically convince the participants that the European Political Community will not be a substitute for membership, but will enable a real rapprochement of the countries and strengthen the European perspective of those of them who wish to join to the European Union. It is a sovereign decision of each country whether to join the EU or to remain only part of the European Political Community.

Participation in the European Political Community has been aptly compared to engagement before marriage. (Chopin, Macek, and Maillard) Just as an engagement provides an opportunity to get to know each other better before the wedding, so the European Political Community would help the participants

¹⁰ See details in Debate: What 'European political community' do we need now? <https://theconversation.com/debate-what-european-political-community-do-we-need-now-183380>.

to know each other, to strengthen the sense of belonging to the family of democratic states and of shared values and strategic visions.

It should be emphasised that, in fact, the European Political Community can in the first place ensure political integration, until the countries that wish full membership in the EU fulfill the economic and legal Copenhagen criteria, the achievement of which requires a much longer period. On the other hand, the European Political Community includes countries that for one or another reason do not wish to join the EU, but are interested in participating in areas such as security, defense, energy, transport, science, culture, etc. – for example, the European Political Community is an opportunity to re-engage the UK on important Pan-European issues.

On May 19, 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz clearly stated before the Bundestag, „that there is no shortcut to a direct deviation from the main road to EU membership. The accession process is not a matter of a few months or a few years,“ However, this does not mean that rapid measures should not be taken. Olaf Scholz called the European Political Community „a great innovation“. The appeal of Ernst Stetter from Fondation Jean Jaures is indicative of the leaders of France and Germany picking up the „pilgrim’s baton“ and going around European countries to convince them of the meaning of this idea.¹¹

The lesson of the failure of Mitterrand’s project for a European confederation due to its long delay probably played its part in Macron’s call for swift action and the inauguration of the European Political Community on the 6th October 2022 in Prague. Following the gathering, a plan for follow-up summits was announced – Moldova, Spain and the UK were chosen to host the forum every six months from 2022. The idea is to alternate between EU and non-EU countries as hosts.

5. Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from the development of the idea of a European Political Community so far? The first meeting of the European leaders is undoubtedly useful, as it created an opportunity to discuss a number of important common issues in a broad European format, and not only within the framework of the EU Member States. According to the French president Emmanuel Macron „the aim of the meeting was to send a message of unity and to „build a strategic intimacy“ with all European countries, to share a common reading of the situation affecting our Europe, to build a common strategy and therefore a strategic conversation which until now has not really existed and which could give rise to divisions, to come up with common pro-

¹¹ Stetter,E. La communauté politique européenne et la question de l’adhésion de l’Ukraine à l’UE, Fondation Jean Jaures paper, 23/05/2022

jects.“¹² As commented – The Economist“, „Getting 27 EU leaders in a room together is routine. Throwing in 17 more will involve a complex diplomatic ballet.“¹³

If we look at the details, we will see some important signs - for example, beyond the comments about the warming of the UK's relationship with the EU, there was a demand that there should be no European flag at the forum. The very discreet participation of the European Union should also be noted. Sharp contradictions between Turkey and Greece also stood out despite the general friendly tone. The candidate countries once again expressed their expectation for full membership in the EU, and not remaining in the „waiting room“ of the European Political Community. The problem of differentiated integration or the so-called „avant-garde circles“ arises again. Although it is clear that it exists in practice, the problem is that no one wants to be in the outermost circle of integration or in the outer tier. The question is how to make the outer circle – why is actually the European Political Community more attractive for the countries outside the EU.

Having highlighted the positive elements and the usefulness of this undertaking, we should pay more attention in the conclusion to the risks that may hinder the original conception. Many analysts fear that the European Political Community could turn into another talking room without real results. Another concern is the overlap with the activities of other Pan-European organizations such as the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. There is also some disagreement about the criteria for participation in the European Political Community – for example, should Turkey and Azerbaijan be defined as democracies under their current leadership? Clarifying all the details as well as the organizational elements will be very important for the future development of the European Political Community and its success.

No matter how optimistically we look at the revival of Francois Mitterrand's idea of pan-European unity, it is unlikely that the European Political Community will be able to quickly overcome the differences, divisions and contradictions in Europe, but it will certainly contribute to the creation of a climate of mutual understanding of the positions of each European country, a climate of discussion and search for common solutions to common problems as well as to establishment of atmosphere of trust among the European leaders. The European Political Community can be the first step to the United Nations of Europe. But for now, there are more questions than answers.

¹² Tidey, A. European Political Community: Europe hails united stand over Russia's war in Ukraine, Euronews, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/10/06/european-political-community-european-leaders-gather-to-discuss-new-club-of-nations>

¹³ Meet the brand-new European Political Community, The Economist, 6/10/2022

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