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Is a 'closer Europe' a better Europe?

Macron's idea of 'European sovereignty' doesn't match Germany's European federation dream. In today's context the EU must be more capable not closer

In no other European country has the term ‘European sovereignty’, which French President Emmanuel Macron used in his speech at the Sorbonne in Paris on 26 September 2017, found such a strong and sustained echo as in Germany. In the 2021 election campaign, the term was used again and again, often in the form of a ‘sovereign European Union’. It can be found several times in the coalition agreement and also in Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s first government statement in the Bundestag.

However, it’s highly likely that the enthusiastic approval of Macron's formula is based on a misunderstanding, indeed on German wishful thinking. In Germany, ‘European sovereignty’ is often associated with the further development of the EU’s union of states into a European federation, even a European federal state, a concept which the coalition agreement expressly upholds at the urging of the European politicians of all three parties. But nothing is further from Macron’s mind than a transfer of French sovereign rights to a European superstate. And he is certainly not thinking of a de facto Europeanisation of such highly symbolic great power attributes as the permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council or France’s nuclear deterrent.

When he says ‘European sovereignty’, Macron primarily means more independence from the US and NATO, an attitude which in no way corresponds to the foreign and security policy priorities of the Federal Republic of Germany. Rather, this interpretation goes back to Charles de Gaulle, the founder of the Fifth Republic French’s *raison d’état*. And when the French President advocates increased joint borrowing by the EU, a debt union, this contradicts everything that is known about the goals of the federal government and, above all, that of Federal Finance Minister Christian Lindner.

What European sovereignty really means

There are certainly broad areas of agreement between Paris and Berlin, not least in the sector of a common European armaments and defence policy, which Macron rightly repeatedly emphasises. However, there is no need for the misleading term 'European sovereignty' if what is meant is this form of intergovernmental 'More Europe'.

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However, there are also other, fundamental considerations that speak against the term 'European sovereignty'. In democracies there can be no sovereignty beyond the sovereignty of the people. The sovereignty of the people finds its expression in parliaments, which result from general, free, secret, direct, and *equal* elections, so those that correspond to the principle 'one person, one vote'. However, such a parliament only exists at national level, not at European level.

In the elections to the European Parliament, the smaller EU member states are privileged at the expense of the larger ones, and for good reason. To name just the most blatant example, a Maltese vote weighs ten times as much as a German one. A European Parliament based on equal voting rights would need to have around 6,000 MEPs for states such as Malta and Luxembourg also to be represented there. Such a parliament couldn't properly operate.

The democratic legitimacy deficit resulting from unequal elections is acceptable as long as the Strasbourg Parliament does not claim the same rights as the parliaments of the member states. It exercises important rights of control and participation, but it would be a mistake to think that the EU's lack of democratic legitimacy could be remedied by making it fully parliamentarian. Some German MEPs in particular are deluding themselves here.

German exceptionalism

This has a historical explanation. The Germans destroyed their first nation-state, the German Empire of 1871, within three-quarters of a century through excessive nationalism. The two successor states of the German Reich were not nation states. While the GDR prescribed an internationalist, 'socialist' identity for itself, a 'post-national', Europe-

oriented consciousness developed over the years in the 'old' Federal Republic, which many intellectuals, especially those on the left of the centre, considered a signature of the epoch. That was a mistake.

The post-national rhetoric of German provenance is a case of false consciousness, one that goes hand in hand with a misjudgement of the future of the community.

Hardly any other member state of the European Community outside of the Federal Republic could imagine relinquishing its own nationhood and at some point, merging into 'Europe'. Rather, people consciously clung to their own national identities and their own nation-states, reminding the Germans from time to time that before 1945, as occupiers, they had questioned the national identities of the peoples in the occupied countries.

Unlike the 'old' Federal Republic and the defunct GDR, the reunified Germany is again a nation state, but one of the new, post-classical kind: it exercises some of its sovereign rights jointly with other members of the EU and has delegated other rights to shared bodies such as the ECB. Seen in this way, the post-national rhetoric of German provenance is a case of false consciousness, one that goes hand in hand with a misjudgement of the future of the community.

A more capable Europe instead of a sovereign European Union

The EU's claim to be a community of values is being radically called into question by 'illiberal democracies' such as Hungary and Poland, which have declared war on normative 'essentials' such as the independence of the judiciary, a core element of the rule of law. The EU's claim to speak to the outside world with one voice cannot be made good if individual members, like Hungary again, join forces with a sworn opponent of the EU like Putin's Russia. 'More Europe' will therefore hardly be possible within the framework of the EU 27.

For the same reason, it is currently illusory to place one's hopes on treaty changes such as would be necessary to enable foreign and security policy issues to be voted on by a qualified majority in the European Council. However, since the global situation makes 'more Europe' urgent in this area in particular, it is necessary to strengthen the common ground of those states that essentially 'pull in the same direction'. This applies globally, but must also be expressed within the EU. Striving for 'ever closer cooperation' is, given the current situation, more realistic than striving for 'ever closer union'.

What is important in all of this is the participation of the national parliaments. Nothing has fostered the sense of the existence of a self-appointed executive power in Brussels more than the propensity of governments to view 'Europe' as an executive domain. The judgement of the Federal Constitutional Court on the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, which emphasises the integration responsibility of the national parliaments, has brought about an improvement in this respect. The Bundestag's debates on European policy help ensure that European issues also receive more attention from the German public. Another contribution to 'more Europe' would be intensive, continuous cooperation between the European committees of the parliaments of the EU Member States and a synchronisation of their work.

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An enlargement of the European Union is inconceivable without a thorough reform of the decision-making processes. This applies to the states of the western Balkans as well as to the new accession candidates Ukraine and Moldova. The cohesion of the community would be strained to the utmost if the group of 'illiberal democracies' were to expand and states that felt less beholden to the political culture of the West than to that of Putin's Russia were to be included. Macron is therefore absolutely right when he proposes as a preliminary form of membership a European Political Community, which can also include states where it is doubtful whether they will ever meet the requirements for full EU membership.

Presumably, many of those who speak of 'European sovereignty' or a 'sovereign European Union' ultimately only want an EU that is *more capable* of acting than today's version. In this case, it would certainly be better to use precisely this term, which is more modest and honest than the misleading, ambitious term that arouses false associations of 'European sovereignty', which for its author Macron is only a metaphor.

The fact that the Europeans are trying to increase their global political clout through closer cooperation is necessary not only because Russia and China are giving the reason to do so. They must too, because the future of their most powerful ally is highly uncertain. Since they cannot rule out a, for them, threatening outcome in the 2024 US presidential elections, the western democracies inside and outside of Europe need already to start thinking about what the 'worst case' would result in for them and their alliances, above all NATO.



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