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The future of Europe and the European Union: the French point of view

Przyszłość Europy i Unii Europejskiej: francuski punkt widzenia

The article presents the French point of view on the future of Europe and the European Union. The starting point is the statement that from the very beginning France saw European integration through the prism of its own interests and the desire to regain the greatness of France, which was degraded after World War II. Hence, French ideas for the European Union have always been a function of France's perception of itself in European architecture. Hence, at the beginning, France was reluctant to enlarge the Union, and then, from the 1980s, it promoted various visions of the so-called multi-speed integration, linking them to the idea of circles of integration, and recognizing that Paris should always be in the narrowest, strongest circle of integration processes, which was obviously associated with the desire for France to be one of the main forces setting the direction and pace of integration.

Key words: France, European integration, European Union.

Artykuł przedstawia francuski punkt widzenia na przyszłość Europy oraz Unii Europejskiej. Punktem wyjścia jest stwierdzenie, że od samego początku Francja postrzegała integrację europejską przez pryzmat swoich własnych interesów i chęci odzyskania wielkości Francji, która została zdegradowana po II wojnie światowej. Stąd francuskie pomysły na Unię Europejską były zawsze funkcją postrzegania Francji przez samą siebie w architekturze europejskiej. Stąd na początku Francja opornie podchodziła do poszerzenia Unii, potem zaś od lat 80. XX wieku lansowała rozmaite wizje tzw. integracji wielu prędkości, wiążąc je z pomysłem

na kręgów integracji i uznając, że Paryż zawsze powinien się znajdować w najwęższym, najmocniejszym kręgu procesów integracyjnych, co oczywiście wiązano z chęcią tego, aby Francja była jedną z głównych sił nadających kierunek i tempo integracji.

Słowa klucze: Francja, integracja europejska, Unia Europejska.

Introduction

France, with its past as one of the superpowers, has always had ambitions to play a leading role in the EU, with EU serving, since the very beginning, as a tool to restrict Germany's position, and at the same time as a springboard to maintain the strength of France in Europe (which was all the more necessary now that the US had become a leading force in the world). However, the attitude of France and the French towards the Union and toward the Communities beforehand has always been highly nuanced. This was because of the fear that the Union would be dominated by other countries (most of all, the Germans, but – later – also the British), that the role played by France would be reduced in the melting pot of other Member States, and also due to the mechanisms of European integration being perceived as being primarily economic in nature, without any direct political consequences. This stance has changed only recently, i.e. at the turn of the 21st century, when France recognized that the Union is a holistic and much more ambitious project, which cannot be put in rigid frames of economic cooperation alone.

For this reason, the French approach to integration processes the function of many, often conflicting trends and phenomena. Never, however, has the Union as such, or the integration of the old continent in general, constituted an intrinsic goal of French policy¹. They have rather been a function of numerous other variables, while the prime directive of Paris' activity in the international space was to carry out the will of General Ch. De Gaulle's to make France "great again". This was a manifestation of longing for the lost position of leadership, which France without a doubt had after World War I, from which it emerged as the

¹ Cf. M. Kipping, *La France et les origines de l'Union européenne (1944-1952): Intégration économique et compétitivité internationale*, Paris 2002, *passim*.

undisputed victor and also the promoter of the new order. After World War II, the situation drastically changed, not because France was not among the victorious states, but because among the Allies it was a pariah, giving way for the US and Great Britain. The syndrome of a lost winner weighed heavily on France after 1945 and its policies. The rejection of this syndrome came in 1958, with the dismantling of the Fourth Republic system widely perceived as a dwarf democracy that enjoyed neither respect nor prestige and which had to deal with its own problems, which by necessity could not elevate the France's position in the arena of global politics (not counting the colonial perturbations in Indochina or North Africa, which, however, further burdened France and could not serve as a fuel in its search for a new geopolitical space). As a result, the advent of the new Fifth Republic was to be France's opportunity to distinguish itself again, best summarized by the slogan "3 x a", which was to mean express the causes for the '58 revolution, but also Paris's appetite for regaining its rightful place, as it was thought. It was about the atom (i.e. atomic energy and the atomic bomb, which gave France an entry pass to the exclusive club of world powers); Algeria, which was associated with all the ballast of colonialism à la française, which for most French politicians, despite its obvious burdens, was also a cause for pride and for recognizing the special role of France and its international radiance after all; and, lastly, foreign policy (*affaires*), which was supposed to be an instrument for building a strong and prominent France on the international stage, at least rivaling the Third Republic. The Fifth Republic, unlike its predecessor, was thus to be powerful, resilient and, above all, active. It was to be full of life, creative and at the same time constructive actor in international relations – the processes of integration on the old continent created very good conditions to effect these ambitions.

Multiple variants for the European Union's future

The creative approach to the European Union, meant to show that France perceives the Union as a good opportunity to strengthen its position, is best demonstrated by the various proposals concerning the Union's future and France's place in that future. However, these proposals did not present themselves immediately. They emerged slowly and were a consequence of the expansion processes of the Communities and the

accession of new Member States. Hence, they began to be promoted in earnest only in the 1980s, which was correlated, on the one hand, with attempts at more extensive changes to the treaties (which came to fruition in 1986 in the form of the Single European Act), and, on the other hand, with the expansion of the Communities with Greece (1981) as well as Portugal and Spain (1986). It was at this point when the then-President François Mitterrand presented a vision of a European confederation to complement the Communities proper. According to Mitterrand, the process of European integration was supposed to comprise two parallel structures, namely the Communities and the states which would gain the full membership status in the near or distant future but which, in this pre-accession phase, would gradually strengthen their ties with the Communities by forming a confederation. Thanks to this, the unity of Europe would be achieved in two ways, through the advanced structure in the form of the Communities (the Union) and via the transitional structure, i.e. the confederated pre-accession states with the prospect of full membership in the Community². It is argued that Mitterrand's proposal concerned not so much the shape of the Communities, but rather what the international surroundings were supposed to look like – i.e. states that either formally aspired to become members in the former 12 (Austria, Sweden, Finland, Norway), or which had begun democratization processes and intended to commence integration processes in the future (countries of the Central Europe)³. It is thus assumed that the *cofédération européenne* did not, as a rule, pertain to the future of the Union (the Communities), but rather was an idea about the status of states which, per Mitterrand's intentions, were meant to legally remain outside the "core" of the integration processes, having only some unspecified association with the Communities. The European confederation, according to this proposal, was merely a transitional phase for a country which remained completely outside the Communities and strived to for a part of them. From the French perspective, this status was supposed to guarantee the stability and prosperity of the old dozen, while at the same time it was meant to economically, as well as politically, bind countries outside the Communities with them. In line with this proposal, leaving

² Cf. K. Jaworski, *Francuskie wizje zróżnicowanej integracji europejskiej w kontekście debaty na temat przyszłości UE i strefy euro*, "Sprawy Międzynarodowe" 2019, no. 2, p. 203.

³ More on this subject, see: K.J. Helnarska, *Polityka Francji wobec Europy Środkowej po zimnej wojnie*, Toruń 2008, p. 168 et seq.

the Communities in their current shape also served the vital interests of France, which feared that the expansion of the Communities towards the East excessively strengthen Germany, which, after all, had long regarded Central Europe as a natural zone of its influence (according to the well-known idea of *Mitteleuropa*). Confederation, no matter how you look at it, was thus an idea to maintain France's central role in a relatively small Community, and at the same time it was a response to the decomposition of global geopolitics after the collapse of communism and the emergence of a gray area in Central Europe, which both the East (according to old resentments) and the West (seeing in this part of the world primarily a market) were seeking to annex. Confederation was also the idea of developing the Central European states so that they would not long for Moscow (without upsetting Russia too much), but at the same time so that they would not voice their aspirations for full membership in the old 12 (it was thought that these states would be an economic burden). Such a proposal expressed the vital interests of Paris⁴, which included: 1) maintaining France's leading role in the Community (which in France's opinion should be relatively small); 2) weakening Germany's designs, further strengthened in the 1990s by reunification; 3) refusal to antagonize Russia, which was regarded as a state which, like Germany, had a vital interest in the Central European region. From this point of view, it bears noting that Mitterrand's ideas were not so much ideas for the future of the Communities, much less a plan for expansion, but rather were for the future of undeveloped Europe (i.e. the countries between the former Communities and Russia), which was supposed to maintain France's position in the former Communities and establish a tool for balancing German and Russian interests through a French platform in the form of a confederation. Hence, when evaluating the concept of a European confederation, it is argued sometimes that it was not an idea for a Union (the Communities), but rather an idea for Central Europe (in order to keep them out and far from the Communities⁵). It should be remembered, however, that the idea of a European confederation has strongly weighed on French European policy. All other ideas that emerged at a later time took Mitterrand's view as their starting point, either referring to it in one way or another or developing it. This was,

⁴ Cf. M. Gaillard, *France-Europe: Politique européenne de la France de 1950 à nos jours*, Paris 2010, p. 123 et seq.

⁵ Cf. M. Mikołajczyk, *François Mitterrand i Europa*, Poznań 2014, p. 251 et seq.

after all, the case with the projects put forward by Édouard Ballaadur or Emmanuel Macron⁶. All of these are based on the assumption that European integration should proceed at different speeds, and that the states that make up the old continent are interested in integration in varying degrees. This general model for the future of the Union used to be referred to as differentiated European integration, the core of which is the division of states with regard to different levels, degrees or phases of integration⁷.

The plans for the future of the Union and, before that, the Communities emerged in France against a specific, particular, endemic political, historical and cultural background. France has always believed that it constituted the center of Europe and that its role was to guide and lead in building the unity of the continent and designing its political and socio-economic background. As a state co-responsible for the integration processes in Europe, it has also always claimed to fulfil a role of an EU superpower. Indeed, this claim had concrete basis, being not only the chronology of the process of creating today's European Union⁸, but also the superpower position that France enjoyed prior to this (especially after the end of World War I, when France was hailed as the main victor and the model of democracy⁹), as well as the geographical, population and economic potential of Marianne¹⁰. France's aspirations are further substantially complemented by certain other elements. These can include, among others, the influence of the French culture, including language (as the second, after English, principal language of EU diplomacy), the military factor (including the nuclear arsenal), or, finally, France's geopolitical position and the consequences thereof (including e.g. its post-colonial legacy and associated natural areas of influence – *vide* the Maghreb states). Also working in France's favor has long been the perception that it was the only viable counterweight in Europe to Germany's

⁶ Cf. J. Szymanek, *Francuskie wizje przyszłości Europy*, "Infos" 2020, no. 7, pp. 1-4.

⁷ Cf. J. Ziółkowska, *Systematyzacja pojęć i koncepcji związanych ze zjawiskiem zróżnicowanej integracji i segmentacji politycznej*, [in:] *Polityki europejskie w dobie kryzysu*, ed. T. Grosse, Warsaw 2016, p. 34 et seq.

⁸ France was one of the founding countries (along with Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany and Italy) and the Communities.

⁹ This made it so that many countries that emerged after the end of World War I copied French political solutions (e.g., Czechoslovakia or Poland).

¹⁰ As France is oftentimes called.

position, thus balancing the European political scene¹¹. This legacy of France and of its international role has made it so that all French ideas about the future of the Union have specific characteristics. These ideas were always more far-reaching, exceeding the boundaries of the Union, which, from the perspective of Paris, was a tool for building a strong French influence: globally, not just regionally¹². This without a doubt gave the designs for future visions of the Union *fabrique en France* a specific identity, adopting an approach which went beyond the Union, viewing it through the prism of France's ambitious role at least in certain parts of the world (North Africa, the Middle East, Russia, former colonies). In each case, building a prominent, important France in the broader international stage required, first of all, strengthening its position within the Communities and then the Union. It is for this reason that the Communities and then the Union were the subject of various French plans for the future, which for Paris always included a strong France in a strong but as French as possible Union.

Thus, various factors predispose France to play a key role in EU politics. For instance, France is the first EU Member State in terms of area (more than 632,000 square kilometers); the second in terms of population (with a population of more than 66 million¹³). It also belongs to the so called Eurozone and is a Schengen zone country, where many EU institutions (such as the European Parliament in Strasbourg) or EU agencies are based. However, French assets are also encumbered. It is indicated, for example, that Paris' ambitions to lead the EU are undermined by the economy that is not in the best shape¹⁴, a high public debt that is contrary to the EU's economic policy, or – as the Spanish newspaper *El País* called it some time ago – Paris' low diplomatic loyalty, which does not inspire confidence in potential partners¹⁵, and which only proves that Paris, on

¹¹ By contrast, the United Kingdom was never seen that way for at least three reasons. The first was its insularity, which always led to more or less pronounced isolationist sympathies. The second was London's natural gravitation towards the US and towards the establishment of a Euro-Atlantic tandem of sorts. The third, finally, was France's explicit reluctance to allow the Great Britain put down stronger political roots on the European continent, which was largely a consequence of historical circumstances between Paris and London.

¹² Cf. F. Bozo, *La politique étrangère de la France depuis 1945*, Paris 1997, p. 94 et seq.

¹³ Germany ranks first, with a population of more than 81 million. In third place (after *Brexit*) is Italy, with a population of nearly 61 million.

¹⁴ The French GDP ranks far behind such countries as Luxembourg, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium and Finland.

¹⁵ *De Merkel a Macron, La decisión sobre el FMI exhibe liderazgo francés, pero es y debe ser compartido*, "El País", 14 August 2019.

both the EU and international levels, always acts instrumentally and pragmatically, recognizing that it is France and its position that are the primary goals, and not, for instance, carefully building an alliance with one partner or another. France's weaknesses also include its unstable internal situation and the high level of polarization of political and social conflicts, and thus the fluctuation in the behavior of voters and the political scene. In this scope, one of the problems is also a high level of euroscepticism or even anti-Europeanism, which manifests itself both in public polls and in the popularity of political groups critical of the EU¹⁶. Also casting a shadow over France's credibility are the tensions in relations with the US (particularly evident in the Trump era) and its – almost always – favorable attitude towards and sometimes even fascination with Russia (which raises understandable concerns especially in the eastern EU countries). France's assets are also weakened by the fact that France looks at different parts of the European Union in a principally disjointed manner. For example, Paris is vitally interested in agricultural policy, but much less in energy issues, even though the latter does not satisfy the “green energy” standards (most of France's energy comes from the atom). The same applies to geography of the EU and around the EU, which means that France cares a great deal about the Mediterranean region (where it sees itself as the natural leader), while it views Eastern Europe, for example, with a great deal of nonchalance. For these reasons, it is sometimes pointed out that the problem with the French approach to the European Union nevertheless boils down to the fact that it views the Union through the prism of its own interests, and thus lacks the ability to let go of a Francocentric view of the Union. For many other countries, this from very start disqualifies French ideas, which in one form or another are most often just a reflection of French politics and its problems and priorities. This makes it so that French intentions towards the EU lack the necessary distance and momentum, being – intentionally or

¹⁶ Polls show that only 51% of the French support the EU, as many as 55% feel poorly informed about the EU, 52% of the French believe that France benefits from being in the EU. Commentators point out that most French are “slightly attached” to the EU (*adhésion molle à l'UE*), with only 6% unconditionally wanting for France to carry on the current approach, and on the other hand only 11% are reluctant and wish that France would leave the EU. According to them, the EU must first of all review its actions, and they expect a substantial change in that regard: 48% want the EU to review its actions in depth, compared to 22% who want it to adapt its activities action without any changes. Cf. <https://www.bva-group.com/sondages/francais-lunion-europeenne-sondage-bva-tribune/> [accessed on 4 September 2021].

not – entangled in traditional politics stigmatized by national divisions¹⁷. There are also that the designs and plans expressed by France with regard to the European Union are more aimed at painting France as a promoter of European unity, rather than a real instrument of action, with is best demonstrated by genuine concerns of France before the establishment of the single market, which, according to many, was an *ultra vires* action of the then European Commission and presented the dangerous, as it was thought at the time, prospect of the EU going in the direction of a state-like organism, which France had been opposing for a long time¹⁸. These image-building measures, which were meant to demonstrate Paris' leadership role in the EU, in promoting various ideas for the future, coincided with another way of thinking that determined all subsequent iterations of the idea of Europe propagated by France (and, it seems, not only by France). This mindset was reflected in the view expressed by Jaques Delors when he said: "Europe is like riding a bicycle," meaning that "if you stop cycling, you will fall"¹⁹ (*l'Europe, c'est comme le vélo, si on arrête de pédaler, on tombe*). This thought demonstrates the conviction of European elites that the EU needs constant movement, that no form of the EU is an unchanging structure, that Europeanization is a continuous process that in every case must accelerate, and go further and deeper²⁰. As a result, thinking about the future of the European Union is determined by the slogan "more Europe" (*plus d'Europe*), whatever this is supposed to mean²¹. According to this approach, there is a clear rift between French (and European) elites and the French. The latter are convinced that European integration structures have reached a stable point of some sort and that the integration cannot be boiled down to only plodding down on a permanent basis. This is all the more so because, for most French, the EU is viewed necessarily through the prism of national politics. Thus, 34% of the French cast votes in the European elections based on the domestic political scene and the problems which emerge therein, while at the same time half of them are against further deepening of the integration processes, especially if these were to result in the EU

¹⁷ Cf. N. Jabko, *Comment la France définit ses intérêts dans l'Union européenne*, "Revue Française de Science Politique" 2005, no. 2, p. 221 et seq.

¹⁸ Cf. H. Védérine, *Les mondes de François Mitterrand*, Paris 1996, *passim*.

¹⁹ Ch. Bué, *La politique de développement de l'Union européenne: réformes et européanisation*, "Critique Internationale" 2011, no. 4, p. 83.

²⁰ Cf. G. Courty, G. Devin, *La construction européenne*, Paris 2005, p. 41

²¹ Ch. Bué, *La politique de développement de l'Union européenne...*, p. 90.

imposing certain decisions on Member States. This feeling of certain disillusionment among the French with the EU does not necessarily stem from a dislike towards the EU, but from the fact that only 47% of the French believe that France's voice carries substantial weight in the EU. The majority of respondents believe that France's role and position in the EU is too small²².

For this reason, one might think that the French views towards the EU are an expression of a longing to, as General Ch. de Gaulle said, "making France great again." The General's view is still deeply rooted in the French *raison d'état* at the present time, which means, *inter alia*, that virtually every serious politician is trying to achieve certain objectives which were once formulated by the founder of the Fifth Republic²³. Simultaneously, today it seems as obvious that involvement in the European project constitutes a "multiplier of France's power". Hence, since the acceleration of EU expansion processes and implementing the institutional reforms thereof, French leaders have been expressing their own proposals for the future of the Union and Europe. President E. Macron, too, from the very beginning of his tenure as President of the Republic, has attempted to draw up ambitious plans for the restitution of France's position in Europe, thus bridging the gap with Germany which, especially since the reunification, has been considered the driving force behind integration processes. Germany's primacy was demonstrated especially after imposing on the first 12 EU Member States the idea of expanding EU not only with the seemingly obvious candidates (Austria, Sweden and Finland), but also the Central European states. For many observers, this was an obvious defeat for France, whose plan for a European confederation as a substitute of sorts for the Communities (Union) was thus decisively rejected, and the idea of a small Union and countries which were associated with it by numerous dependencies, but without being formal members thereof, was replaced by the vision of an ever-expanding Union.

Therefore, France's response to the changed geopolitical arrangement in the Union was E. Balladur's view according to which Europe would be subject to the logic of variable geometry, whereby integration

²² Cf. <https://www.bva-group.com/sondages/francais-lunion-europeenne-sondage-bva-tribune/> [accessed on 4 September 2021].

²³ A. Szeptycki, *Francja czy Europa? Dziedzictwo generała de Gaulle'a w polityce zagranicznej V Republiki*, Warsaw 2005, pp. 337-338.

processes would divide the continent into three circles (*Europe des cercles*)²⁴. The first circle was to include all Member States united around the same values (such as democracy, rule of law, solidarity), evolving in a unified economic space and participating in common policies. In order to facilitate more efficient and equitable operation, the Union had to be reformed. Edouard Balladur, being an advocate of a political Europe, proposed to give the Council of Ministers an impetus role by expanding the list of items subject to qualified majority voting, provided that each country's position corresponded to its actual demographic and economic weight. He also advocated a stable presidency of the European Council, as well as the establishment of a Union foreign minister to be supported by the European diplomatic service. The second circle was supposed to be a circle of specialized cooperation. The idea was to combine the Economic and Monetary Union, the Schengen Area and other cooperation schemes that demonstrate the possibility to "set several rhythms for the Union" (*d'imprimer plusieurs rythmes à l'Union*), without resulting in fragmentation. However, according to Edouard Balladur, the enhanced cooperation procedure provided for in the current treaties remains complicated and too restrictive. He therefore proposed to create "circles of specialized cooperation" (*cercles de coopération spécialisée*) which would allow countries desiring to do so to jointly go beyond the scope of EU's jurisdiction, e.g. in fiscal or social matters. By breaking with standardized logic, such an approach would also avoid the emergence of a "hard core" that would lead to a two-speed Europe. The final, third circle could be referred to as "Europe of partnerships with neighbors of the European Union" (*L'Europe des partenariats avec les voisins de l'Union européenne*). Following the 2004 expansion and the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, E. Balladur was of the opinion that the European Union did not have sufficient financial resources, institutions or social base to continue its geographic development. For Balladur, a group of 27 countries (still without Croatia) was the limit of the Union's capacity and effectiveness. However, in order to preserve the "area of peace, prosperity and security" (*espace de paix, de prospérité et de sécurité*) that the European Union has become, it is important to arrange solidarity with neighboring countries. For this reason, Edouard Balladur suggested to reorganize the EU's neighborhood policy around partnership agreements, with respect

²⁴ Cf. É. Balladur, *L'Europe autrement*, Paris 2006, *passim*.

for democratic values, the rule of law, minorities and borders. In this way, the partner states would not legally be members of the Union, but in a political and economic sense they would form “extension of the Union” of sorts. The privileged partner status granted to neighboring countries would in no way guarantee their accession to the European Union, but neither would it preclude it. Balladur’s *L’Europe des partenariats avec les voisins de l’Union européenne* would thus be an extension of Mitterrand’s idea of the European confederation. Commenting years later on his views concerning the development of the Union, E. Balladur admitted that the Europe of the Three Circles project was primarily concerned with the expansion of the European Union, its geographical development, constituting simultaneously an attempt to “overtake” Germany, which, unlike France, openly sought to expand the borders of the Union to the East²⁵.

A new iteration of French ideas for Europe, taking into account the UE expansion and the belief that the expansion thereof will be a never-ending story, was expressed by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing jointly with former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. In 2000, these two politicians referred to the next half century as a period of successive expansion of the Union’s borders, which they said would be carried out in a three tracks. The first was to consist of the so-called European space, encompassing the dimension of political integration supplemented by a catalog of common principles and values and free market principles. The second one covered the area of the Union’s external relations, to be based on two assumptions, i.e. a common foreign policy and a common defense policy. This track would not include all Member States, but only those which, on the one hand, showed interest in a common foreign policy and on the other hand, militarily speaking, had a substantial defense potential. For this reason, France, as the nuclear power of the Union, was to lead the way. Finally, the third track of integration was to be extended only to the most ambitious countries who regard even closer cooperation as a factor of utmost priority. In d’Estaing’s view, full and uniform integration of several dozens of states was virtually impossible. Cultural, linguistic, civilizational, political but also psychological differences will by necessity result in, according to d’Estaing, varying forms of integration, which will differ depending on the will of interested countries. The French politician predicted, however, that the states furthest along in the unification

²⁵ Cf. É. Balladur, A. Duhamel, *Grandeur declin et destin de la Ve République. Un dialogue*, Paris 2017, p. 203.

processes would cause a form of a European federation to be adopted, such federation to be bound with other participants by a convention defining the various aspects of integration²⁶. In this convention, the European Union was supposed to be the collective expression of a unification policy based on common rules and values, while its core would be formed by a federation in which all three tracks of the old continent's unity would converge. Of course, France, in this vision of Europe, was both in the Union and in the federation, being a key element thereof.

Another French idea for the European Union was President Jacques Chirac's desire to create a so-called "pioneer group" (*groupe pionnier*) within the Union. The idea for the group was based on the assumption that the process of expanding the Union's borders is not in line with its efficiency and is contrary to the old Member States' desire to deepen and accelerate integration. J. Chirac believed that Europe needs multiple speeds, i.e. there are states which are interested in participating in the Union on different terms than some others. Hence, the Union should be a platform for flexible cooperation, but cooperation of this type must not prevent other states from implementing enhanced cooperation (*coopération renforcée*). Therefore, from among all Member States, it is necessary to identify a priority group which will be the promoter of the Union's expansion and give it a momentum for operation. According to this idea of J. Chirac's, this priority group should be based on the Franco-German tandem, around which other countries, more advanced in integration, should be gathered. At the same time, Chirac assumed that such increased cooperation within the pioneer group would be motivated by the economy, foreign and defense policy, and internal security issues (fighting crime and terrorism). This vision for the Union's development was supposed to satisfy two key requirements of European policy of France, namely rapprochement with Germany²⁷ (with whom France was to take the lead in the Union) and acceptance of the fact that the Union was expanding eastward and southward²⁸. This, in turn, meant that

²⁶ V. Giscard d'Estaing, H. Schmidt, *Wysokie pokoje i przedsięwzięcia*, [in:] *O przyszłości Europy. Głosy polityków*, eds. J. Boratyński, K. Stawicka, Warsaw 2000, p. 24 et seq.

²⁷ Cf. B. Koszel, *Partnerstwo francusko-niemieckie na przełomie XX i XXI wieku*, "Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe" 2006, no. 4, p. 151 et seq.

²⁸ Cf. K. Jaworski, *Francuska wizja zróżnicowanej...*, p. 206.

differentiated integration, corresponding to the vision of a multi-speed Europe, would be one of the paths forward for the Union²⁹.

The idea of multi-speed Europe integration process or, in other words, of differentiated integration in Europe was referenced by Emmanuel Macron. His views have become known as the Europe of concentric circles and, emphasizing other factors, the Renaissance of Europe. The vision of the development of the European Union regarded as successive circles of integration, although currently associated with E. Macron, is, as one can easily guess, much older. It has originated in the Maastricht Treaty. Initially, it was understood as an opportunity for individual Member States to gradually implement the Economic and Monetary Union enshrined in the treaty. Its emergence was the result of difficulties in satisfying the convergence criteria of the European Union, some countries' dissatisfaction with the deepening of integration, interest expressed by underdeveloped countries of Central and Eastern Europe in membership in the EU, and, finally, an attempt to reconcile the idea of expanding the Union eastward with the simultaneous desire to deepen integration among the old Member States. The idea of circles was formulated by Germany and the then president of the European Commission J. Delors. It stated that the most developed countries which ready to implement comprehensive integration would constitute the first (inner) circle, while the second would include both other Member States that, for economic or political reasons, are not yet ready for monetary union and the EFTA countries. The third (outer) circle would be formed of countries awaiting membership. The final, widest circle, in turn, would include all OSCE states, i.e. states that respect a certain minimum canon of European values. This term, while initially adopted, was quickly superseded by "Multi-speed Europe", mostly because the latter did not imply that certain opportunities are closed for some of the states remaining in the second or later circles. Multi-speed Europe, as opposed to a Europe of concentric circles, was thus an open project, according to which it would be up to the states themselves to decide what stage of integration would suit them³⁰.

²⁹ It is exactly this vision which is most often taken into consideration in discussions about the future of the European Union. More on this topic, see: *Europa wielu prędkości*, eds. M. Golińczak, R. Klementowski, Warsaw 2021, *passim*.

³⁰ <https://encyklopedia.interia.pl/slownik-ue/news-europa-koncentrycznych-kregow,nId,2112325> (accessed on 29 August 2019).

The latest proposals regarding the future of the EU and Europe

One of the ideas formulated in the early 1990s was revived in French public discourse in 2014. It was expressed, in a slightly refreshed form, by Vincent le Biez, who presented the plan for a “three-layer map of Europe” (*la carte d’une Europe à trois niveaux*). According to the French scholar, the European project needs a “breath of fresh air” (*nouveau souffle*). This is because today’s EU faces many challenges. These include: 1) the geographic expansion of the Union; 2) the accession of countries with varying degrees of economic development; 3) the challenges related to globalization and the fact that, in confrontation with world powers, only a united EU has a chance to be a major player; 4) challenges concerning broadly understood security (in the field of energy, environment, etc.), which can only be met by the EU as a whole, not by its individual Member States; 5) different visions of Europe and the clash between pro-European currents and skepticism or even hostility towards the EU.

The current European Union, in the opinion of V. le Biez, is more of a constraint than a positive structure creating impulses and effectively operating in global political and economic conditions. In his view, today’s difficulties in the development of the EU result from the fact that different Member States do not pursue the same level of integration, nor the same strategic goals. Hence, V. le Biez proposed the Franco-German tandem, as a driving force behind the integration, the return to the Europe of the six (i.e. the countries of the first, most integrated circle), strengthening the Eurozone. This, he believed, would provide the basis to structure the EU around three concentric circles (*trois cercles concentriques*) corresponding to the three logics of integration (*trois logiques d’intégration*).

The first circle was to form the hard core of the EU whose purpose was to converge the project. This core would consist of the main Eurozone Member States (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Belgium), which together account for 65% of the GDP of the EU as a whole and as much as 87% of the GDP of the Eurozone countries. The core would enjoy special representation in EU bodies and international financial institutions (WTO, IMF and others). It would also have its own budget.

The second circle would constitute an economic zone based on co-ordination and cooperation. In this case, instead of simple convergence between countries that are too different from one another, this would involve the development of own economic and monetary policy that would reconcile the elements of economic growth with the need for sustainable development of all Member States. According to this scholar, the circle in question would include such countries as Luxembourg, Ireland, Portugal, Austria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Greece, Finland, Malta, Cyprus, Estonia and Latvia.

The third circle would be a free trade area subject to the rule of law. The structure of the third circle would be, in le Biz's opinion, based on two key elements of the EU, i.e. promoting the rule of law, peace and human rights, and the common market and free trade. According to this idea, the third circle would have no geographical constraints. On the contrary, it would gradually expand as "EU civilization" spreads. Of the current EU states, it would be composed of such countries as Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania and the United Kingdom.

According to V. le Biez, the endless expansion of the EU is more conducive to the disintegration of the EU project than disintegrating more than European integration. Therefore, if the EU is to have any substance at all the Europe of concentric circles idea must be implemented sooner or later³¹.

Vincent le Biez's idea was referenced four years later by President E. Macron. In 2018, during his visits to Madrid and Lisbon, and later in speeches in France, he presented the vision of a Europe of concentric circles. According to Macron, the circles of EU integration would illustrate the integration progress of various Member States, while at the same time corresponding to the states themselves, which do not have to hold the same interest in far-reaching integration. E. Macron proposed three circles. Going "in the direction of Europe", the broadest would be a third circle comprising states that respect general European values, regardless of whether they are formally members of the EU. It has been noted that in Macron's project, the third European circle would comprise countries such as Turkey, Israel, Russia and Morocco. The accession to this circle would be conditional on the recognition of democracy as the basic rule

³¹ Por. V. le Biez, *La carte d'une Europe à trois niveaux qui fonctionnerait enfin*, "Le Figaro" 24 April 2014.

of governance. It is indicated that this idea, despite the fact that it leads to the dilution of the EU project, corresponds strongly with France's geopolitical interests. These, after all, aim to include such factors as: a) rapprochement with Russia, b) good relations with Middle Eastern countries; c) stronger integration of Maghreb countries into EU policy. This circle implements an idea which has been long raised by France, which would like to "surround" the current EU with countries holding varying membership statuses. And thus other states, including those outside Europe, would join the European project one by one, pursuing their membership under different rules. This extends to such countries such as Turkey, Israel or Morocco³². It should be emphasized that France in particular, with its traditional gravitation towards the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia), is interested in establishing such an expansive, yet variously integrated (deconcentrated) Union.

Macron's second circle would correspond to a strong single market. It would thus include all the countries of today's EU, including those outside the Eurozone (e.g. Sweden, Poland, Hungary).

The third, narrowest circle, comprising the core of Europe, would be the "heart of the reactor" of European integration. This circle, with France in the lead, would give the impetus for integration, take care of the status of the euro, and implement joint projects.

This is how Emmanuel Macron envisages a Europe of concentric circles, where the degree of integration would vary depending on the area in question. In his view, the Eurozone – which at the present time includes 19 countries – would be the epicenter of the EU. Commentators indicate that what Macron has proposed are, first of all, the very same old ideas with new polish and are clearly politically motivated. This is because Macron wants to build the solidarity of the EU's South in the face of the migration crisis, and thus dissociate himself from the countries whose opinions differ in this scope (Poland, Hungary). Secondly, he wants to shift the EU's focus toward the Mediterranean and traditionally French zones of interest. Thirdly, he wants to minimize the importance of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which Macron accuses of populism and nationalist tendencies, while promoting only their own economic interests³³. It should be stressed that President Macron's idea

³² P. Verluise, *Geopolityka granic Wspólnoty Europejskiej*, Torun 2014, p. 193 et seq.

³³ Cf. E. Beretta, *De quelle Europe rêve Macron?*, "Le Point" of 11 May 2018.

generally results from the belief that European solidarity should be built around specific projects, such as the migration crisis, environmental protection or the prosperity of the Eurozone. In effect, Macron seeks to diversify the pace of integration, leaving stragglers behind so as to pursue French interests (such as good relations with Russia, shifting the Union's interests toward the Mediterranean and close, almost "neo-colonial" ties with the Maghreb). It should be noted that this EU policy is nothing new in France. It merely constitutes a new narrative of the old policy, which is much closer to the Mediterranean or Russia than to Central and Eastern Europe.

The French debate on Europe got a new boost in the spring of 2019. In March of that year, President E. Macron published in newspapers of all member states an appeal "for a European revival"³⁴. The French president started from the observation that since the end of World War II, Europe is currently facing its most serious threats. They are symbolized by Brexit, which illustrates the erosion of the European project. However, in the opinion of E. Macron, they are not limited to that. These threats include: 1) the growth of skeptical or even anti-EU sentiments; 2) the rising popularity of political movements and parties that are anti-establishment and populist, and sometimes even nationalist; 3) the torpor of integration processes and the absence of a bold vision for EU progress; 4) the dangers posed by the uneven development of Member States, which often plays into Eurosceptic sentiments; 5) the challenges in competing on the global political and trade chessboard; 6) the ecological risks and climate change threatening all of humanity.

In the face of all these occurrences and processes, E. Macron calls for a Renaissance of the Union, its thorough revival in the spirit of the original ideas that guided the founders and subsequent signatories of the alliance. The pathos of Macron's manifesto, full of impassioned appeals and emotional statements, is meant to "awaken" Europe, its citizens and institutions to perform the task of as quickly and decisively as possible. In implementing this program, Europe should be "unyielding, proud and keen". The face of Europe today is a "historic success", it constitutes the result of the reconciliation of "a devastated continent in an unprecedented project of peace, prosperity and freedom". Today

³⁴ In Poland, E. Macron's appeal was published by "Rzeczpospolita". Cf. E. Macron, *Na rzecz europejskiego Odrodzenia*, "Rzeczpospolita" of 5 March 2019.

we need a new common agenda, since many goals can only be achieved with solidarity and consistent measures undertaken by all members of the Union. Simultaneously, Macron warns against the trap of inaction and acquiescence to a leaderless *status quo*. Proponents of nationalist and all forms of separatism – which must be strongly resisted – count on the indifference and torpor of the citizens of European countries. Therefore, knowing and properly defining all the threats and challenges of today's world, we should take steps in order to develop new forms of European civilization which will be able to find answers and ways to address the fears and anxieties of our nations. Macron, requesting to urgently start the development and implementation of the necessary changes, calls to focus the European revival on three values, which he himself calls European ambitions, driving the development of the old continent, i.e. freedom, care and progress.

Freedom, being a prime value, constitutes the foundation of the EU. One form of freedom is the universal right to elect leaders and representatives. That is why, in order to ensure the fairness, sovereignty and transparency of such important elections, Macron calls for the establishment of the European Agency for the Protection of Democracies, whose representatives will help counter cyber-attacks, manipulation or unauthorized interference in the electoral process. In Macron's view, it is also necessary to protect the borders of the European community more effectively, because these borders contribute to a sense of belonging and guarantee "security in freedom". For this reason, according to the French president, it is necessary to verify and more tightly seal the operations of the Schengen zone. All countries that wish to remain in it would be required to adopt and implement rules to effectively secure their inviolability and imperviousness, and will jointly adopt and implement unified rules for dealing with migration issues, which are currently posing a great challenge. To this end, the European Union Agency for Asylum as well as a common border police must be established. Coordination over the migration and asylum policies of all countries acting in solidarity will be handled by the European Internal Security Council. In advocating such solutions, Marcon strongly emphasized that Europe should protect both its values and its borders.

European defense policy must be subject to similar treatment. For this reason, a defense treaty needs to be prepared and implemented, and rules regarding mutual defense need to be adopted jointly with NATO,

and as a result EU should increase the military funding. The European Security Council should work jointly with the United Kingdom, after Brexit, to develop military solutions. Borders of European countries should also protect the EU economy. For this purpose, EU should update its economic and trade cooperation policy, implement procedures aimed at protecting competitiveness, and defend against the impunity of countries and companies operating in the EU market that refuse to comply with any rules adopted in the EU. Europe must not indulge those who violate its strategic interests, do not care about the environment, do not respect the protection of personal data, avoid paying taxes. European countries should develop the “European preference” rules in strategic areas of the economy; industry, new technologies, trade, the public market, finance and fiscal policy.

E. Macron proudly emphasizes that Europe is in the lead, especially in the area of social security. That is the reason we must keep going further and introduce an aid package for every worker to ensure equal pay for work in each Member State. Progress must also be made with regard to environmental standards. In this field, Macron is proposing the establishment of additional institutions, such as the European Climate Bank which would finance the ecological transition, or the European Sanitary inspection for food surveillance and control. Strict rules for operation in an ecologically protected environment must be a priority for all European countries and institutions.

Freedom, protection and progress must form, according to E. Macron, the main pillars of the Renaissance of Europe. All EU states, institutions and communities should participate in the common work of reviving the Community. Before the end of the year, the Conference for Europe would be established. Acting in panels divided by topics and nationalities, the Conference will develop specific roadmaps and policy designs for the future.

The European Political Community: the idea for a new architecture of Europe

Without a doubt, the changes that occurred in 2022 affect the orientation of geopolitics in Europe. Of course, the key change was Russia’s

unprecedented in the post-World War II period aggression against Ukraine. But in addition to this, Europe was also hit by other changes that forced the development of new projects conducive to the political organization of the old continent. One of them was the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, another was the economic crisis that affected European countries as a consequence of the Ukrainian-Russian war. Finally, Europe was also affected by changes resulting from broader fluctuations in world politics, including, *inter alia*, the growing US-China rivalry.

The French response to all of these developments is the latest proposal for the European Political Community³⁵. Commenced on 9 May 2022 in Emmanuel Macron's speech in Strasbourg at the conclusion of the Conference on the Future of Europe³⁶, the initiative to establish the European Political Community (hereinafter EPC) was quickly realized in practice. The first constitutive meeting of the new entity within the European architecture was held in Prague, Czech Republic, on 6 October 2022. It resulting in the establishment, next to the existing European international organizations such as the European Union, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, of an entirely new structure, which, in line with France's intentions, is to constitute the driving force for European cooperation beyond the borders of the EU. At the same time, this entity – which the French do not attempt to conceal at all – is meant to slow down the pace of EU expansion, and above all to prevent the admission of Ukraine to the EU, which, according to Paris, could shake the European space too much, shifting the political idea of the West too radically towards the East, and as a result, instead of easing tensions with Russia, generate new fields of conflict. Of course, suspending the process of the EU expansion does not concern Ukraine only, but also other countries that, in Paris' view, are not yet ready for accession and could therefore overcomplicate the geopolitical situation in Europe. Besides, as Macron notes, in order for the European community to be ready to welcome new members, it must itself deal with the problems from which it suffers, such as low efficiency of implemented measures, in particular in the international space.

³⁵ Cf. J. Szymanek, *Europejska Wspólnota Polityczna*, „Infos” 2023, no. 3, pp. 1-4.

³⁶ <https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/282736-union-europeenne-les-priorites-des-francais-pour-lavenir-de-lue> [accessed on 20 January 2023].

Of course, the very idea of creating this form of cooperation is not new. Initially, the European Political Community was meant to be an international organization tasked with guaranteeing democratic control over the European Defense Community, which was being established in parallel, and linking it with other forms of cooperation in the post-war Europe, i.e. the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. And thus the EPC was supposed to be the cement holding the then European Communities, and above all – an element ensuring democratic control over the planned future European army comprising the six founding states (Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Italy, West Germany and France). Ultimately, the project to create a European Defense Community collapsed (after Paris rejected the treaty³⁷), and the EPC did not come to fruition, remaining for a long time a project of enhanced European political cooperation. Nevertheless, it is difficult to think that the original version of the EPC was the source of Macron's idea. This is all the more so because the original version of the EPC envisioned a community comprised of only the member states belonging to the original European structures, while today's EPC, by design, is intended to be a platform for the cooperation of all European countries, whether or not they are members of the EU. For these reasons, it is correctly indicated that E. Macron was directly inspired by the proposal of one of his predecessors, François Mitterrand, who suggested to establish the so-called European Confederation in 1989 with the aim of creating a European political space exceeding the boundaries of the then European Communities (today's EU).

The idea of the Confederation first emerged in December 1989, immediately after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, and by design was intended to reorganize the cooperation between the countries of the old continent, and referenced – in some form – General de Gaulle's famous phrase about "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals". According to Mitterrand's proposal, accession to the European Confederation would be conditional upon the fulfillment of the following: 1) respect for political pluralism; 2) the holding of free elections; 3) the establishment of a representative system; and 4) a guarantee of freedom of the press and information. Furthermore, the core of the Confederation was to guarantee

³⁷ Mainly due to the stance of General Charles de Gaulle, who was against the European Defense Community and the creation of a single European army. As a result, the French parliament refused to ratify the treaty establishing the EDC, which by necessity rendered the establishment of the EPC pointless.

“cooperation”, “peace” and “security” on the European continent. One of the aspects of this new format was the so-called Charter of Paris for a New Europe of 1990, which officially announced the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the process of building a new international space on the old continent. The next step aimed at establishing the Confederation was the Prague Conference, held on 13-14 June 1991. This initially ambitious meeting, however, ended in a fiasco, which ultimately torpedoed the European Confederation project. The failure was the result of several reasons. The first was the express aversion of the US, the second was the evolution of Germany’s position, which was initially favorable to the project but ended up ultimately discrediting it. Finally, the third, and the most important, was the clear reluctance of the Central and Eastern European countries, which were anxious that constructing a political format for European cooperation without the US, and with the USSR involvement, would be insanely dangerous.

It is worth remembering that before E. Macron refreshed Mitterrand’s idea, giving it the form of the EPC, the idea of the European Confederation was alluded to by Italian politician and political scientist Enrico Letta. In April 2022, he called for the creation of a confederation, consisting of the 27 EU Member States plus Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, and later also North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo. This, he argued, would produce a two-fold effect. Firstly, Ukraine and other countries awaiting membership in the EU would be able to participate in European public life and become actors in a common political and strategic space. Secondly, the accession process of more countries would become structured and organized. According to the author of this idea, the confederation would be a mediating body between the EU and its peripheries, easing the process of political transformation and cushioning tensions between the eastern and western parts of the continent, which, in the opinion of E. Letta, are the root of the EU’s dysfunctionality and mutual distrust³⁸. Due to this, for the Italian politician, the Confederation would be a form of rationalization and optimization of the EU’s functioning without introducing any institutional changes, since, in his opinion, the majority of troubles that the EU is

³⁸ Cf. https://www.corriere.it/economia/finanza/22_aprile_19/enrico-letta-confederazione-europea-percorso-l-adesione-kiev-9fda6a1c-c014-11ec-9f78-c9d279c21b38.shtml [accessed on 20 January 2023].

facing today are psychological identity-related problems of the two parts of the European continent.

Emmanuel Macron's speech forms a part in a cycle of his activities which he has been undertaking in Europe since 2017 to some success. In his speeches and actions, he has always campaigned for deeper European integration within the EU. This was to be achieved through such ideas as the Europe of concentric circles or the European Renaissance³⁹. The French president noted that the EU in particular needs decisive and bold action. He emphasized that it faces totally new global challenges which the old continent will not be able to handle should the EU remain an inefficient structure, and instead of joint action we will have a traditional "concert of superpowers". Introducing reforms, also institutional in nature, has been a constant theme of the proposals for changes concerning the EU. At the same time, they all had one clear direction, i.e. the pursuit of greater centralization as the optimal way to seek efficiency in the operation of the Union. The sequence of steps that were to lead away from changes within the European Union also included the Conference on the Future of Europe⁴⁰. The Conference was largely inspired by the actions of French diplomacy, which sought to force changes that would optimize the functioning of the Union, in accordance with Paris' expectations, through the "back door", so to speak, and thus without launching a formal process of revising the treaties.

This is one of the reasons why the Conclusions on the Conference on the Future of Europe were presented on 9 May 2022 during the French presidency of the European, covering an extensive catalog, divided into 49 sections, of proposals for strengthening the European Union. The Conclusions on the Conference indicated that the EU should be more just and efficient, greener, more innovative, more participatory, more democratic. The end result of the Conference, it is argued, consists of a mix of earlier ideas from the European Commission, proposals from leading countries (i.e. Germany and France) and pro-European think

³⁹ For more on this topic, see J. Szymanek, *Francuskie aspiracje do przywództwa w Unii Europejskiej i wizje przyszłości integracji europejskiej*, [in:] *Wizje przyszłości Unii Europejskiej*, eds. M. Romanowski, J. Szymanek, Warsaw 2022, p. 233 et seq.

⁴⁰ Cf. *L'avenir est entre vos mains. Contribution citoyenne à la Conférence sur l'avenir de l'Europe*, eds. C. Beaune, M. Fesneau, Bruxelles 2022, p. 20 et seq.

tanks, guided by the old motto “more Europe” (*plus d’Europe*)⁴¹. In this melting pot of ideas and more or less finished concepts, Emmanuel Macron voiced a demand for greater integration in all areas of the Union’s operation. He therefore proposed reopening the institutional question, which was closed since 2009 by the Lisbon Treaty, by opening a formal procedure for revising the treaties. He was specifically concerned with increasing the areas where the qualified majority rule could be used (instead of unanimity) in the Council of the EU. It is worth pointing out, however, that on the same day 13 Member States declared that they were opposed to such a resumption of the institutional discussion, especially if it were to focus on eliminating unanimity and extending the use of majority voting.

Anticipating such a reaction, Emmanuelle Macron simultaneously put forward the old idea of a Europe composed of the most integrated hard core and less integrated periphery. This idea was supposed to correspond both to the conception of creating such a European space that could accommodate Ukraine without having to overcome the difficulties related to full and complete membership (which is probably true for other candidate countries as well), and to allude to the lack of a specific forum for eurozone Member States.

It is worth noting that E. Macron, when presenting the idea of the EPC, emphasized that it was meant to be a platform for cooperation between the EU and European countries that are not members of the Union. He added at the same time that this community will be aimed not only at countries applying for full membership in the EU, but also at European countries that for the time being do not want to join the European project (*vide* Switzerland, Norway, Iceland), as well as those that, as he expressed it, have “recently left” (*récemment quitté*) the community, thus referring to the United Kingdom. By defining the framework for participation in the EPC in such broad terms, E. Macron also noted that the membership in this new cooperative format would be subject to only two conditions, namely “sharing EU values” (*partager les valeurs de l’UE*) and identifying oneself as a “European nation” (*nation européenne*).

The proposal to create an EPC was met with very mixed reviews. Critics of Macron’s idea pointed out, first of all, that what is supposed

⁴¹ <https://atlantico.fr/article/decryptage/europe-emmanuel-macron--entre-vision-d-avenir-et-ambiguite-discours-strasbourg-communautepolitique-europeenne-parlement-europeen-journee-de-l-europe-christophe-bouillaud-sebastien-maillard> [accessed on 20 January 2023].

to constitute the core of the EPC idea, i.e. the inclusion of Europe's so-called periphery in cooperation with the EU *de facto* is already occurring and takes place in many other forms, such as the European Economic Area (EEA), bilateral agreements with Switzerland or, for example, a customs union with Turkey. Some critics, especially from Central European countries, that argued according to Macron the EPC is not willing to close the channels of dialogue with Russia, which in the eyes of European partners looked like an overly conciliatory attitude of Paris towards Moscow, especially since the EPC idea was put forward after the aggression against Ukraine.

In contrast, Macron's supporters pointed out that the very fact that the EPC was presented constituted an affirmation of an inherently democratic, free Europe, which was in stark contrast to Moscow's authoritarian, militaristic stance towards Ukraine and the entire Central European region. At the same time, they indicated that the proposal presented by the French president was a proof of Paris' responsibility for the continent, all the more so because it was expressed by one of the founding states, which was always expected to put forward bold, ambitious visions for the future of the EU. Simultaneously, it was argued that the answer Macron gave was a compromise, which by definition facilitates discussion and creates space for dialogue. Furthermore, it was submitted that the EPC idea was a middle-ground between extremes, i.e. on the one hand, the rejection of the EU expansion, and on the other hand, the call for the accession of Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia to the EU, as the best response towards Moscow's revisionist attitude. EPC supporters stressed that the implementation of this format would enable the inclusion of non-EU states in the European democratic dynamic, would expand the Western political space without rendering the Union even more dysfunctional upon the accession of new member states, and at the same time would increase the distance of the democratic Europe from Russia and Belarus which are the states that face deserved ostracism from the West. Simultaneously, it was noted, the EPC idea corresponded with the long-promoted concepts of a Europe with different levels of integration (*différents niveaux d'intégration*) and the so-called differentiated deepening (*approfondissements différenciés*) of cooperation.

Paradoxically, the most enthusiastic response came from London. The United Kingdom, through its chief executive Boris Johnson and then Liz Truss, announced that it was very favorably disposed to the idea

of joining the new institutional architecture. Liz Truss publicly stated that she would attend the first EPC meeting, and even offered that the United Kingdom would be happy to organize the next one. Italy and the Benelux countries have also expressed approval of the idea. In contrast, the Balkan candidate countries remained more than reserved. They openly announced that they were awaiting more details from the EU on specific methods of action and goals of the project, and refused to *a priori* approve the idea, without, however, openly disavowing it. They also expressed concern that the EPC could delay or even halt for extended periods of time the process of admitting new member states to the EU, something they absolutely did not agree with. It is noteworthy that the countries in the region did not hide the fact that they regard France's idea, in fact, as an EU idea, which is intended as a counter-proposal to the increasingly bold – especially after 24 February 2022 – ideas of EU expansion⁴². This serves to explain the attitude of the Balkan states, whose far-reaching reluctance was a clear diplomatic sign of non-acceptance of the looming possibility of stopping the process of EU expansion and creating the EPC as something in return. Also other countries which openly aspired to join the EU (Georgia, Moldova) remained cautious. On the one hand, they appreciate that the EPC would enable the creation of the first “gateway” (*sas d'entrée*) to full EU membership. On the other hand, however, they fear that the format could become a “substitute” (*adeau empoisonné de substitution*) for EU membership, which they are unwilling to accept. Central European countries, including Poland and the Baltic states, approached Macron's project with suspicion. They considered it a stalling game as far as EU expansion is concerned, and as a means to seek a compromise with Moscow, which deemed it a priority to cease the EU enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, Ukraine responded with clear reluctance and even hostility to the EPC idea, accusing it of detracting from vital issues in the European discussion and, above all, of establishing an institutional ruse of sorts that would block Ukraine's admission to the EU for a long time. In this respect, the position taken by Berlin is interesting in. Namely, Germany was perhaps the only country to take a wait-and-see attitude towards the EPC. Not wanting to torpedo the initiative, it announced that it would

⁴² One has to bear in mind that Central European countries in particular saw Russia's aggression against Ukraine as the best proof that it was necessary to expand the Union to include such countries as Ukraine and Moldova, mainly to increase the space of peace and tranquility, thus repelling Russian revisionism.

join the discussion on the EPC, while making no secret of its disbelief in the success of the project⁴³.

According to the decision made by the 27 Member States at the European Council held on 23-24 June 2022 (based on the proposal submitted by Emmanuel Macron), the European Political Community met for the first time in Prague on 6 October 2022. At the end of the meeting, the French president announced the “unity of the 44 European countries” which “very clearly condemned Russian aggression” (*très clairement dit leur condamnation de l’agression russe*) and expressed “support for Ukraine” (*leur soutien à l’Ukraine*). Also, Josep Borrell welcomed the fact that the countries were meeting to “see how to build a new security structure in Europe”. At the same time, he pointed to the need to establish a new international entity that would exclude “Russia, not because we don’t want Russia to be part of Europe, but because Putin’s Russia has placed itself outside the European community”⁴⁴. The first summit did not formulate any binding conclusions beyond a few general assumptions that determine the axiology of the EPC. These include: 1) the desire for a clear dissociation from Russia and Belarus as countries that have violated the principles of a peaceful international order; 2) the intention to support countries mainly in the Eastern European region that are not members of the European Union, but which do not hide their EU aspirations; 3) the conviction that rapid accession to the EU structures is unlikely to be possible, but it is possible and necessary to create a network of ties that would bind the Eastern European region more strongly to the EU. The Prague summit agreed that the 44 member states are to meet again in the spring of 2023 in Moldova. Subsequent meetings are to be held in Spain and then in the United Kingdom. It was also arranged that the primary goal of the meetings would be to establish multiple ties between EU and non-EU member states, with the aim of achieving their closer integration.

During the Prague meeting the objectives of the EPC were clarified as well. The main goal is to strengthen the connections between the European Union and those who share its values while not being members. EPC constitutes for this reason, as the name suggests, a political community

⁴³ Cf. <https://ine.org.pl/europejska-wspolnota-polityczna-macrona-teoria-apraktyka/> [accessed on 20 January 2023].

⁴⁴ <https://www.touteleurope.eu/l-ue-dans-le-monde/qu-est-ce-que-la-communaute-politique-europeenne/> [accessed on 20 January 2023].

on a pan-European scale, but it is not an international organization. Intending to eventually meet on a cyclical basis, it seeks to facilitate co-operation among its members on topics as diverse as migration, energy, security, transportation and education. Key topics include “Peace and Security” and “Energy, Climate and Economic Situation”. While this new and innovative (in terms of scale) format is almost sure to continue its existence, its operation and tasks are yet to be precisely clarified. One can still see distrust between the various participants and, above all, the evident tension between the old EU Member States and the countries of the so-called “new Europe” and the EU periphery. The latter are afraid that the EPC could close the door to the EU for them, instead giving them an uncertain structure for European cooperation.

Summary

French ideas for the future of the European Union are diverse. However, they all oscillate around some constants that have not been put into question since President Mitterrand. The first is the acceptance of the need to expand the Union’s borders, something which France has come to accept only slowly and reluctantly. The French political class today, however, has no doubts that the Union is not a creature of constancy when it comes to the composition of Member States, and that the process of enlargement is inevitable. The second is the certainty that the only alternative to consistent integration is adopting the idea of a multi-speed Europe, according to which individual Member States can make independent decisions, according to their own economic and political interests, whether to undertake closer or perhaps looser cooperation. The third is the conviction that France is at the center of integration, that it is the country that sets the rhythm for the processes of European rapprochement, and that in this process, together with Germany, it plays – or in any case should play – a leadership role. The fourth assumption, which is more and more consistently endorsed in France, is the belief that those countries which are most advanced in integration will, sooner or later, gravitate toward a federal structure that will constitute the core of the Union. This core is to be the pilot of unification processes, a kind of the management board the Union at large. The fifth is the conviction that the understanding of what the European Union is has changed

drastically. It encompasses, on the one hand, a community of certain values and principles regardless of even the formal status of a member state (according to this view, the Union corresponds more closely to the Western hemisphere Europe), and on the other hand, the increasingly closer, at least para-federal, cooperation of the leading states in the process of integration of the old continent (the terms of *sensu stricto* union, the core of integration or – simply – the European federation is reserved for these states). All of these assumptions correspond to the French understanding of Europeanization which is deemed to mean a political change⁴⁵, which comprises the idea of “more Europe”, the rapprochement between member states and the establishment of common standards and procedures. This tendency of change in Europe call for, on the one hand, the imposition of certain common solutions taking the form of European values and, on the other hand, singling out a priority group from among its members who move towards a federal. France fully accepts this two-fold scenario of European development. It roughly corresponds to the traditional French approach to the Union, based on the assumption that the proper Union is the Union from before the expansion processes of the 1990s, and that it is this old Union that should ultimately become a European federation, while the other states should form circles of more or less close cooperation. As a matter of fact, such an idea is also embedded in the latest proposal for the establishment of the European Political Community – we can clearly differentiate between the European Union and its “old core”, the new Member States (Central Europe) and all those who make up the peripheries of the European Union.

⁴⁵ Cf. G. Courty, G. Devin, *La construction européenne*, Paris, 2005, p. 41.

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