

Emmanuel Macron: the return of France as a driving force for European integration?

Dr. Bettina Steible

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

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Introduction

On 10 May 2018, President Emmanuel Macron received the Charlemagne international prize (*Karlspreis*) for his renewed vision of the European project, based on European sovereignty. And indeed, the presidential elections of 2017 marked the return of France on the European stage after a few years of relative absence. Quite unprecedentedly, Emmanuel Macron Europeanised the French presidential campaign as a candidate by putting the European Union at the centre of the public debate, and then became a fervent proponent of reform at European level as President.

Emmanuel Macron was born on 21 December 1977, in Amiens. He studied in Philosophy and then entered the prestigious *École Nationale de l'Administration* (ENA) in 2002, the school where most of the French political elite and senior civil servants are trained. Upon graduation, he worked at the Inspectorate General of Finance for four years, from 2004 until

2008. After that, he became an investment banker at Rothschild, where he pursued a successful career.

In 2012, he shifted from the banking sector to politics, as he accepted to enter into François Hollande's cabinet, first as Deputy Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic (2012-2014), and later as the Minister of Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs (2014-2016). He then resigned from the government in 2016 to prepare the ground for the upcoming presidential campaign with the creation of a new centrist and pro-European political movement called 'En Marche!', which would later become 'La République en Marche' (Le Monde, 2016).

The irruption of this movement disrupted the French political landscape, as he opposed the left/right dichotomy and framed the campaign as a competition between European progressists and nationalists. Such framework attracted a significant part of the moderate wing of the socialists and the conservative parties (Le Monde, 2016), thus resulting in the fragmentation of the traditional political parties that had monopolized the political arena until then. In an unprecedented manner for a newly created independent party, Emmanuel Macron managed to gain most votes during the first ballot and faced the far-right leader Marine Le Pen during the second round. On 7 May 2017, he was elected President of the French Republic with 66.1% of the vote and a record abstention at 25.4% (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2017).

At 39, Emmanuel Macron became the youngest French President of the fifth Republic. As such, he has arguably approached his presidency in a novel manner, outside the constraints in which the previous presidents were often confined. As noted by Kauffmann, his younger age allows him to address certain sensitive issues such as the Algerian War and decolonization from a different, less traumatised, perspective (2020, p.1). As for European matters, it allows him to envision the reform of the European Union without the weight of the no to the 2005 referendum on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (Kauffmann, 2020, p. 1). That being said, Emmanuel Macron certainly fits into some continuity as regards a certain idea of France as a supporter of universal values, as well as France's role on the European stage.

Against this background, President Macron has unveiled his vision for the future of the European project in several speeches, especially the 2017 Pnyx speech delivered in Athens, the 2017 Sorbonne speech, and the 2018 Charlemagne Prize speech. In this context, President Macron has indeed presented himself as a reformist, both at domestic and European levels. By doing so, he reconnects with the idea of France as a driving force for European integration (Section I) as he puts forwards bold proposals regarding the method, i.e., how to reinvigorate the European project and democracy (Section II), and the content, i.e., the need to move towards a united and sovereign Europe (Section III).

I. France's renewed leadership in the EU

“The time when France makes proposals in order to move forward with Europe and every European who so wishes – that time has returned”. With these words pronounced on the occasion of the 2017 Sorbonne speech, Emmanuel Macron clearly enunciates his vision of France's role in the European integration process: that of a State that puts forward proposals and takes initiatives regarding the European agenda. In this regard, while Emmanuel Macron acknowledges the need to go beyond the traditional French-German axis, the latter has been reinforced as a result of the pandemic.

a. A renewed French-German axis, reinforced by the COVID-19 crisis

The French-German couple dates back to the origins of the European project. As Schuman expressed it in his famous 1950 Declaration, the process of integration aimed to establish and consolidate peace across the continent by uniting the powers that used to wage war against one another, especially Germany and France. In this context, the adoption of the Elysée treaty, adopted on 22 January 1963 between Charles de Gaulle and German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, marked the reconciliation between both countries and the recognition of the French-German couple as a driving force for European integration (Calmes-Brunet, 2015). Likewise, as the two most powerful economies of the European Union, it has been

commonly agreed throughout the history of the European integration process that the French-German axis was a prerequisite for structural change (Beach and Mazzucelli, 2007), “a sine qua non for major decisions” (Giurlando, 2021, p. 7). In addition, in the current post-Brexit scenario, the French-German couple has gained even more relevance (Krotz & Schramm, 2021).

As highlighted by Beaune, “no other partnership is as effective as the Franco-German one” (2020, p. 2). The adoption of the Maastricht Treaty, the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union, and the creation of the common currency are proof of that (Quatremer, 2019). In this respect, far from requiring a constant harmony, one of the strengths of the French-German couple resides in their cultural differences cultures and diverging priorities. According to Beaune, “the irreplaceable strength of the Franco-German relationship [lies in] a working relationship, organized at all levels of political and administrative life, which derives its strength from the fact that the two countries often hold diverging positions, but can overcome them at key moments and enlist the support of the others” (2020, p. 3).

Nonetheless, there must be some equality between Germany and France in terms of geopolitical influence and economic power for this axis to be functional and relevant (Giurlando, 2021). While France had been in a predominant position in the decades that followed the second World War, the balance tilted in favour of Germany as the latter has consolidated its economic power. In this context, the French authorities saw European integration as a means to “encase” German power and thereby avoid France’s *déclassement* (Giurlando, 2021, p. 6). “Like de Gaulle, Mitterrand viewed the European framework as the only way to rehabilitate German partners without humiliation or naivety, to increase their power, which was necessary for France, while at the same time containing it, which was just as necessary” (Beaune, 2020, p. 6). However, the imbalance increased with the German reunification, the enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, which has weakened “France’s leadership in the French-German motor” (Giurlando, 2021, p. 7; Middelaar, 2015), but also with the Euro and the debt crisis. As a consequence, France’s current ability to propose change relies on its influence and capacity to close the gap with Germany (Deubner, 2011, p. 25; Giurlando, 2021, p. 3).

In this context of asymmetry between Germany and France, Macron has undertaken a set of structural reforms at domestic level, so as to gain legitimacy as a reliable partner regarding European reforms: “Reforms in the labour market, vocational training and financing the economy will allow us to create growth and employment and to do what we need to do in France. Because no one would listen to us for a second if our European ambitions were merely a means of fixing our domestic problems. That is not their purpose, and in light of what we are doing in France, I will not allow anyone in Europe say that France now has no legitimacy to propose measures. We are making reforms, we are changing the face of our country, but we are doing so with a European ambition” (Sorbonne speech). The implementation of these reforms is intended to benefit French economy as much as to “convince Germany that France [is] a strong and credible partner, and assure its position as an equal partner in the French-German couple which [is] essential to the governance of the EU” (Giurlando, 2021, p. 14).

In this line, Macron explicitly proposed a new partnership to Germany in order to “inject decisive, practical momentum” (Sorbonne speech). In this speech, the French President paved the way for closer cooperation between both States through the adoption of the Aix La Chapelle Treaty on 22 January 2019¹, on the 56th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty. Prior to the pandemic, Germany thus responded to the calls for enhanced cooperation between both countries and to discuss proposals to reform the EU. Despite divergences, the political will was present on both sides of the Rhine, thus revitalizing the French-German couple that had been abandoned for some time (Vaillant, 2018). That being said, the dialogue on the European project entered into a new phase as it seemed to fade away as the (numerous) French proposals were often met with silence from Germany (Stephens, 2020).

The irruption of the Covid-19 pandemic was then a game changer and urged for joint action. While Europe was at the epicentre of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, the first reactions of EU member states were to adopt unilateral decisions in an uncoordinated manner, thus undermining the very foundations of the European legal order and participating in the idea

¹ Traité entre la République française et la République fédérale d'Allemagne sur la coopération et l'intégration franco-allemandes, 22 January 2019. Available at : <https://www.touteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Traite.Aix-la-Chapelle.22.01.2019.pdf> (last consulted on 15/07/2021).

that the value of solidarity was an empty word. Nevertheless, as the EU started to react (Alemanno, 2020)², some EU member states already predicted the heavy socio-economic impact of the pandemic. In this context, France managed to convince Germany of the need for an ambitious recovery plan that would imply borrowing at the European level, thereby mutualizing debt, something that had been unimaginable until then (Kauffmann, 2020, p. 5). Eventually, on 18 May 2020, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron jointly presented their French-German initiative for the European Recovery from the Coronavirus Crisis, which included the creation of an ambitious recovery fund of 500 billion euros³. This historic step forward has been widely recognized and the German Minister of Finance, Olaf Scholz, talked about a Hamiltonian moment for Europe (Kauffmann, 2020, p. 5). The European Commission then prepared a plan on this basis, which was approved by the European Council in July 2021, and is now known as NextGenerationEU. It provided for the Commission's emission of 750 billion euros⁴ in debt that all member states would have to repay, making it the "largest stimulus package ever financed in Europe"⁵, thus proving the return of the French-German couple's effective leadership.

b. Beyond the French-German axis

Despite the importance of the French-German axis, the EU's power dynamics have changed with 28 and then 27 member states, something that has not been sufficiently acknowledged by French leaders. "France was in denial about a twenty-seven-member EU. While rightly highlighting the serious flaws of an EU that was ill-designed for its size and heterogeneity, the French leaders acted as though they were still dealing with a six or twelve-member EU" (Beaune, 2020, p. 4). And indeed, the French-German couple is necessary but not enough to accomplish change in a 27 member states EU. Suffice is to recall the words of Manfred Weber during debates that took place in the European Parliament with Emmanuel Macron: "True democracy means more than just a meeting between Angela Merkel and Emmanuel

² For a comprehensive overview of the European Union's response to the pandemic, see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response_en (last consulted on 15/07/2021).

³ See: <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/05/18/french-german-initiative-for-the-european-recovery-from-the-coronavirus-crisis> (last consulted on 15/07/2021).

⁴ Under the 2021 figures, the amount rises to 906,9 billion euros. See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en (last consulted on 10/09/2021).

⁵ See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en (last consulted on 10/09/2021).

Macron, the Franco-German axis is important, but it is not Europe. Europe is much, much, much, much more”⁶. In this respect, the enlargements have led to “a larger and more heterogeneous EU in terms of political culture, economic interests, and national policy preferences” (Krotz & Schramm, 2021), so that all States must be addressed if one intends to exercise leadership (Beaune, 2020, p. 4),

Furthermore, some other axes have emerged. For example, the so-called frugal states (Austria, Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands, and Sweden) in reference to their “risk-aversion in the expenditure of EU resources”, have successfully voiced their concerns and managed to shape the discussion on the recovery fund (Dennison & Zerka, 2020). Likewise, the Netherlands, a founding Member State is not to be underestimated, and has proven to be a key actor on climate change issues, together with Denmark (Four, 2019). The Visegrad group (V4), consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia is also worth mentioning, as it has been quite active in opposing certain reforms during the so-called migration crisis in 2015. Without being formalised, some North/South or East/West axes have also appeared, depending on the issue at stake. President Macron is aware of these power dynamics, and has attempted to go beyond the necessary French-German couple by establishing intense bilateral contacts with other member states. According to Beaune, “without these prior efforts, Germany would not have shared France’s position on the May 2020 recovery plan, and unanimity would not have been reached on the recovery plan only two months later” (2020, p. 4).

Finally, the role of the European Commission as a motor of European integration should not be forgotten albeit its ambition is always to be framed within the remit of the EU Treaties. In its quality of holder of the right of initiative and guardian of the Treaties, it holds an advantageous position to shape the EU’s political agenda and priorities that will then be discussed during the European legislative process. Von der Leyen’s ‘geopolitical’ Commission further points into that direction. In this respect, the proposals put forward by France triggered a virtuous circle, as it generated alternative proposals, be it in Germany or

⁶ See: European Parliament, Debate with the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, on the Future of Europe (debate), 17 April 2018. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-04-17-ITM-004_EN.html (last consulted on 17/07/2021).

from the Commission. During the previous legislature, the visions of Jean-Claude Juncker in the State of the Union, Angela Merkel in her Plans for European Reform, and Emmanuel Macron in the Sorbonne speech were put forward and discussed in the European public space (European Political Strategy Centre). Likewise, the European Commission's ambitious response to the French-German initiative on a recovery plan signed "the return of a golden triangle, which had not made such an impact since the early 1990s – the French-German partnership and an ambitious European Commission" (Beaune, 2020, p. 1).

II. Addressing the so-called democratic deficit of the EU

Emmanuel Macron's project for the EU rests on the necessary attachment to European values as the defining elements of the EU's identity. He articulates a narrative willing to address the democratic deficit of the EU and that creates the conditions for the consolidation of a true European public debate.

a. Providing meaning to the EU's identity

One of the recurring ideas of Emmanuel Macron's different speeches is the need to address the democratic deficit of the EU and make it closer to its citizens first, by using a different – less technocratic – language, and then, by giving full meaning to the EU's identity.

It appears from the discourse used by President Macron that one of the means to reach European citizens is to move away from the technocratic verbiage and to speak in an understandable manner regarding what they expect from the EU (Sorbonne speech). In this regard, he suggests the idea that nationalism and illiberalism are surging in Europe also as a consequence of the technocratic nature of the EU: "because our weakness, blindness or lack of awareness have created the conditions for [the sad passions of Europe's] victory. Because we have forgotten that we must stay behind this ambition! (...) They are lying to the people, but we have let them do it, because we wanted to establish the idea that Europe had become a powerless bureaucracy" (Sorbonne speech). Consequently, there is a need to reinvigorate the discourse on the EU by giving it a soul, a narrative that may attract citizens. Instead of focusing on treaty reforms and technical issues, the idea is to reflect on the European project,

what it means, and what it should offer. It aims to think about the content before the format: “I am coming to the end of my speech and you have heard me say hardly anything about tools. Because Europe has obsessively talked about treaties, budgets, capabilities and mechanisms, rather than projects. This approach no longer moves us forward. Changing a treaty is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end, an ambition” (Sorbonne speech).

To do so, Emmanuel Macron refers to democracy, solidarity, and culture as constitutive elements of the EU’s identity: “Very few nations have such an intimate link between their own culture and their identity. Indeed, these ties which unite us, are the ties of freedom, Human Rights, values which have made our Europe and which no vicissitude of history has been able to sway” (Athens speech).

Actually, his discourse has the merit of attempting to provide a meaning to the values that are enshrined in article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU): “The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the member states in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”. These values have become “axiological” since the entry into force of the Lisbon (Simon, 2008). They are enshrined in the body of the Treaties, so that they belong to EU primary law and have a specific meaning under EU law, but they also have a political meaning insofar as they reflect the EU’s identity. The appeal to these values echoes the debate on integration techniques. The process of European integration has been based on the functionalist method whereby competences have been put in common so as to create *de facto* solidarity; however, if this method has been successful in establishing an institutional framework that adopts policies in numerous fields and that regulates an efficient common market, it has not been that successful in creating a common identity. As the process of economic integration as deepened, EU member states have started defining the EU’s identity with the Declaration on European Identity adopted in 1973 until the recognition of the EU’s values in the Lisbon Treaty. Nonetheless, the European identity in terms of values often seem too abstract to provide a sense of belonging (Chopin, 2018), so that it is indeed necessary to provide

meaning to the EU's identity. It is also important in order not to leave the monopoly on the definition of European identity to extremist and populist movements.

In this respect, Macron refers quite classically to democracy as one of the cornerstones of the European project: “the essence of the European project is democracy. I would even say that it is its greatest strength, what really fuels it” (Sorbonne speech). Nevertheless, Emmanuel Macron considers that the current EU institutional design has not gone sufficiently far and needs to be reformed in order to be fully democratic: “We must rebuild the European project, by and with the people, with a much stronger democratic foundation” (Sorbonne speech). In this context, he puts forward some ambitious proposals, such as the establishment of transnational lists, the creation of a Parliament for the Eurozone, or the reduction of the number of Commissioners to 15 members. As some of the proposals require treaty change, it will prove difficult to implement them. Furthermore, some inconsistencies have been underlined on this topic, such as when member states appointed Ursula Von der Leyen as President of the Commission without following the Spitzenkandidat procedure⁷. On this aspect, Macron supports this procedure, but he wishes to link them to transnational lists.

In addition, he rightfully promotes the democratic ideal as a counterpoint to the proponents of illiberal tendencies: “The European Union in 2024 will be brought together on two pillars, in my view. The first represents the values of democracy and the rule of law. They're non-negotiable, there can be no cherry-picking. On values, there can be no two-speed Europe. They are the catalyst for our unity and freedom” (Sorbonne speech). Certainly, the situation within the European Union has become worrying, as some member states have shifted towards illiberalism. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Hungary, Poland, and Romania are among the countries that have suffered the greatest democratic decline in the world (2019). Likewise, Poland is deemed the country that has most shifted towards authoritarianism during the last decade (V-Dem Institute, 2021). While the European Union has developed a set of tools, such as the Rule of Law Framework, the procedure established under article 7 TEU, or jurisdictional tools, thus far, they have had

⁷ See: European Parliament, Debate with the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, on the Future of Europe (debate), 17 April 2018. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-04-17-ITM-004_EN.html (last consulted on 17/07/2021).

a limited impact on the ground as argued elsewhere (Steible, 2021). It is also in this context that Emmanuel Macron vetoed the accession procedure of Northern Macedonia and Albania to the EU in 2019, as he expressed the need to reform the enlargement processes in light of the Hungarian and Polish drifts upon their accession to the UE. Likewise, France was one of the 19 signatories of the Declaration on the rule of law of 2 April 2020, which called for the respect of the rule of law, democracy, and human rights when adopting emergency measures against the Covid-19⁸. Finally, it seems that the rule of law crisis in Europe will be one of the priorities of the upcoming French presidency of the EU. Nonetheless, beyond rhetoric, more could have been done. For example, in the absence of decisive action from the European Commission (Pech, Wachociec, & Mazur, 2021), France, just like any other Member State, could have initiated infringement proceedings before the Court of Justice on the basis of article 259 TFEU. Consequently, Macron's credibility on this topic will depend to some extent on the work that will be deployed during the French presidency.

In addition, Macron refers extensively to solidarity as a constitutive element of the EU's identity. While solidarity is also a value enshrined in article 2 TEU, it is not the one that has been most developed due to the current division of competences between the EU and its member states. It is therefore a welcome development, that is intended to provide more unity to the EU. It refers to solidarity among States and among the peoples of the EU.

Solidarity among States is understood as an element that requires thorough attention and work, as it is arguably a component that has greatly suffered in recent years, first in the management of the Euro crisis, and second, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic: "while we have talked at length over the past ten years about responsibility in Europe, we have neglected the solidarity between us" (Sorbonne speech). Thus, pursuing solidarity among member states is understood as something that will lead to more adherence to the European project across Europe.

⁸ See the text of the Declaration: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/europe/evenements-et-actualites-lies-a-la-politique-europeenne-de-la-france/actualites-europeennes/article/declaration-de-19-pays-europeens-sur-l-etat-de-droit-2-04-20> (last consulted on 17/07/2021).

As for solidarity among peoples, Macron often refers to social justice as a defining trait of the European continent that differentiates it from the rest of the world, including allies such as the United States: “we are not the United States of America. They are our historical allies. Like them, we cherish freedom, we cherish human rights, we have deep attachments, but we have, for example, a preference for equality that is not found in the United States of America. Our values are not quite the same. We have an attachment to social democracy, to more equality, our reactions are not the same” (Geopolitique, 2020). In this regard, he proposes to move towards greater social convergence as well as corporate taxation harmonization. According to him, Europe needs “a revamped social model”, that would create the conditions for a “fair, protective and ambitious Europe” that unites people (Sorbonne speech). It is in this spirit that he successfully promoted the revision of the Directive on the posting of workers, and that France supported Juncker’s Pillar of Social Rights. Once again, the focus on solidarity is a defence against the surge of extremist movements, as it aims to attract citizens who have felt abandoned by the EU and who are appealed by nationalist rhetoric.

Finally, a decisive and innovative feature of the European project according to Macron is culture: “Have this crazy ambition again to desire a stronger, more democratic Europe, revitalized by its culture and what unites us!” (Athens speech). In his Sorbonne speech, he went further as he considered culture to be the most important link among Europeans: “The strongest cement that binds the European Union together will always be culture and knowledge”. In this respect, he proposes to establish “cultural heritage conferences at European level (...) to adopt a coordinated approach” (Athens speech), to promote exchanges and the knowledge of other European languages, to create European universities, and, following the model of higher education, to begin a process of harmonization and mutual recognition of secondary education diplomas. Thus, Macron’s vision for Europe rests on the idea that what forges the European identity are its democratic system and its values. He invites citizens and political leaders to embrace culture and solidarity as pillars of the European identity. Macron instils the idea that Europe’s narrative need to be changed, that it needs a soul to attract citizens, and *in fine*, that it needs to be politicised.

b. Creating the conditions for a European public debate

One of the recurring elements of Emmanuel Macron's speeches on Europe is the need to create the conditions for a true European public debate that would indeed include citizens. In the Sorbonne speech, he underlines how overcoming the rejection of the Dutch and the French to the Constitutional Treaty was a mistake: "And I think we were wrong to move Europe forward in spite of the people". One consequence for the present and future of the EU is the need to give citizens a voice in the process of European integration. To do so, Emmanuel Macron has resorted to different means.

On the one hand, he addressed a letter to all European citizens in 2019 called 'For European renewal', which was translated into 21 languages and published in the most important newspapers across Europe so as to reach the broadest audience possible⁹. This direct communication constitutes an innovative exercise to involve European citizens in this transnational reflection on the European project. This connection with the people is also reflected in his willingness to address the youth: "Sovereignty, democracy and culture are the three areas of opportunity that I would like to offer to the young people of Europe in the hope that they will seize them and consider them their own" (Athens speech).

On the other hand, he has pushed since the Athens speech for the organisation of democratic conventions across the European continent, so as to engage citizens in the debate. In the same vein, Macron put forward the idea of a Conference for Europe in his letter to Europeans, which was later endorsed by the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. While the Conference on the Future of Europe was supposed to be launched in May 2020, it was postponed until May 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Conference, placed under the auspices of the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council, was eventually launched on 9 May 2021 in Strasbourg in the presence of Emmanuel Macron. It is taking place across the 27 member states and a digital platform¹⁰ is made available to its citizens in the 24 languages of the EU in order to share their ideas and participate in the events that are organised throughout the continent. It

⁹ The text of the letter and the different translations is available at: <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/04/for-european-renewal> (last consulted on 17/07/2021).

¹⁰ See: <https://futureu.europa.eu/> (last consulted on 10/08/2021).

therefore comprises the following components: a multilingual digital platform where citizens can share ideas and send their submissions; decentralised events across Europe; European Citizens' Panels, in which different topics are discussed and proposals are put forward by citizens from all member states; and Conference Plenaries, where the recommendations of the national and European citizens' panels are debated. While the other components focus on citizens' participation, the Plenary also include representatives of the European Parliament, the Council, the European Commission, national parliaments¹¹. As for the content, even though treaty reform is theoretically not on the table (De La Baume, 2020), the underpinning is not to have any taboo, and to engage in any topic. In parallel to the Conference, France is also organising side-events, such as an online consultation aimed at gathering the opinion of the youth on the EU¹².

This Conference is therefore an innovative and unprecedented transnational democratic exercise. Despite its name, the parallelism with the Convention on the Future of Europe is not evident as it should not be understood at this stage as a constitutional moment. It should rather be understood as a means to create a truly European public debate and to finally manage to put Europe at the centre of the political debate. This is by itself an important step towards the politicization of the EU and one manner to address the democratic deficit of the EU.

The organisation of this Conference can be credited to Emmanuel Macron. However, its success will depend on different factors, such as how proposals will be processed by EU institutions and Members States, or the degree of participation of citizens. In this respect, quite paradoxically, the French online consultation aimed at the youth (now closed) managed to gather more than 50.000 citizens in comparison with less than 30.000 online participants in the Conference's platform. While there are also more than 100.000 events participants, for the time being, the Conference is not involving as many citizens as it should to be representative of the will of the people.

¹¹ For more information on the components of the Conference, please see: <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/about?locale=en> (last consulted on 20/09/2021).

¹² See: <https://about.make.org/pourquoi-cette-consultation/parole-aux-jeunes> (last consulted on 20/09/2021).

Thus, an important part of Emmanuel Macron's vision for Europe deals with the method – how to address the democratic deficit, how to engage citizens and give them a voice – as he knows that this is an absolute requisite for the survival of the European project. In addition, he has also presented on different occasions a very detailed plan that rests on the idea of European sovereignty.

III. A new narrative: a sovereign Europe that protects citizens

Sovereignty has been the main vector of Macron's vision for Europe, one that has been reaffirmed throughout his different speeches and exchanges. Quite eloquently, the interview in the Financial Times concluded "It is time for Europeans to become sovereign" (WTE/JHR, 2018). According to him, European sovereignty is envisaged as the solution against nationalism and populism (Vaillant, 2018) and to have strategic autonomy into the current geopolitical context, characterized by the increasing antagonism between the United States and China.

When he was running for the presidential elections, Emmanuel Macron wrote "The true sovereigntists are the Pro-Europeans" (Beaune, 2020, p. 6). Upon acceding to the Presidency, he has indeed repeatedly referred to a European Union that would benefit from the strength of sovereignty, defined as "our capacity to exist in the world as it currently exists, to defend our values and our interests" (Sorbonne speech). This concept rapidly made its way in Brussels, as it has been used by members of the Commission and referred to in official policy documents (Verellen, 2020).

Of course, the use of such concept is not neutral, as it is normally associated to a State (Loughlin, 2003; Pellet, 1997) and necessarily has constitutional implications. Beyond the political rhetoric and programmatic perspective associated to European sovereignty, it is indeed possible to wonder what the implications are for the nature of the European Union: is the idea to turn the EU into a State, or to transform the concept of sovereignty, so that it can be separated from a State? If the latter is true, then could it apply to any supranational organization, or would it be a constitutive element of the *sui generis* nature of the EU? The answer to these questions is unclear under Macron's claims.

Constitutional theory presents different versions of the relationship between the EU and its member states. In the first one, sovereignty is losing relevance under the influence of European integration process; under the second one, the transfer of competences to the EU leads to the EU taking over sovereignty from its constituents; under the third scenario, sovereignty becomes a ‘claim to authority’ for which the State has no special status (WTE/JHR, 2018, pp. 2-3). Macron’s perspective could be more aligned with yet another perspective, that of multilevel constitutionalism, insofar as the relationship between the EU and its member states’ sovereignty is characterised by synergy (WTE/JHR, 2018, p. 3); however, Macron’s vision is eminently political, not legal, so that it is difficult to fit it into this scheme. Another possibility would be to frame Macron’s understanding into the post-traditional conception of sovereignty, so that European sovereignty would not be another expression of State sovereignty, but literally the sovereignty of the EU (Avbelj, 2020). According to this perspective, what characterizes sovereignty would be “the acceptance by the audience, existing internally and externally of the claiming entity”, thus making it possible to witness pluralist sovereignty (Avbelj, 2020, p. 300).

According to Macron, European sovereignty would not harm national sovereignty, but would on the contrary make it stronger¹³. It is not understood as a substitute, but rather as complementary to national sovereignty. Therefore, EU member states would retain their national sovereignty and also benefit from the European one. As argued by Vaillant (2018), this concept could be understood as the application of the subsidiarity principle enshrined in article 5 TEU, according to which the Union should act insofar as the objectives of the proposed action are better achieved at the EU’s level. Under this perspective, if States are unable to act efficiently in a specific field, then the European Union should take over, but with all the strength that would be expected from a State.

In fine, that would mean to transform the EU into a real political actor, both internally and externally: “Sovereignty is, in essence, the ability to defend or uphold one’s interests and

¹³ See: European Parliament, Debate with the President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, on the Future of Europe (debate), 17 April 2018. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-04-17-ITM-004_EN.html (last consulted on 17/07/2021).

values, which Europe does not yet dare to do or consider without a sense of modesty linked to its colonial legacy, the collapse brought about by world wars, and its totalitarian experiences. However, the “geopolitical” Europe sought by Ursula von der Leyen in particular is the real issue in the decade ahead: existing on the map or being subject to the law of others” (Beaune, 2020). Thus, European sovereignty is understood as a means to maximize the interests of its member states on the international stage. If the EU is indeed considered as a credible political actor, then it can exist on its own, have its own voice and, for example, it does not necessarily need to take part in the American/Chinese dispute for hegemony.

Besides, taken within the context of the French political arena, European sovereignty echoes the concept of *souverainistes*, i.e., those who support the withdrawal from the EU in opposition to pro-European movements (WTE/JHR, 2018). Under Macron’s vision, sovereignty is not the prerogative of the State; rather, it becomes an instrument to counter the arguments of Eurosceptics movements since it can be also Europeanised. Likewise, while former president Trump “glorified sovereignty as the independence of states from international organisation, Macron (...) defended sovereignty as a key attribute of multilateralism” at the UN General Assembly in September 2017 (WTE/JHR, 2018, p. 3). Therefore, instead of understanding European integration as a loss of sovereignty, it should rather be comprehended as a means to increase state authority (WTE/JHR, 2018, p. 4). As the editorial of the European Constitutional Law Review on European sovereignty noted: “The notion of European sovereignty allows us, consequently, to see not just the risk of a loss of national sovereign authority to the EU, but also the potential benefits to be won at the Union level, for each state individually, and for all together. In the same way that previous innovations to the notion of sovereignty the latest of which was national sovereignty - had in fact signified a sophistication and a strengthening of the sovereignty of the state concerned, European sovereignty may signify a new stage of sophistication of state sovereignty for EU member states” (2018, p. 5).

Finally, the concept of European sovereignty also serves to detail the program of Emmanuel Macron for Europe, revolving around six main dimensions: strategic autonomy in security and defence matters; addressing the migration challenge and developing a foreign policy that focuses on the Mediterranean and African; leading the ecological transition; promoting its

own model of digitalization, between innovation and regulation; and finally, standing as an economic and monetary power (Sorbonne speech). These components are presented as priorities to give full effect to a sovereign Europe that protects citizens both internally and externally.

Conclusions

The arrival of Emmanuel Macron to the French presidency implied important changes both at domestic and European levels. At domestic level, he started a process of general reform, which has not always been well accepted by the French population. At European level, he has relentlessly presented his vision for Europe and has used novel tools in order to address the general public and getting it involved in the European public debate.

As Mayer has argued, he has taken risks in exposing with such detail his plans for Europe, for his political life “will inevitably be judged by the results” (WTE/JHR, 2018). Some of the proposals are quite ambitious and either require treaty change or strong political will from EU member states, so that it is quite unlikely that they will be taken on board. On this aspect, while much needs to be accomplished, and certainly not everything will or should be accomplished, Macron’s proposals for a democratic, united, and sovereign Europe have been partly implemented. According to Beaune, “more than half of the proposals in [the] Sorbonne speech are being implemented” (2020, p. 19). Even so, irrespective of the results, one of the most important added value of his plan is to attempt to put Europe at the centre of the political debate, to engage citizens in the reflection on the future of the EU, and to offer a new narrative for the European project.

Another lesson is the return of the French-German couple as a driving force for European integration, although the Covid-19 pandemic has forced a qualitative leap in such process. Nevertheless, the capacity of France, in the present case led by Emmanuel Macron, to reform and reinvent the European project probably rests on its ability to convince French citizens that it is necessary to do so. In this respect, the results of the last European elections and the surge of the yellow vest movements, just to mention some of the most significant phenomena,

have undermined such capacity. Without domestic societal support, Emmanuel Macron will not manage to appear as a legitimate leader on the European stage.

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