



No false promises

French President Emmanuel Macron presents himself publicly as a European. In view of a rising tide of Euroscepticism, this is a particularly welcome development. He even had the European anthem played at his inauguration in 2017; and most recently, he caused a sensation by making an appeal in several European newspapers.

Even if the channels of communication are new, the basic approach to the further evolution of Europe corresponds to the traditional French way of doing things, which also prevailed at the time the single currency was launched: first centralise and then hope for convergence.

The development of European monetary union over the last 20 years has proven that convergence does not happen automatically. To now use other instruments to pool debts and harmonise social security systems, in addition to a common monetary policy, and introduce a uniform minimum wage – in other words, to bring about convergence by force – is without doubt a very bold experiment that will involve considerable risks.

Macron's goal of strengthening Europe is certainly the right one but he is going about it the wrong way. The continued development of the EU can only succeed if its member states feel that their sovereignty is respected, despite all the necessary cooperation. The way that Brexit remains locked in an excruciating purgatory is an example of the kind of damage that can be done if this condition no longer appears to hold true. That is why subsidiarity must be respected as one of the fundamental principles of the union and applied to areas such as fiscal policy. The risks are too great that actions and liability will become even more separated from one another and consolidation efforts in individual countries will be completely abandoned. The entrenched belief in an industrial policy in France does not correspond to the basic European principle of competition. Centralisation, on the other hand, should be sought wherever diversity is a weakness. This applies, in particular, to security and foreign policy.

In my opinion, the following maxim will boost the chances of success for the EU's future development: focus on what we already have in order to limit complexity. To restore lost trust, there must be confidence that rules will be adhered to. The regulatory thicket must be pruned back to make Europe more easily understood. But joint efforts to improve our European home also include re-thinking our approach to transfer payments and structural funds. Extracting as much as possible seems to have become the principal goal of some member states.

We must start at the point where Europe is visible to everyone. The continued spread of nationalist thinking, which has manifested itself throughout the EU in elections, can only be prevented if Europe is not simply an abstract notion nor associated with a loss of influence.

In the end, politicians' promises should not be overly grandiose because it is unlikely that countries will ever converge entirely. Even in Germany, the declared goal of "equivalence of living conditions" has proved elusive. Instead, a glance at the districts that make up the German state of Hesse, for example, shows that prosperity is very unevenly distributed between individual regions – despite a barrage of economic policy initiatives.

Nobody would even entertain the idea of calling the composition of the state of Hesse into question. But the situation in Europe is a different matter altogether. Anyone who promises that more centralisation will make everything equally good either runs the risk of everything getting worse or of confidence in the European project being totally lost. ■

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