

France, Germany and the future of Europe

A new world requires new ideas on sovereignty and unity

by Sergio Fabbrini in Rome

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Britain's exit from the European Union is depleting the resources of a country which at the start of the last century governed just under one-quarter of the world population. The multiple crises of the last decade have divided Europe, creating blocs of countries that distrust one another. The Visegrád group has expanded to the east and the west, the Hanseatic coalition is consolidating among the small and medium-sized countries of the north, and the Mediterranean states are united by their weaknesses. In the middle are France and Germany. Both are aware that the EU must decide, after the forthcoming elections to the European Parliament, how to face up to the threat of disaggregation.

French President Emmanuel Macron opened his pro-European line of argument on 5 March with a letter to the citizens of Europe published in all 28 EU countries. For Macron, the EU must build centralised institutions that can defend citizens and set common organisational standards. The EU is not just a market, says Macron, even if it would not exist without a market. The EU is a political entity consisting of people and values that must be protected. In economic terms, the letter does not address the issue of euro area governance. However, it does propose reviewing some single market regulations. For Macron, it is necessary to reform policy on internal competition and foreign trade. In addition, he says Europe must promote a standard tax policy, as well as a transnational labour protection policy.

On defence, Macron proposes creating a European agency for the protection of democracies, a Frontier force to protect its boundaries, an agency for political asylum, a council for internal security and another council for international security, to be joined also by the UK. His logic is clear – institutional capacity-building at the centre of the EU will be used to pull the union closer together again. Such capacity-building must give rise to European sovereignty with the features of a state that, in the future, can replace the national equivalent.

In a piece published four days after Macron's letter, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union, proposed an alternative vision of European aggregation. For her, 'European centralism, European statism, the collectivisation of debts, a Europeanisation of social systems and the minimum wage would be the wrong way.' She acknowledges the EU must move to define the European way of living but must do so through the efforts of its member states. For Kramp-Karrenbauer, the EU must not be 'a European superstate... European institutions cannot claim any moral superiority over the collaborative effort of national governments. A new Europe cannot be founded without the nation states: they provide democratic legitimacy and identification. It is the member states that formulate and bring together their own interests at the European level.'

Even if Kramp-Karrenbauer then adds that 'Europe should therefore stand on two equal pillars: the intergovernmental method and the community method,' in her contribution citizens are more national than European. From her perspective, it is not necessary to encourage capacity-building at the centre of the EU. It is enough to promote innovative policy programmes, such as a budget for innovation, a climate protection pact, incentives to reduce the distortion of competition between different tax regimes and strengthening the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Kramp-Karrenbauer's proposals on migration policy exemplify the German vision. It 'must be organised according to the principle of communicating vessels. Each member state must make its own contribution to combating the causes of migration, protecting its borders, and taking in migrants. The more work it does in one area, the smaller its contribution might be in other areas.' For Kramp-Karrenbauer, the reform of the EU must take place through differentiated policies backed by equally differentiated agreements among member states.

The discussion between the leaders of France and Germany is very important. And yet, both are prisoners of the same statist vision of the integration process. For Macron it is necessary to construct state sovereignty in Brussels, while for Kramp-Karrenbauer it is necessary to preserve the sovereignty of national capitals.

Europe continues to be prisoner to a concept of sovereignty developed for its past. Setting European sovereignty against national sovereignty is a mistake that would come at a high price. Sovereignty can

instead be divided, between the members states and the union, on the basis of empirical and not abstract assessments. The EU needs institutional capacity-building in the centre, but it also needs member states with their own institutional strength. To repair Europe's disaggregation a federal union is needed, not a European state or an association of European states. A new world requires new ideas. At present, Europe seems unlikely to be delivering them.

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