

The Geopolitics of Europe. From the Atlantic to the Urals

4 - The European Union, an Original Multipolar system

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The member States have built an original multipolar system, but does this guarantee consistency ? The multipolarity of the EU is a product of history that can yield significant results and serious contradictions.

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Begun during the Cold War, the construction of the European community was not the product of a pre-scripted scenario but the result of a number of convergent internal and external motivating factors. It has been a construction process, ideologically quite vague, built as a sort of exercise in inventive DIY and based on constant negotiation and compromise rather than conflict. Anyone simply visiting World War I and II cemeteries, looking at the crosses and monuments and reading off the names of those who died, can understand that the European project is an instrument for peace that commands respect. Its failings should not mask the fact that the European community is probably the most successful outcome of the United Nations Organisation (UNO) charter, since a war between EU members has now become highly improbable. The accession process requires each candidate to pacify its relations with its neighbours. Beyond this, the EU exerts positive external influence on law and peace in its immediate environment and world-wide. This is why the EU can be qualified as an international organization for the public good.

The member States have built an original multipolar system, but does this guarantee consistency ?

I. The multipolarity of the EU is a product of history...

The EU is a multipolar system in the sense that it is an organized set of entities combining several poles. The system is the result of countless negotiations in which the players include member States and European institutions.

States with highly differentiated characteristics...

Since July 1 2013, and at this writing, the EU has been made up of 28 member States. Often opposed and indeed sometimes at war in the past, they are all marked by unique histories, have varied structures and singular approaches to geopolitics. France is a centralised state, while Germany is comfortable in its federalism and would be more than happy to see its blueprint reproduced, one way or another, in the EU.

Each country's history cannot be applied to others. France perceives itself as a millenary nation state, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia are, to some extent, youthful, since they were born in 1993 with the peaceful division of the former Czechoslovakia. This of course does not prevent both countries from having a long previous history. Each member State forms a pole within the EU configuration, having its own capital city and calculating what is best for it and when. Note how we always say "Paris and Berlin think that...". The political capitals are here synonymous with executive power. These States do not have friends ; they have allies,

partners... and rivals. For them, the key question remains : how we can maximise our gains, and ... relinquish as little sovereignty as possible ? Around common interests – some regular, others short-lived – member countries form and revive alliances.

Thus, the EU's social policy is often presented as a weak aspect of European policy. It is true that the rule of unanimity that applies here makes it difficult to define ambitious goals. Some member countries do not have a minimum wage and others have few qualms about making "social dumping" an attractive argument for their domestic labour market. To some extent, the populations of the EU member states have never been so fiercely in competition for jobs. Faced with rising unemployment, the Commission felt that it was important to give the impression that it was doing something about it. This led to the 2012 "employment package", a set of recommendations to member states to reinvigorate the job market. The commissioners took up the cause of minimum wages, differentiated by sector and negotiated between social partners. In June 2013, the European Council introduced a global approach to reduce unemployment among young people, an age group that is particularly exposed and whose support for European construction has been waning.

A transversal study of a wide range of social issues has shown significant differences across the member states. If we take for example the practice of imprisonment, it is immediately obvious that incarceration rates are not systematically proportional to crime rates, but correspond to a vision of delinquency and crime and how these should be treated. The member States making the most extensive use of imprisonment are by decreasing order : Estonia (302 people imprisoned for a population of 100,000) ; Latvia (293) ; Lithuania (232) ; Poland (228) ; the Czech Republic (185) and Slovakia (162). It will not have escaped the reader's attention that these are all former USSR Soviet Republics or satellites. With an incarceration rate of 95 per 100,000 inhabitants, France lies below the EU average (123), between the Netherlands and Germany. The countries that have the least recourse to jail are from the highest downwards : Cyprus (79) ; Sweden (77) ; Ireland (75) ; Denmark (71) ; Finland (68) and Slovenia (60). This shows that in an emblematic area of social culture like imprisonment, results are very disparate across the EU member countries, Estonia making five times more use of imprisonment than Slovenia.

... and unidentified institutions

From the institutional angle, the EU also looks like a multipolar organisation. Article 13 of the EU treaty revised by the Treaty of Lisbon lists the following institutions : the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, the European Court of Auditors, the Court of Justice of the European Union and the Central European Bank. It is worth noting that in recent years, the European Council has increasingly tended to marginalize the Council of Ministers and the European Commission.

Moreover, since the Treaty of Lisbon entered force, the function of EU Presidency has been split into two entities. On one hand, the President of the European Council [with a renewable two and a half year mandate] and the six-month revolving Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers. The Treaty of Lisbon thus maintains the six-monthly presidency of the EU Council that works in cooperation with the President of the European Council, initially the Belgian, Herman Van Rompuy and, since December 1 2014, the Pole, Donald Tusk. The Treaty of Lisbon also created the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security

Policy, appointed for five years. The first incumbent was Britain's Lady Catherine Ashton. The change of European Commission (2014) re-dealt the pack, and Ashton was succeeded by Federica Mogherini, former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, a position that she had held for six months. In addition to the European texts are affairs involving persons and contexts inside and outside the EU.

We have often heard about the EU's "institutional triangle", but what exactly is it ? Christian Lequesne and Yves Doutriaux have this to say :

"Under the method, the European Commission is alone in making proposals and, where appropriate, executes the decisions taken by the Parliament and the Council, while the Council and the Parliament - since the Treaty of Maastricht - make decisions jointly, based on the Commission's proposals".

To describe the European institutions as complex is at best a euphemism. The complexity is a product of history and the 2005 stalemate did nothing to help. This does not facilitate communication on European affairs. Mediators - whether journalists, publishers or academics - often fear that it will be off-putting. Experience does, however, show that it is possible to take an interest in European matters, provided that real subjects are addressed, cutting out the clichés and cant, something that institutional communication does not dare to do, at risk of weakening the foundations of the European construction process.

Finally, we should not forget that 22 of the 28 EU member countries are also members of NATO. The planned enlargements would further increase the number of member states that are also members of NATO. We have already seen that relations between NATO and the EU are more important than the media tends to indicate, notably when it comes to enlargements.

II. ... that can yield significant results ...

Flawed though they may be, the internal market, commercial policy and enlargements count among the positives of European construction.

The construction of the internal market

The internal market is one of the most fundamental acquis of European construction. Its most ardent advocates uphold this "Common Market" as the preamble to a political Union. A sign of its success was the way the expression entered everyday language as early as the nineteen sixties and seventies as a synonym for the EEC. It does, however, seem today to have lost currency, even sounding dated. The 1986 Single European Act consecrated the concept of "Internal Market", intended to supersede Common Market, even though the latter did not formally disappear, at least from official documents. The "borderless" Internal Market officially came into effect on January 1 1993.

Article 26 (ex-14 TCE) of the Treaty on the EU says this :

"The internal market shall comprise an area without internal frontiers in which the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital is ensured in accordance with the provisions of the Treaties. The Council, on a proposal from the Commission, shall determine the guidelines and conditions necessary to ensure balanced progress in all the sectors concerned".

This then is an area shared by the EU countries and by a population of half a billion. It should however be noted that the advantages of this big market cannot all be extended to a new member State before the expiry of transitory periods that can last up to seven years. On January 1 2014, Bulgaria and Romania were admitted from the antechamber, but Croatia is waiting. Meanwhile, non-member States including Norway and Iceland still enjoy the advantages of the EU's free trade regime, the European Economic Area (EEA).

In the broad sense, the interior market also covers the European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) as well as ambitious integration policies, for example in the fields of transportation and energy. By opening up national markets, the Interior Market has first and foremost contributed to increasing intra-community trade, which now generally accounts for nearly 70% of the member countries' foreign trade. The Single Market opens opportunities for businesses, notably in the form of outlets for their products.

For consumers, competition can bring price reductions, a broader range of products on the shelves and services, including, for example, better health protection and food safety. A number of cases of illegal meat trafficking have nonetheless shown that crime networks can sometimes steal a march on the authorities.

Despite its success, the Interior Market has, since the turn of the century, been suffering from an erosion of political and social support for the integration of the European markets, illustrated in 2005 by the so-called "Polish plumber" affair and the 2013 controversy about posted workers. There are also residual tax, regulatory and technical distortions that facilitate, for example, fiscal dumping. Services, moreover, remain poorly integrated into the big Single Market.

The economic and financial crisis has laid bare the structural weaknesses of the internal market. Between 2008 and 2009, the EU's GDP regressed by 700 bn euros, the number of unemployed rose significantly, public deficit worsened, and intra-European trade of goods fell by 15% in value while exports to other countries fell by 12%. Above all, the crisis has revealed the fragility of certain member States and of the European system. It has exposed a major contradiction in the Interior Market : when growth becomes atonic among the key EU protagonists, the member countries start to asphyxiate each other, such is their propensity towards intra-zone commerce.

The relaunch of the Single Market is embodied in the "Europe 2020" strategy as a means of reinvigorating economic growth and re-establishing trust in the advantages of economic integration among Europeans. Having adopted the Single Market Act in April 2011, the European Commission came up with a second package of measures : the Single Market Act II. This lays plans notably for new actions to develop transport and energy networks, as well as encouraging social entrepreneurship and consumer confidence. Another aspect of the Internal Market is the way it has been structured around standards that have also been a means of exerting external influence.

Common commercial policy

The consolidation of the Internal Market initially gave EEC and then EU standards considerable global influence, notably via commercial policy. This reflected the community's

intention to build through law rather than force, exporting its standards beyond the confines of the EU in “soft power” mode. The EU has for long been a prime mover in the furthering of commercial, social and environmental standards, notably via initiatives involving the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The EU’s commercial policy has led it to assume a role as an international player, while engaging in a form of federalism without quite saying so, the Commission’s role in negotiations taking precedence here over that of the Member states. Since the mid 1990s, cooperation and coordination between governments and the Commission appears to have been becoming more difficult to implement, creating new road blocks.

EU action theoretically makes use of two assets : power of constraint - via the conditions with which countries wishing to do business with the EU must comply - and power to convince by showing the efficiency of a development model based on trade. Currently, the EU is increasingly at pains to persuade the WTO to factor in its conception of international regulation.

French Senate advisor, Philippe Delivet explained on *Diploweb.com* :

“Through its commercial policy, the EU has taken up a clear position in favour of international trade. It has for long favoured a multilateral approach, notably by championing the creation of the WTO in 1995. As the negotiation cycle in Doha (opened in 2001 and suspended in 2006) became bogged down, the EU decided to allow more room for bilateral negotiation. Here, it very widely opened its markets to products coming in from other countries. Under the effect of commercial negotiations, the community preference that expressed itself via the Common External Tariff was gradually weakened. However, conversely, European exporters have benefitted from the dismantling of tariff barriers among non-EU countries. It remains for the EU to address the challenge of reciprocity. It cannot admit a very broad opening up of its market if, at the same time, non-EU countries openly or surreptitiously hang on to or re-establish entry barriers for European products. [...] The EU is still very dependent for raw materials and fuel. In addition to which it has to face up to the new international trade environment created by globalisation. It records very good results especially in high-end market segments. Its exports are robust in the industrialised countries but far less efficient on fast growing markets like Asia. This is therefore a real challenge to competitiveness, implying, in particular, a sustained effort in research and innovation”.

The common trade policy must address three big questions. How can the EU stay wide open to the outside market while at the same time truly guaranteeing that the imported products and services comply with the social, sanitary and environmental demands of the member countries ? Lowered with each fresh negotiation cycle, has the common external tariff — around 3% —fallen below the threshold of economic efficiency ? How is the EU to defend its interests in the framework of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the USA (see Chapter 11) ? To retake the initiative on the planetary scale, the EU should take a positive, prospective approach and adopt a real strategy combining policies on trade, industry, competition and bringing a new dynamic back to research.

No fewer than seven enlargements

The Federal Republic of Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands formed the Europe of Six from 1957 to 1973. The initial configuration united a population of 163 million with a relatively homogeneous standard of living, on a total area of 1.3 million km².

General de Gaulle's France twice slapped its veto on the UK's candidature. His successor, Georges Pompidou, adopted a new stance. In 1973, the United Kingdom became a member, London honing its lobbying techniques in the corridors of Brussels, and militating for a market-style Europe, combating the Federal model.

Had European construction not been in many ways a success, would we have seen its membership multiplied by 4.6 from 6 to 28 ? This very sensible observation is a good advert for the EU but should not conceal the fact that Switzerland and Norway have refused to join.

Order	Year	Country	Configuration	Total area (in millions of km ²)	Total population (in millions)
1 st	1973	Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom	Europe of nine	1.7	240
2 nd	1981	Greece	Europe of ten	1.8	260
3 rd	1986	Spain, Portugal	Europe of twelve	2.3	310
4 th	1995	Austria, Finland, Sweden	EU-15	3.2	360
5 th	2004	Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic	EU-25	3.9	460
6 th	2007	Bulgaria, Romania	EU-27	4.3	465
7 th	2013	Croatia	EU-28	4.5	506

EU. European construction : an enlargement timeline

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It should also be noted that, in addition to the seven official enlargements, the integration of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) into Federal Germany as part of the unification process of 1990 was an enlargement in everything but name, the EU - and NATO - thereby swallowing a former satellite of the USSR. This was a remarkably discrete enlargement, perhaps because it in fact embodied a major strategic revolution.

Let us now focus on the EU enlargements of 2004, 2007 and 2013, with a total of 13 new entrants. In all, they amounted to a total area of over one million km², and in 2013 counted a population of 107 million. Apart from the two Mediterranean islands, Cyprus - still divided - and Malta, the 11 other States that joined the EU with these enlargements had experienced communist regimes with various flavours of planned, collectivist economies. The failures of the doctrine and the practical implementation ended with the fall of the iron curtain (1989), the implosion of the USSR (1991), and the countries' candidatures for the EU. In 2004, with the biggest of the European community enlargements, the President of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Jean Lemierre analysed their transition towards the market economy for the magazine *Politique internationale* in these terms :

"The balance sheet is positive. Ten years ago, nobody would have thought they would have joined the EU so quickly and in such favourable conditions. Their economies have been integrated into the European economies. They have a high export capacity towards the EU and far-reaching changes have been made. The last fifteen years bode well for the future. The transition has not, however, been easy. Each country has advanced in its own way, but progress has been made, thanks to the European cause. The prospect of joining the EU provided tremendous leverage, greatly speeding up reform. However, the transition is not yet complete, nor is the effective convergence of the economies".

Subjecting accession to conditions, the EU has produced the effect of an external constraint

that has been accepted because of the prospect of integration. The adoption of the community acquis – more than 80,000 pages of regulations – imposes a form of compliance with standards. In this respect, the enlargements are a major work of foreign policy, as they ultimately amount to exporting a *modus operandi* from the member countries to the others. All that remains is to put these standards into practice, an ideal that is, rightly or wrongly, tacitly accepted to be very ambitious.

The result of these enlargements in the early years of the twenty first century is an EU more extensive but more heterogeneous than ever, even though the process of economic catch-up is continuing in most of the new member countries, in spite of the crisis. For several years, opinion surveys have been indicating “enlargement fatigue” across broad swathes of public opinion in the senior member States. It is true that the national and European authorities kept a particularly low profile on January 1 2007 and July 1 2013 when it came to justifying the new accessions. However the lack of political debate produced damaging effects : the successive enlargements of the EU have not only made it bigger, they have also made it different. The demographic, economic, political and strategic changes have changed the ball game, without any real democratic debate. The combined effects of the enlargements and the economic crisis are reshaping the EU, and the resulting contradictions are grist to the anti-European mill.

III. ... and serious contradictions

As the old adage goes, nations have “no friends, but only interests”, and capitals often play ambiguous games. There are occasions where geopolitical realities set them face to face with their inadequacies.

When member states play (petty) games

Contradictions and ambiguities – sometimes constructive in the case studied here – are inherent to all human organisations. While there is no reason to dramatise, it is important to shed some light on these issues. We shall focus here firstly on those that relate to the nature of European construction, and then turn our attention to those that diminish the scope of common policies.

Should the EU be a gathering of nation states or should it be aiming for a form of federalism ? This is an old question, partly already answered *de facto*, but rarely exposed to objective public debate. This is unsurprising as the political leaders of the member countries have all been wont to political calculations about the European community, and outcomes have not always lived up to expectations. Why too would the generations in power today have to pay the political price for misjudgements by leaders who are no longer around to shoulder the blame ? It is better to leave the picture blurred and say as little as possible.

The bottom line is that those who govern the member countries are caught up in a contradiction : using European construction to offload constraints – in order to foist what they think are good decisions on to the electorate without paying the price at the next elections – while at the same time keeping as much national sovereignty as possible to build their own political edifice. In a sense, for national rulers, building the EU is tantamount to sawing off the branch they are sitting on, namely their prerogatives in the national arena.

This is why most of the political decisions have for long remained in the hands of individual countries. An essentially inter-governmental framework propitious for conserving the sovereignty of the member countries has been maintained for the key issues. Jean-Louis Bourlanges, French MEP, puts it this way :

[...] everything has been designed and organised to ensure that heads of State of government reign with majestic powers, unshared, within the framework of a European Council ; itself bound by the rule of “common agreement”.

These contradictions feed the inadequacies of the Internal Market, commercial policy and the life of democracy. Despite the success stories we mentioned earlier, the Internal Market still has significant failings because of the range of national regulations. 28 regulations co-exist, notably in the following areas : tax policy, financial services, innovation and research. Likewise, the “covert federalism” of the European community appears to have reached its limit, as two simultaneous trends have emerged : the growing difficulty for the EU to make its voice heard in major international negotiations and the resurgence of protectionist temptations in some fringes of the EU’s public opinion. Finally, Professor Vivien A. Schmidt shows that the EU “is globally destructive for democracy as a result of the effects of its mere presence on the traditional functioning of the national democracies.”

These ambiguities contribute to reducing the scope of the policies conceived and implemented by the EU and even to undermining the basis provided by the electorate’s trust in the European project.

The wars in the Balkans reveal the weakness of the European community

During the 1990s, the powerlessness of the European community to address the wars in the Balkans was shared by the UN’s Security Council. Hungary, a non-permanent of the Security Council in 1992 and 1993, only recently released from the orbit of the USSR, had tried to draw the attention of the permanent members to the risks of genocide and the urgent need for intervention.

In June 1991, the proclamations of Croatian and Slovenian independence were milestones in the breakup of the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, notably via armed conflict between Serbs and Croats. Despite imposing an arms embargo, the EEC proved incapable of finding a political solution to a crisis that was taking place less than a three-hour flight from Brussels. The member States were divided in their interpretation of the crisis and condemned themselves to impotence.

The Hungarian ambassador to the UN, André Erdos, brought an illuminating testimony. It is worth remembering that the country was, at this stage, a member of neither NATO nor the EU. He told *Diploweb.com* :

“It was amazing and extremely frustrating for us to be confronted day after day by the powerlessness and lack of political will to act at the right time that was going to characterize the behaviour of the international community, and more specifically the Euro-Atlantic world, throughout the crisis. The influential countries, individually or in groups, all took as their starting point the idea that the crisis did not imperil their basic strategic interests. Moreover,

they made a point of treating the conflict with a considerable lack of the knowledge required to understand the region. Thus, during the debates, the ambassador of a Western nation to the UN Security Council, and a permanent member – echoing Serbian propaganda – thought that Bosnia had been invented by Tito (sic !)... [...] We realised, even at the early stage of the conflict (late 1991- early 1992), that the political leaders from the oldest generations – perhaps as a result of the still vivid memories of the history of World War II or still under the effect of propaganda from the Milosevic clan – considered the Serbs *ipso facto* as freedom fighters, whereas the Croats were bizarrely perceived as Ustaše collaborators. [...] During a debate at the General Assembly of the UN on December 14 1992, we [Hungary] declared : "the tragedy of Bosnia-Herzegovina is a stain on the honour of Europe and the whole world".

The power games of the local players, the impotence of the EU and the serious failings of the UN in the implementation of its own decisions and resolutions were the causes of the tragedy of Srebrenica, in which some 8,000 Bosnian men were massacred by Serbs in July 1995.

Much drama later, the United States and NATO took military action on the doorstep of an EU that appeared divided, weak, indeed non-existent. It was the USA that hosted and led the Dayton Agreement that put an end to the conflict in December 1995.

The EU hardly gave a better account of itself in 1998-1999 during the Kosovo War in which the Albanese nationalists of the Kosovo Liberation Army fought Serbian troops under the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. The EU, impotent yet again, lined up once more behind the USA that chose NATO's option of an aerial bombardment of Serbia between March and June 1999. Bombardments that have left traces in the memory of Serbians... and their Russian allies.

It should, however, be noted that, having been found wanting on two separate occasions, the EU has become aware of the need to develop European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), declared operational by the European Council in Laeken in December 2001. A declaration followed by uneven effects to which we shall return in Chapter 8.

The paradoxical balance sheet of the EU's development aid policy

In its publications, the European Commission willingly presents the EU as a model for development aid. The EU is claimed to be by far the world's leading provider of official development assistance (ODA), accounting for nearly 60% of the global total, far ahead of the US, Japan and the emerging countries. Furthermore, Brussels willingly presents itself as exemplary in the monitoring and control of funds that benefit 140 countries, also announcing that the EU plans to raise its ODA from 0.56% of GDI in 2010 to 0.7% in 2015, in line with UN objectives.

The Global Europe section accounts for around 6% of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020, and theoretically covers all EU external action ("foreign policy") in ODA and humanitarian aid. The European Development Fund however also provides financial resources to "EU as a Global Player", but is not part of the EU budget and is not therefore covered by the MFF.

Everything would be just fine were the EU not rife with contradictions.

Firstly, the European Commission casts itself in an advantageous light, using money that is not its own. Indeed, the member States fund directly from their own domestic budgets more than three quarters of public aid to the development of the EU zone. The Commission stumps up less than a quarter of its funds. In other words we are looking at a system with “28+1” policies, namely the bilateral policies of the member countries plus that of the European Commission.

Secondly, the policy implemented by the European Commission is a host of interleaved programs, which comes down to “artificially swelling development aid-related statistics”, according to the European Parliament.

Thirdly, the dispersal of European aid reduces its efficiency. Multiplying the number of budgetary lines makes it hard for the European citizens to understand. The *trompe-l'oeil* champions of development aid, the member countries and the EU institutions implementing disparate policies without succeeding in drawing political benefit on a level with the investment. In reality, the EU's development aid can be considered politically “blind”, for want of being clearly pinned to political objectives. For example, even though European Funds are allocated to the United Nations Development Program, the European flag is not clearly flown in the places where the money is spent.

This means that contradictions between individual nations and the EU reduce the political benefit from the development assistance and illustrate the ambiguous relationship these players entertain with power. Furthermore, the economic crisis generally leads countries to cut back their national development aid budget ; this makes it unlikely that the EU will reach its 2015 goal of devoting 0.7% of GDI to ODA. Meanwhile, the emerging nations are carving out a space for themselves in the developing countries, and the fact that they are more willing than the European Commission to close their eyes to corruption enhances their appeal in the eyes of leaders of some beneficiary nations.

It is important to resist the – easy – temptation to throw out the baby with the bathwater. So it is true that, while the EU has inadequacies, these are first and foremost the product of history and, secondly, the result of sometimes inconsequential decisions by governments and citizens alike. Instead of seeing conspiracies at every street corner or falling into facile criticism, it would be better for each country to sweep in front of its own door, and acknowledge its contradictions, indeed its inadequacies. This way, new paths might be explored.

There is, however, a problem : as the years go by, new generations seem less and less sensitive to the “Europe equals peace” argument. History lessons, media anniversary specials and commemorations can do nothing to prevent the passing of time. The EU thus has to make a new case for itself, and, this, in itself, is no mean task !

Manuscrit clos en 2015.

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