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# European Sovereignty

Commentary on the Findings  
of the Survey in France

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## A PARADOXICAL CONCEPT IN FRANCE

The term »European sovereignty« confronts France with a paradox: France is the archetypal old sovereign nation-state built by the monarchy of the Ancien Régime and completed by the French Revolution. However, it is also France that has floated the notion of European sovereignty, specifically Emmanuel Macron, who has himself embraced »republican monarchy« à la française. We need to understand why this paradox is only apparent and draw what lessons we can learn from it in order to construct a European sovereignty.

## SOVEREIGNTY: A CONCEPT ASSOCIATED WITH THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FRENCH NATIONAL STATE, BUT NOW LINKED TO THE AMBITION OF EUROPEAN POWER

Until Emmanuel Macron's speech at the Sorbonne on 26 September 2017 European sovereignty did not exist in French public discourse, properly speaking. On one hand, there was French sovereignty, and on the other there were transfers or delegations of powers to Europe, which could be justified as being in France's interests. The zealots of the construction of Europe have often argued that these transfers to the European Union do not curtail France's sovereignty, but on the contrary restore it, as the country's influence and strength on the international stage diminish. This reasoning underlay the support for the Maastricht Treaty and the project of the single

currency. Before European sovereignty the notion generally supported in France was that of »Europe is strength«.

But there is also a lot of dissatisfaction and disappointment in France in relation to various questions linked to European construction: loss of national control, the democratic deficit, an alleged »[economic/classical] liberal drift« by a Europe aiming to drive an unfettered globalisation, as well as European enlargement to encompass countries in central and eastern Europe, which is not particularly popular in France. The project of a constitutional treaty, with its unfortunate connotations of building a federal European state, was accordingly rejected by the French people in 2005, by a clear majority of 55 per cent of votes cast.

Many jurists, perhaps on purist grounds, reject the very notion of »shared sovereignty«: for them, sovereignty cannot be shared or delegated. France's Constitutional Council initially rejected out of hand any »transfers of sovereignty« (decision of 1976), before accepting »transfers of powers« on condition that the »essential conditions of national sovereignty« were preserved (decision of 1985). It has upheld this ever since.

The positioning of French political forces in relation to the novel concept of European sovereignty is characterised by the same cleavages as afflicted the Maastricht Treaty, the project of a European constitution, and European construction in general. The pro-European Socialists, the Greens, the Republicans on the right, the »En Marche« movement and François Bayrou's MODEM in the centre form a grand pro-European coalition

(which also exists in the European Parliament). They support and endorse the notion of European sovereignty, as long as it represents an aspiration to a strong Europe and does not set itself up against national sovereignty. By contrast, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's radical left-wing party *France insoumise* (France Unbowed, LFI), Marine Le Pen's extremist right-wing *Rassemblement national*, and the »sovereignists« of the republican left (such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement) or of the republican right (Nicolas Dupont-Aignan) reject European sovereignty as incompatible with »national sovereignty« or »popular sovereignty«.

In France, the word »sovereignty« is linked to the construction of the state and of the nation. It is readily associated with authority, power, royalty and strength, not to mention independence and freedom, as the survey conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean-Jaurès has clearly shown. European sovereignty, according to this same study, has less positive connotations in Latin countries, such as France, Spain and Italy (perhaps because they are distant heirs of the Roman Empire, the Roman public tradition of a central authority from above), while the Germanic or Slav countries, such as Germany, Sweden or the countries of central and eastern Europe, regard it as a form of emancipation. From that standpoint the fixation on European sovereignty is doubly problematic in the French debate: on one hand, it further polarises the divide between pro- and anti-Europeans (which is undoubtedly what Emmanuel Macron wants with a view to unifying the pro-Europeans, setting up a duel with Marine Le Pen and depriving her of the monopoly on sovereignty); while on the other hand, it is unable to attract broad and deep support because of French historical and cultural sensitivities (which explains why Emmanuel Macron often also talks about sovereignty and power in reference to France).

The Covid-19 pandemic has enhanced support for European sovereignty, but rather by way of the intermediary concept of strategic autonomy. As such, the notion of European sovereignty has been deployed in the European debate only in relation to digital sovereignty, as confirmed by Strategic Agenda 2019–2024, adopted by the European Council in June 2019: »Europe will have digital sovereignty«. The notion of strategic autonomy, by contrast, which France has been pushing in the European debate since 2013, has left the orbit of defence and security and is now used in relation to the new European industrial strategy in many key sectors (defence, space, health care, the digital, energy, raw materials). In fact, the pandemic has heightened awareness that Europe needs to reduce its strategic dependencies (for example, in the medical domain) and to strengthen its critical industrial and technological capacities. This is fully in line with traditional French priorities (this also concerns, in both a French and a European context, industrial, technological, economic and health-care sovereignty, among other things).

## **A EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY THAT MUST REMAIN COMPATIBLE WITH NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY**

In all the countries in which the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean-Jaurès carried out their survey any attachment to European sovereignty is weaker than the attachment

to national sovereignty. But France and Italy stand out from the other countries under study in that a majority even consider the two concepts to be contradictory, as sovereignty refers first and foremost to the nation. Furthermore, a majority in the two countries take the view that Europe is still not really sovereign, while all the other countries believe that Europe is already sovereign. They are therefore also the most sceptical, with 41 per cent and 37 per cent of respondents, respectively, expressing a positive assessment of European sovereignty as against 35 per cent and 47 per cent, respectively, having a negative assessment. Conversely, the notion of strategic autonomy finds more favour in France and Italy than European sovereignty (the opposite is the case in Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden). It should be noted that Spain, based on these findings, feels more attachment to Nordic or Slavic Europe than to »Latin« Europe. One could even hypothesise that in Spain Europe is regarded as a solution to its domestic problems (Catalonia).

If one asks whether national and European sovereignty should be strengthened the findings are less differentiated. Substantial majorities in all the countries (above 70 per cent) believe that both sovereignties need to be strengthened. France and Italy are once again the two countries in which support for strengthening European sovereignty is a little less pronounced (66 per cent and 60 per cent, respectively). It should also be noted that in all the countries, except Spain, support for strengthening national sovereignty prevails over strengthening European sovereignty.

Two lessons can be drawn from these findings. First of all, France and Italy, which are among the countries with the highest levels of mistrust with regard to the European Union, according to Eurobarometer surveys, and in which populist parties are also doing best, are much more sceptical about the concept and the project of European sovereignty. In these two countries doubts and dissatisfaction are significant in relation to European construction. It is therefore not immediately evident how they can be persuaded to back a substantial reinforcement of European competences. This finding is consistent with surveys that have always shown that the French, in particular, are most favourably disposed towards a Europe of states, which gives priority to national institutions, than to a federal Europe, prioritising European institutions. The term »strategic autonomy« finds more favour, undoubtedly because it does not come down on the side of Europe as against its nation states (Europe can help the member states to strengthen their strategic autonomy in global competition between powers) and because it is a matter of political substance rather than political form.

A second lesson is that Europeans are as much, if not more attached to national sovereignty than to European sovereignty. Because there is no contradiction between the two, strengthening European sovereignty is viewed positively. Such a contradiction can rapidly re-emerge, however. For example, the Nordic countries, which are net contributors to the European budget, support the single currency and the single market, but prefer to retain their fiscal and budgetary sovereignty. The central and eastern European countries support the Schengen Area, but do not want quotas of migrants and refugees to be im-

posed on them. That explains why there is little appetite in Europe for a major recasting of the treaties and of competences. Already, the European Convention of 2002–2003, which led to the constitutional treaty, did not substantially enhance European competences, but retained unanimity voting in various key areas linked to national sovereignty (economic policy, social policy, foreign policy, defence, police, justice and immigration). In this context, it will take a lot for the Conference on the future of Europe, launched in 2021, to come up with anything more than a marginal change to the EU treaties, institutions and policies. It will rather be a matter of strengthening Europe where it is desirable (for example, as regards health care or fiscal issues), of modifying European agreements where a consensus is emerging (for example, the budgetary stability pact) and to reduce European bureaucracy and regulation in order to apply subsidiarity more readily, wherever possible.

More promising than a recast of the treaties is the collective project, involving both the EU and its member states, of strengthening Europe's clout, strategic autonomy and effectiveness.

### **EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY: A SHARED, ALBEIT NUANCED RESPONSE TO GLOBAL CHALLENGES AMONG THE MEMBER STATES**

There is a remarkable consensus across European countries on the reasons and constitutive elements that justify strengthening European sovereignty, especially in terms of economic sovereignty, food and health sovereignty, common defence, control of external borders, protection against foreign interference, control of strategic infrastructure and own energy resources. Climate change, the terrorist threat and threats to health are cited as the main external motivations behind strengthening European sovereignty. All these elements substantially overlap the Sorbonne programme set out by French President Emmanuel Macron and other speeches.

Subtle differences can be observed between countries, however. Spain and Italy, hard hit first by the euro crisis and then by the health crisis, primarily want economic prosperity from Europe. France, in line with other Latin countries (Italy, Romania, Spain) would like Europe to be endowed with its own tax revenues, which is less of a priority for Germany, Poland and Sweden. France, like Sweden or Italy, appears more worried about China's great-power ambitions than about the United States, while Germany and Spain take the opposite view (clearly because of the legacy of the Trump years), and the central and eastern European countries are more concerned about Russia. France is more worried than other countries about the terrorist threat and the domination of US technology companies (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft, or GAFAM). France and Italy are concerned by the weakness of European institutions, while Germany and Sweden are worried about nationalist political leaders.

It should be noted, finally, that the nation-state's lack of heft on the international stage is an argument for reinforcing national sovereignty. This finds more favour in France and in oth-

er Latin countries (Italy, Spain) or in smaller countries (Latvia, Romania) than in Germany, Poland or Sweden. On one hand, Europe is regarded as a power multiplier, a means of attaining »critical mass« in the global arena, but that does not obstruct the maintenance of a certain primacy for the national vision and national interest. It may appear counter-intuitive that France, which still retains numerous power assets, considers itself too small or too weak for the global fray, and that Germany is no longer as pro-European as it once was. In any event, that is in line with the French elite project of selling »Europe is strength« as a means of multiplying French power, while the French population is rather prone to pessimism and declinism.

In this context, surveys expressing strong support for a common security and defence policy must be approached with caution. On paper, there is indisputably a strong expectation, which is also reflected in the broad support, affirmed by other opinion surveys, for a »European army«. But such surveys rarely go into the practical details or nuances. Are the various national publics in Europe prepared to contemplate the demise of national armies within a single, integrated European army? Are they willing to envisage European military intervention in foreign conflicts, such as the US presence in Afghanistan and Iraq and in their general war against terror, or like France in Mali? Are European countries ready to renounce the protection of the United States and NATO and to rely solely on a common European defence and the French nuclear deterrent? Political reality, experience and diplomatic practice have shown that progress on these issues is possible, but fraught with difficulty.

France has always supported the development of European defence, but on one hand, it is less dependent on US protection, given its western European geographical location and its own nuclear deterrent, while on the other hand, it has always wanted to maintain the capacity for autonomous action, which it is prepared to deploy, whether within an EU or a NATO framework, or in some other ad hoc international framework. Strengthening European defence and security is desirable in terms of a pooling of resources, joint projects and capacity for common action, but from the French standpoint it must not impede the willingness to act, which remains, in these domains, primarily in a national framework.

### **POPULATIONS EXPECT ABOVE ALL PROSPERITY, SECURITY, PROTECTION AND EFFECTIVENESS**

The survey conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean-Jaurès confirmed that there is a strong attachment to the European Union across all its member states. Despite subtle differences, including a more pronounced reluctance as regards European sovereignty in countries such as France and Italy, there is strong majority support for the European Union and the single currency, according to the Eurobarometer surveys already mentioned. This explains why the partisans of a putative Frexit, for example, are very much in the minority, and that there currently appears to be little danger of a repeat of Brexit in any other country. Furthermore,

the single currency has established an irreversible bond in the European construction, which is just what François Mitterrand was counting on when he got a reunified Germany on board. On top of that, awareness of common external dangers, such as climate change, the terrorist threat, the threat to health, geopolitical competition (United States, China, Russia, Turkey) and pressure from uncontrolled migration create a favourable dynamic for the project of European sovereignty.

At the same time, public expectations should not be misinterpreted. People remain attached, albeit in different ways, to national sovereignty. They want, first and foremost, prosperity, security, protection and effectiveness. We need to grasp the nuances, the hesitations and the divergences to which Europe's populations give expression, before plunging headlong into new transfers of competences, resources and policymaking to Brussels. The European Recovery Plan proposed by France and Germany in 2020 is a good example of an audacious and ambitious initiative that has shown itself to be well up to the historic challenge of the pandemic and its consequences. It allows us to strengthen European sovereignty in terms of economic prosperity, as well as technological, environmental and digital sovereignty. But also evident is the reluctance of the self-styled »frugal« countries to sign blank cheques and to turn a blind eye to the demands of economic competitiveness and budgetary discipline. Europe will always require compromises between nations.

## NECESSARY DEBATES ON THE WAY TO EUROPEAN EMANCIPATION

Semantic debates are as frustrating as they are necessary. Frustrating because the same words are often underpinned by different definitions (as this survey has shown in a very interesting manner) and because discussions on words are exhausting for diplomats and negotiators without too much to show for it: the notion of »strategic autonomy«, the great innovation of 2020, is a good example of this. Such debates are nonetheless necessary because behind the words are slogans expressing political orientations. It is not a small matter that Europe has declared its intention to be sovereign and strategically autonomous. A form of European emancipation is at work here and it should be encouraged.

This opinion survey has also shown, at least for the countries under study, that European sovereignty refers to something common and real among the people of Europe. The term »European sovereignty« is controversial because it calls into question national sovereignty and can give the impression that European construction is moving towards an omnipotent and sovereign European federal state, somehow above Europe's peoples. In order for this to be accepted as applying to other areas besides the digital, and so that one can talk of sovereignty in the economic, monetary, industrial, technological, food, health, spatial, environmental and energy fields, and even in defence and border management, our understanding of European sovereignty needs to be consolidated around three elements: (i) European sovereignty has its origins in a community of fate, identity and belonging, based on a shared history, geography, values and interests; (ii) Europe-

an sovereignty is an adjunct to national sovereignties, completing and reinforcing them (as emphasised by Jean-Yves Le Drian in Prague in 2019): »this common sovereignty does not take anything away from our national sovereignties«; and (iii) it allows Europe to reinforce its independence, its self-determination and its liberty in the world, in the teeth of common challenges and other powers (which, to be sure, is a shared understanding of the term »sovereignty«, including in France, despite the dominant reference to monarchy). What is at issue as regards European sovereignty is Europe's capacity to think of itself as a united whole and to assert its own interests, its own values, its own norms and its own vision.

As things stand, the term »strategic autonomy« seems more consensual and moreover it has found its place in »approved« European language. But it is up against two pitfalls that assume two complementarities. In the area of defence and security it comes up against the primacy of NATO in the collective defence of Europe and the attachment to the transatlantic relationship, just at the time this is in the process of restoration under the Biden administration. We need to show that the affirmation of Europe does not call into question transatlantic ties but rather complements them. In the economic domain, the debate on strategic autonomy comes up against the opposition between the supporters of strong public intervention in the economy, which is a traditional preference in France, and supporters of opening up, competition and private initiative. Here too compromises need to be found, some sort of complementarity, to be able to combine public authority and rivalry.

This battle of words must continue to be fought in the knowledge that, if they embody a common political ambition, it must first of all go through concrete actions and projects. The results obtained from the study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Fondation Jean-Jaurès in any case show that there is a common path on which to advance towards more European autonomy and sovereignty.

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