

'The Council of Europe, crucible of European confederation' from Le Monde (12 May 1992)

Caption: On 12 May 1992, commenting on the collapse of the Soviet Union, the French daily newspaper Le Monde outlines the new tasks of the Council of Europe.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Lesourne, Jacques. 12.05.1992, n° 14 707; 49e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Le Conseil de l'Europe, creuset de la confédération", auteur:Scotto, Marcel , p. 8.

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Last updated: 05/07/2016

The Council of Europe, crucible of European confederation

Strasbourg

by our correspondent

When François Mitterrand put forward his idea of a European confederation again last week, this time in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it was a spectacular reminder of the existence of an institution that is little known, not to say ignored. Yet the Council of Europe is the continent's oldest intergovernmental organisation, whose aim from the outset was to bring together all its parliamentary democracies under one roof. The Treaty of London was signed by France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and the three Benelux countries on 5 May 1949, well before the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), Western European Union (WEU) and the EEC.

The other European democracies, including the Federal Republic of Germany, soon joined what Winston Churchill hoped would become the cradle of a 'United States of Europe'. As a sign of Franco-German reconciliation, Strasbourg, a city fought over in three wars in 70 years, was chosen as the seat of the organisation. The Secretariat was established in the Alsatian capital, as were the European Court and Commission for Human Rights. Strasbourg also hosts the twice-yearly meetings of the Committee of Foreign Ministers and the three annual sessions of the Assembly, whose members, unlike those of the European Parliament of the Twelve, are representatives of national parliaments.

The aim of the Council of Europe is 'to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress.' But some of the founding fathers, especially Robert Schuman, wanted to push integration further in order to begin paving the way for the 'economic and political union' called for by the Hague Congress (7 May 1948), in which Mitterrand had taken part. In the face of opposition from the British, who were determined to maintain a strictly intergovernmental structure, France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries decided to strike out on a new path by establishing the ECSC and, subsequently, the EEC.

Priority for the Common Market

By transferring powers from national governments — an approach first illustrated by the common agricultural policy — 'Smaller Europe', with its economic agenda, soon outstripped its older sister in terms of public impact and efficiency. As the years passed, the efforts of the 'Greater Europe' were obscured by the development of the EEC. By 1989, the Council of Europe had, almost unnoticed, acquired a total membership of 23 countries, with a sphere of activities covering everything from culture, protection of the environment and the campaign against torture to the prevention of violence in sports stadiums.

No fewer than 150 conventions have been drawn up and presented for signature to the countries of Western Europe. True to its intergovernmental approach, the Council does not compel Member States to sign. There is only one exception to the *à la carte* menu: accession to the Strasbourg organisation involves acceptance of the Convention on Human Rights, which is the only supranational component of the 'Greater Europe' — although countries still have to undertake to recognise the jurisdiction of the Court (see *Le Monde*, 28 April).

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the tearing down of the Iron Curtain gave the Council a second wind. Coinciding with the arrival of a new Secretary-General, Catherine Lalumière, the collapse of the Communist bloc enabled it to revive its pan-European vocation. Unlike their counterparts in Brussels, the Strasbourg authorities plunged into the breach and encouraged accession by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and (on 7 May 1992) Bulgaria have already joined. Others — Romania and the three Baltic States — should follow by the end of the year.

From Brest to Vladivostok?

Even if not explicitly stated, the policy of the present 27 members is to welcome the new republics as soon as possible. Most of them already have a foothold in the Council of Europe, having obtained 'special guest' status (a parliamentary delegation at the Assembly, but without voting rights). Provided they become genuine parliamentary democracies, the former Warsaw Pact allies of the Soviet Union should be able to join without any serious problems. There remains the problem of the states that have emerged from the breakdown of the Soviet empire. What geographic, cultural and religious criteria will Strasbourg apply in considering applications for membership? The case of Russia could be settled rapidly following its membership application of 7 May 1992. The republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus are a trickier matter, however, and the European authorities have not yet reached any definite conclusions.

In point of fact, this rush for accession looks very much like compensation for the setback with the CSCE. Following democratisation of the former Eastern bloc countries, Strasbourg thought it might be able to host the Assembly of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. It reckoned without opposition from the United States and Canada. Today, the CSCE has its own Parliamentary Assembly with no fixed seat. Is it a coincidence that it will be meeting in Budapest in July, a week after the Assembly of the Council of Europe holds its fourth annual session in that city? The Twenty-Seven will nevertheless be permitted to participate in the CSCE's deliberations, particularly on 'basket three', which includes human rights issues.

When Mitterrand put forward his idea of a confederation at the end of 1989, the Council of Europe hoped to become the linchpin of the future Europe. In the event, it has been somewhat overlooked, even by the French authorities. The President of the Republic rediscovered it, so to speak, on 4 May when he inaugurated the Palace of Human Rights in Strasbourg. But he was at pains to point out that, for the time being, he was simply proposing a 'concept' that would have to be discussed by all the existing European institutions. In other words, the Council of Europe was only 'one of the crucibles' of the Europe of the future: it was up to the Council itself to demonstrate that it was capable of being the only one.

Meanwhile, the European institution in Strasbourg will no doubt continue along the path on which it embarked just over two years ago, with the risk that it will become a kind of European UN with no real influence on events. That was, after all, the point of departure. As Churchill, who was the main instigator behind the Council of Europe, acknowledged in his speech of 11 August 1950 in Strasbourg: 'We in this Assembly have no responsibility or executive power, but we are bound to give our warning and our counsel.'

Marcel Scotto