



# European Confederation

## A much-maligned concept

On 9 May, French President –Emmanuel Macron– proposed the idea of creating a “European political community”<sup>1</sup>. Just days earlier, Enrico Letta proposed a “European Confederation”<sup>2</sup>. Under such plans, both inspired by François Mitterrand’s European Confederation proposal, countries under threat from Russia could join the “European family” without waiting for membership of the European Union (EU). The proposals seek to strengthen cooperation between like-minded European nations, ensuring the stability of the EU and the continent at a time of the resurgence of war on its territories. To understand the proposals, we must first consider what inspired them. In reality, the European political community and the new European Confederation form a part of French diplomacy whose cornerstone issues remain unchanged.

In his New Year address to the French people on 31 December 1989<sup>3</sup>, François Mitterrand depicts a worrying state of affairs for stability across Europe and the globe. While the fall of the Berlin Wall was unquestionably welcomed, it presents considerable political challenges for Europe. The future of NATO and the Warsaw Pact is at risk. At the time, President Mitterrand’s concern with the “revival of nationalities” would return the continent to the Europe of 1919 and undermine borders. To prevent this development as well as overcoming the Yalta order and uniting the two parts of Europe –until then separated by the Iron Curtain– Mitterrand proposed a “common and permanent organisation for exchanges, peace and security”. Dubbed the “European Confederation”, it took inspiration from previous proposals including the Fouchet Plans drafted during General de Gaulle’s first seven-year term.

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1 Macron Emmanuel, [Speech at the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 9 May 2022.  
2 Letta Enrico, [Interview](#) with the *Les Échos* newspaper, 24 April 2022.  
3 Mitterrand François, [French President’s New Year address](#), 31 December 1989.

De Gaulle, who was left scarred by World War II, would go on to express support for Europe-wide intergovernmental cooperation<sup>4</sup>. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, General De Gaulle considered that the European political union protected the sovereignty of its States caught between the two American and Soviet superpowers. This union made it possible to build on their cooperation long-term, shifting the focus beyond a mere economic union which France's then leader deemed inadequate. This laid the foundations for the Fouchet Plans, with a second version published on 18 January 1962<sup>5</sup>. However, one of its main components –the rejection of the Atlantic Alliance– would signal the downfall of the Plans. The Inner Six Member States and the United States did not follow the French proposal which was quickly shelved.

— **“I consider the Community the centrepiece of any construction and Europe, as defined by history and geography, a natural area where every European will feel at home.”**

François Mitterrand

The European Confederation falls within the tradition of the Fouchet Plans. Its primary purpose is also to politically unite European countries while guaranteeing their sovereignty. Nevertheless, it goes one step further by associating Central and Eastern European countries –something almost unthinkable in 1962. President Mitterrand's unexpectedly proposed idea requires further attention. In no time, the French President's statements would outline the contours of this European Confederation to be organised in concentric circles: “I consider the Community the centrepiece of any construction and Europe, as defined by history and geography, a natural area where every European will feel at home. The first circle (the European Economic Community –EEC) will have robust unitary structures, and the second (the Confederation) rules for living together to ensure the development of exchanges and the guarantees of security”.<sup>6</sup> The “unitary structures” referred to by François Mitterrand were intended to be strengthened again by the Maastricht Treaty. Negotiations for this Treaty had begun shortly before, at

the European Council meeting in Strasbourg on 8 and 9 December 1989. The European Confederation would have therefore fulfilled further cooperation by considered expansion.

Nothing was off the table in terms of content. Confederation partners envisioned a range of expertise –from a customs union and student exchanges to air transport, not forgetting financial support. In short, the content of the Confederation remained vague. This was likely to avoid potential criticism. Conversely, the objectives at stake were specific. As previously mentioned, the first of these was to sustain the balance of power in Europe. On the one hand, the Confederation would be designed to prevent the escalation of nationalism. On the other, it would institutionalise

relations with Gorbachev's USSR. The second was to safeguard the ECC with its feared destabilisation by the fast and uncontrolled entry of Central and Eastern European countries. Lastly, the

proposed Confederation would maintain France's leader status on the European political stage at a time when German unification raised concerns of an imbalance in the France-German partnership. What's more, the proposal drew a clear picture of the geographical boundaries for future Member States. Geographically, President Mitterrand intended for the Confederation to be European. As such, he excluded any American involvement from the outset while encouraging USSR participation.

Negotiations quickly got underway to form the Confederation, starting between France and Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. All three Eastern Bloc countries had already begun the democratisation process. Although the three countries were tempted, the project actually materialised with Czechoslovakia. During a meeting with Mitterrand on 19 March 1990, the recently elected Vaclav Havel showed a keen interest, and it was quickly decided to organise an international conference in Prague in June 1991 to create the European Confederation.

<sup>4</sup> De Gaulle Charles, [Speech](#), 31 May 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Draft Treaty, [Fouchet Plan II](#), 18 January 1962.

<sup>6</sup> Mitterrand François, [Interview](#) with the *Vendredi* newspaper, 12 January 1990.

This one-year plus period helped to specify the Confederation's content and allowed time for German unification. Based on the Hague Congress, 150 figures from European countries, Canada, the United States and Japan met in the Czechoslovakian capital from 12 to 13 June 1991. Gathered in six commissions –energy, environment, transport and communication, movement of persons and general affairs– they would discuss strategic directions for the Confederation. Each commission highlighted disparities between the countries of the European Community and the Central and Eastern European countries with a focus on the Confederation's proposed skill sets to eradicate such imbalances. The conferences would recommend the deployment of more efficient telecommunication networks, the development of tourism in Central and Eastern European countries, the guarantee of access to culture and the free movement of people. Together, these measures sought to prevent the East-West divide from being transformed into a gap between rich and poor. All six commissions were convinced of the Confederation's practicality, but the proposal would ultimately be shelved.<sup>7</sup>

While the Prague Conference appeared to have provided an effective platform for the creation of the European Confederation, negotiations were halted. There are a number of reasons for this failure, the first of which was mentioned by President Macron in his speech on 9 May 2022. Barely freed from Soviet rule, the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe did not intend to be associated with the USSR in a new organisation. As was the case for the Fouchet Plans, the absence of the United States was key to Mitterrand's failed proposal. Indeed, America was not prepared to reduce its influence on the Old Continent. James Baker, then George H. W. Bush's Secretary of State, worked closely with Germany and preferred

to strengthen the CSCE<sup>8</sup> over establishing the Confederation. This paved the way for Atlanticist leadership of Central and Eastern European countries<sup>9</sup>. The latter would then divert their attention from a fledgling organisation, instead opting for German-American leadership and NATO as a guarantee of security. Central and Eastern European countries eventually regarded the European Confederation as an antechamber or waiting room to the Community with no assurances of membership. President Mitterrand hinted at this during an interview with Radio France Internationale (RFI) when he declared that this “interim phase [would last] for decades”<sup>10</sup>. Though realistic, this observation would have a devastating impact on Central and Eastern European countries. As a result, they no longer considered the Confederation a platform for membership, but rather a way to shut them out from the Community. The French were left isolated and ended up backing down on a proposal that no longer had any appeal.

Unlike other commissioners, Jacques Delors backed the proposal suggested by François Mitterrand<sup>11</sup>. Much like the Fouchet Plans, many figures regarded Mitterrand's proposal as an attempt to block federalism. Mr. Delors, then President of the European Commission, was aware of the challenges facing Europe and sought to resolve the dilemma between strengthening and expanding. On 17 January 1989, he presented a draft proposal for economic association to establish the European Economic Area (EEA), reflecting the early days of the Single Market. The EEA would unite Member States of the Community and those of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). The Single European Act (SEA) of 1986 focused efforts on the establishment of a single market. This called for the need to address relations with countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), including Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland,

7 AG (5)/4/, Archives of the President of the French Republic – François Mitterrand (1981-1995), National archives of Pierrefitte-sur-Seine

8 The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was an organisation which aimed to facilitate dialogue between East and West. It brought together the USA, Canada, the USSR and all European countries except Albania. Since the Helsinki Final Act was signed on 1 August 1975, the CSCE played an active role in European security, the protection of human rights, and cooperation between States.

9 BAKER James, *Speech at the Aspen Institute Germany*, Berlin, 18 June 1991.

10 MITTERRAND François, *Interview with RFI*, 12 June 1991.

11 MUSITELLI Jean, “François Mitterrand, Architect of the Great Europe: The European Confederation Project (1990–1991)” in *Revue internationale et stratégique*, 2011, Volume 82

Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. Moreover, the creation of the EEA made it possible for the countries of the European Community and the EFTA to form a single area in which the free movement of goods, capital, services and persons would be guaranteed. The EEA treaty was signed on 2 May 1992 and all EFTA countries readily agreed to ratify it, with the notable exception of Switzerland, which refused to join the EEA in a referendum on 6 December 1992. Nonetheless, the European Economic Area continued to be a success story with EU States becoming de facto EEA members. This success, however, was not meant as a substitute for a missing political association. In 2000, Delors incorporated the main aspects of François Mitterrand's Confederation. In doing so, he proposed a Federation of Nation States aimed at consolidating the EU which was at risk of rash expansion.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, this Federation would not be fleshed out. Instead, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) –with its less official structure than any political association– would unite EU Member States and the neighbouring Moldova and Ukraine, thereby fostering more successful cooperation.

The statements of intent delivered by Emmanuel Macron and Enrico Letta bring the European Confederation to the fore-

front of discussion. Such proposals are made during each period of monumental change within Europe. The Fouchet Plans and European Confederation sought to resolve Cold War tensions and the fall of the Berlin Wall respectively whilst the Federation of Nation States was a response to the 2004 enlargement of the EU. Last, the European political community strives to meet current and future challenges, not least the war in Ukraine. A different outcome can be achieved for these new intentions by grasping the European Confederation concept and the reasons it failed. Equally, to understand the Confederation is to gain an insight into Mitterrand's aims. The latter refer to preserving the balance of power, strengthening European and continental integration, and consolidating France for the benefit of Europe. These aims are also a nod to European ideals since the Prague Conference recalls the Hague Congress. The failed Confederation has seemingly dissuaded European and French leaders from such a political association. That said, the outbreak of war in Ukraine stresses the urgent need to move forward and provide neighbouring EU countries with a convincing and realistic solution in readiness for potential membership. Time will tell if the proposal can make progress and convince all stakeholders. ●

<sup>12</sup> Delors Jacques, [Interview](#) with the *Le Temps* newspaper, 17 June 2000.

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