

Changing Places¹

The European House Revisited

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It had been Mikhail Gorbachev, who, as Secretary General of the Soviet Communist Party, re-introduced the metaphor of the “European House” into the public discourse by quoting it in several speeches after 1987 while he presented his visions of a new and stable European order. His view of the “common European House” was that of a large block of flats, commonly shared by dozens of “families” (=nations) for geographical and historical reasons, in which each nation, faced with individual problems, desired to safeguard its independence and foster its own traditions. This image reflected the conventional Russian apprehension of “house” as a block of flats, in which visits among neighbours may in fact be inadvertent. It contrasts, however, with the ordinary Western European understanding of “house” where it is customarily that of a detached or at least terraced house usually inhabited by one single family².

Depending on individual view and socialisation, the term “European house” can thus be used to identify either a larger geographical entity, a cultural concept or a supranational political unit respectively, composed of nation States joined together for common political interests and / or a common cultural background. A closer look at the split accessibility to the metaphor shows that it to some extent mirrors the shifting fate of the concept of “Europe” throughout the centuries, too, reaching far back to the ancient Greek, when there had already been a rather precise perception of “Europe” which had been developed by deliberate dissociation of the Persian kingdom perceived as a foreign and hostile power, at least during the Persian wars. According to Aristotle, the Persians then were forced to spend their lives as submissive

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² See: http://bieson.ub.uni-bielefeld.de/volltexte/2004/483/pdf/01_inhalt.pdf, S. 179 f.

servants under the autarchy of an Asian tyrant, whereas the European Greek had chosen to live as free men on their own responsibility and in accordance with the law. The foundation stone of the “European house” had thus been laid in the 6th and 5th pre-Christian centuries, as a reaction to an external Asian threat trying to establish a hegemonic rule west of Asia Minor. Although the geographical boundaries of this archetypical Europe had been confined to the Greek City-States, a congruence between space and idea can be stated – in those days, it had been the exclusive “oikos” inhabited by the free and law-obedient Greeks who considered themselves “Europeans”.

However, this particular imagination of the “European house” did not last long. The diminishing Asian threat led to a different perception of “oikos”, in the subsequent centuries the idea of “oikumene” combined the ancient “European” and “Asian” worlds again, a world view that was adopted by the Romans who considered the *Imperium Romanum* the *orbis terrarum* and thus refined on a kind of archetypical global thinking. In front of this background the meaning of “Europe” necessarily had to be reduced to the definitions of one geographical space among others like Asia and Africa, whereas the Romans preferred a policy of demarcation by defining themselves against the “uncivilised” barbarians as the inhabitants of the “civilised” oikumene. Later on, under the impact of Christianity, “Occidens” and “Oriens” emerged as the new *portmanteau* words for the split empire. “Occident” yet meant a new definition that should be used, at least since the early Middle Ages, to identify the territorial dimensions of the Christian-West-Roman world as well as the Carolingian empire as its successor. But although Charlemagne himself bore the title of *pater Europae* and the Christianized feudal region frequently referred to itself as “Europe”, there was no common “Europeanness”, no concept of a “European house” as the expression of a common European fate throughout the Middle Ages.

The collapse of the crusade-scheme, fading Papal influence, and the particularisation of the European political landscape as well as growing differences with the Turks seemed to have nourished the non-material perception of Europe towards the end of the Middle Ages as a common house for its inhabitants. Under the impression of the loss of Byzantium, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini – later to become pope – presented the first clear-cut sketch of a European house on the threshold between Middle Ages and Modernity which included Greece, the Balkans and Byzantium. Its purpose was to serve as a homeland for all those who had to face the Islamic challenge.

Thus, during the Renaissance period Europe was considered by contemporaries to be the sphere, where educated and responsible humanistic leaders and nobles gave their best for their States and territories. The emerging international law must be mentioned as well be-

cause it was a genuine European *ius inter gentes* which was required to adjust the relations between the European states. From this point of view the “European house” was cast into a building composed of the European States and held together by an international law of European dimensions.

Whereas the renewal of a Christian “oikumene” failed, the *ius publicum Europaeum*, under the impact of enlightenment, turned out to be the foundation of a new and long-lasting structure of another “European house”, the “balance of power” in Europe as a neatly balanced system of sovereign European powers orientated towards safeguarding the continent’s peace and stability. It is hardly surprising that it turned out to be the leitmotif for European politics at least until the end of the 19th century. A closer look at today’s debates about the *finalité politique* of the European integration process even proves that it is still considered by some prominent political decision makers throughout Europe to be the ideal framework for the future physiognomy of the European Union³.

Therefore, the breaking-strength of the static equilibrium for a “European house” built on the groundwork of balanced power must be investigated. We know of at least two massive attempts to challenge the balance of power in Europe. The first attempt came from Napoleon Bonaparte when he set out to establish a European hegemony. When the coalition forces finally succeeded to shake off Napoleonic rule all the same they owed it primarily to the United Kingdom. However, the persistent British resistance against Napoleon had its source in the particular global setting of the British Empire. By intervening on the European arena Britain was defending her global imperial interests. The same applied to the reason for the British supporting the “Old European” faction at the congress of Vienna, where the anti-Napoleonic coalition worked hard to re-establish a balance of power in Europe.

Although subsequent to 1815 the European political landscape had changed in comparison to the pre-1789-period, the system of Vienna succeeded with re-establishing the familiar structures of the “European house” built on the principle of balance of power. However, new forces put pressure on its statics. Dawning nationalism must be mentioned here in particular, as it represented a force implicitly opposed to the basic ideas of equilibrium. Especially in those parts of

³ Among them the current Czech president Vaclav Klaus who – in complete neglect of the *raison d’être* of the European integration process and its merits – recently recommended the transformation of the European Union into an “Organisation of European States”. See: «Kölner Stadtanzeiger», Monday, 18 July 2005, p. 7.

Europe where the Vienna rules had not allowed the fulfilment of nationalist aspirations, public resistance against the old order grew. This result mainly refers to Central Europe, an area largely influenced by the Germanic territories. While looking for the borders of a future German nation-state, German nationalists discovered the potentials of a hegemony over Central Europe and thus developed referring concepts, at first (in the 1840ies) designed to create a Central European economic zone, then, towards the end of the century, as a zone of political and / or cultural and / or economic hegemony as well. Compared to the Napoleonic attempt to gain control over Europe, the effects of the German policy towards “Mitteleuropa” lasted much longer and had far more dramatic consequences. Both before the First World War as well as during the interwar years and the years of National-Socialist rule the supporters of the German policy towards Central Europe considered the conquest of this sphere of influence to be the starting point for an immense extension of power – at first in the European arena and then, especially under the National-Socialists, globally.

This is not the place to discuss this rather specific model of a “Central European house” of German coinage in detail. It should remind us, however, as well as the Napoleonic example, that a European house built on the presupposition of balanced power always depends on the preparedness of the parties involved to accept the principles of equilibrium. As soon as one party decides to opt out and to pursue national interests without consideration to the other members of the “European household”, the European equilibrium is bound to lose its balance.

As a consequence of the devastating effects of the First World War, Count Coudenhove-Kalergi presented his Pan-European concept. His model of a “Pan-European house”, however, did not receive the public and political support which would have been needed to transform the concept into political reality. Coudenhove’s “European house” finally failed due to the priority national interests enjoyed not only in Germany but European-wide throughout the interwar-years, notwithstanding that National-Socialist aggression against Europe led the continent into the catastrophe of the Second World War⁴. It may be considered one of the ironies of history that the most bankable sketches of “European houses” had been drawn under the immediate impact of National-Socialist attempts to establish a new European or-

⁴ With regard to Coudenhove-Kalergi and the Pan-European Movement of the 1920ies and 1930ies see ANITA ZIEGERHOFER-PRETTENTHALER, *Botschafter Europas. Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi und die Paneuropa-Bewegung in den zwanziger und dreißiger Jahren*, Wien-Köln Weimar, Böhlau, 2004.

der based on the principles of dictatorship. In the face of totalitarian threat the remaining members of the European “oikos” not only recalled their common cultural heritage but also the coherence of their respective political and social principles as values that sprang from a common European source.

Although the concepts developed between 1939 and 1945 stood out for their collective European approach and extended over large parts of Central Europe including the Balkans, the emerging bipolar global system reduced the geographical starting point of the post-war European integration-process to those Countries west of the Iron Curtain. Here, after a promising start, the first attempt to initiate a process in which formerly independent States would delegate certain competences to supranational authorities – the Council of Europe – did not meet the high-flying expectations of the European federalists⁵. The burning questions of the day – the containment of the Soviet Union and the integration of newly created West Germany into the international community on a suitable and, for its neighbours, controllable way – remained unanswered. The necessity to find a mutually acceptable answer to these questions further increased the pressure on the remaining western European Countries to start building the common house. As all further-reaching attempts to establish a Union of European States on federalist lines turned out to be unacceptable for most of the Countries involved, a drastic reduction of the agenda enabled the breakthrough. The first step towards integration was reduced to the amalgamation of a certain, though important economic segment, the European Coal-and Steel-Community. Although at first sight only an instrument for coordinating the coal-and steel-sector of the Countries involved, it was designed to be extendable from the start, firstly because only a partial economic cooperation made no sense from the economist’s point of view, secondly because the community was open for other members from the very beginning, and thirdly because its supranational institutions required far-reaching political reforms within the community’s Member-States.

When the construction work for the European house started, the contractors and builder’s labourers thus could rely on a rather simple construction drawing, at least from today’s point of view. From the point of view of the early 1950ies, the ECSC-scheme was the ultimate of what could be implemented only a few years after the war. There

⁵ JÜRGEN ELVERT, *A fool’s game or a comedy of errors? EU-enlargements in comparative perspective*, in WOLFRAM KAISER, JÜRGEN ELVERT (eds.), *European Union Enlargement. A comparative History*, Abingdon-New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 190.

was no room for high-flying ideas based on the concept of a common European identity but there was in fact a bundle of political problems to be solved as a matter of priority. ECSC marks the beginning of a remarkable success-story, at least at first sight! It must be asked, however, why sceptical voices have been getting louder recently, even among those who are not principally sceptical towards any form of European supranational integration but towards the durability of the integrated Europe, the breaking-strength of the “European house”, to stick to our metaphor.

To me, the lacking agreement on the EU’s *finalité politique* appears to be the most serious blunder made during the construction-work, a mistake made under the impression of the “EU-phoria” of the early 1990ies about the end of the Cold War. The European institutions signalled EU’s preparedness to integrate the former Warsaw-Pact-States within a significantly short time in spite of acknowledging four or more decades of totally different development and socialisation in the Countries who had belonged to the Eastern bloc since the late 1940ies and thus had a record of tremendously unbalanced economic and infrastructural data, a significantly lower level of wages and, generally spoken, urgent need for far-reaching reforms on nearly all relevant societal levels. The ongoing debates about the European constitutional treaty may suffice here to underline that the European Union of today has reached a point, from where it is no longer possible to carry on regardless patching together apparently non-fitting parts if we want to succeed with building a truly solid European house on the groundwork of the original concept of liberty, equality and solidarity with a breaking-strength fit for future challenges.

We must hope that in spite of all current problems related to the European building site the structure of the “European house” has not been overstretched so far in spite of all referring statements and that the integration dynamics are still dynamical enough to integrate the newly arrived members of the European “oikos”. However, with regard to further enlargements I would strongly advocate for a *moratorium*. This *moratorium* should be used first to decide in principle whether or not the integration-process should continue. If the decision turns out in favour of the integration-process a mutually acceptable construction-plan for a “European house” must be drawn with frame-conditions compulsory for all building-labourers. No doubts: the European Union is bearing responsibility as a stability-force for the whole continent and even globally. The EU is also duty-bound towards the Candidate-States and those States which have expressed interest in joining the Union. Therefore it is only fair to inform the candidates and applicants clearly about the intended *finalité politique* of the integration process. So far, there is no such thing as a clear-cut definition of the final lay-out of the house; instead its design is left

open for interpretation. There have already been many examples of illusory interpretations. From this point of view it is also a matter of responsibility towards both the European Union and the applicants to identify an elaborate integration-scenario, not well hidden behind a long catalogue of accession-criteria and certain flowery and non-committal statements in documents like the draft constitution.

There is already a blueprint for a “European house” – the design of a “Europe of the concentric circles” – which has only to be adapted to actual requirements. The first circle should embrace a real federation of those EU Member-States which are prepared to join, whereas the second circle would be the place for those EU-Member-States, which are not or not yet prepared to enter the federation. The third circle may be designed as a Union of European States, associated in a free trade area, while the fourth circle may embrace the common European house in total, including all CSCE-States and thus Russia, too, and may also have a transatlantic component.

So how many rooms are there in the “European house”? Firstly, the answer depends on the perception of the design of the house. Historically, there are at least two different approaches to the image – a geographical one, which takes the whole continent into consideration, and an intellectual one, admitting the existence of certain European segments with special characteristics for historical and / or cultural reasons. Whereas it is easy to draw the geographical boundaries of Europe, it is significantly more difficult to identify the intellectual spheres. When up to the fall of the Iron Curtain the division of the world made it relatively easy, at least for the Western Europeans, to define the belonging to the Western European “oikos” with or without EC-membership, things have become more complicated since, as the Western model has simply been extended towards the East. Whereas the formation of the Western European “oikos” has been the result of a long and often painful integration process, the new Member-States as well as the candidates or self-declared candidates consider membership a matter of course, as a kind of compensation for a decade-long enforced separation from the “European house”. We cannot blame them for it, as the European politicians in charge had encouraged them to do so. The attempt to establish a European constitution, may it be implemented or not, can be taken as a belated admission that this might have been a premature move and that the European Union of today is facing the danger of being overstretched. If we want to have a European house one day, habitable for all, we must bid farewell to the idea that it will be a single detached house, inhabited by one European family. Instead I would recommend the Russian perception of house as a block of flats, leaving it to the inhabitants in which flat they want to live. However, we need somebody to push ahead with the construction-work!