

COMMENT

Macron's Vision for Europe Sets a Very High Bar

Anthony Salamone | 28 September 2017



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French president Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech on Europe this week was as comprehensive as it was ambitious. Over an hour and a half long, it set out a strong pro-EU and pro-integration agenda under the banner of his new 'European Initiative'. While Macron's support for the European project was already well understood, it is worth underlining that these proposals would nonetheless represent a major leap forward and substantially change the character of the EU. They are also by and large challenging to implement – some have been tried and failed (for now), some face pre-existing opposition from member states and others are difficult to predict.

At times, such was the volume of measures outlined and the effort to establish a strategic vision that the intervention resembled a State of the Union speech. He called for an end to blaming 'Brussels' for difficulties that arise (saying '*Bruxelles, c'est nous, toujours...*'). It would normally be more common for representatives of the EU institutions to make such a call, not national leaders. Moreover, Macron's plan is a self-described attempt to 'reclaim' Europe as an idea and to resume 'defending Europe' once again. In fact, the speech's positive outlook brought minimal criticism of the EU itself, attributing most responsibility for present deficiencies to the member states.

The overarching objective which Macron set was the building of a Europe that is sovereign, united and democratic – words themselves which imply an integrationist, quasi-federal direction and significant advances in EU competences. This plan of action would mark a step change for France, which has traditionally espoused a less federalist outlook than Germany, for instance. In practical terms, Macron presented a wide range of ideas (too many to mention here), ranging from creating a European civil protection force, unified defence policy and reinvigorated Financial Transaction Tax to CAP reform, 'European universities' awarding 'European degrees' and a real single energy market. More broadly, he spoke to constructing a new social model for

this century, designed at European level, and actively shaping the digital and technological transformation of the economy.

External impetus for this course of action was a prominent theme in Macron's speech. Global challenges and the realities of modern geopolitics necessitate greater common European action, he said – not a novel concept, but one deployed in various contexts to justify his bold programme. Particularly on defence, he argued for establishing the EU as an independent and effective military power, capable of working alongside the US instead of being reliant on it. When it came to the CAP, which he pledged to make less bureaucratic, more flexible and differentiated (with more room for manoeuvre for member states), he reiterated the goal of food security and the aspiration of Europe to ensure its independence for food supplies. On the economy, he called for a favourable environment to spark European digital champions to rival US and Chinese tech giants and lead the way in innovation. These commitments point to an EU which is more autonomous in the world.

Rebuilding Europe through enhanced democracy

Beyond the headline policy proposals, the most revealing elements of the speech were its democratic and institutional components. Here, Macron juxtaposed his proposed leaps in integration with the assertion that ever more Europe for its own sake and without public support is not the right approach. This more purposeful and inclusive type of strategy is essential for the long-term sustainability of the Union. He argued that leaders have been reluctant to engage with their publics on the details of European matters, and that current apathy and discontent towards the EU were largely self-inflicted.

Macron made a push for moving beyond giving voters 'binary choices' (referendums) to more comprehensive debates and decisions. His signature proposal in this respect is the promise of democratic assemblies (*conventions démocratiques*) to facilitate those big public debates and organically identify key priorities. Realising that ambition would clearly face challenges, among them questions of whether national leaders are willing to take that leap and whether (enough) citizens are truly eager to engage on the details of (European) policy. Rebuilding Europe by and with the people, as he suggested, is not as simple as organising a town hall meetings marathon.

The speech adopted several existing grand ideas for further integration, and took some of them a step further. His Eurozone proposals – common budget, finance minister, parliamentary oversight – have been suggested elsewhere, though his commitment to enacting labour market reforms in France is purposefully designed to convince Germany to support the move to fiscal union (although the German election result has put that prospect in substantial doubt). The resurrection of the concept of limiting the Commission to 15 members was made all the more interesting by his offer that the founding member states should give up their commissioners to demonstrate their commitment to the new approach. However, even this gambit may not persuade countries like Ireland (where the de facto guarantee to keep one commissioner per country helped win the second Lisbon referendum) to endorse the change. Converting the departing UK's MEPs to a transnational European list could be only the first step in a new electoral system, since his hope was that at the election after next (2024) half of the European Parliament would come from the transnational list.

Macron resolved to create a 'rebuilding Europe' high-level group, open to all interested member states and the EU institutions, to identify steps to put this overall vision into effect. He also declared an openness to treaty change, if required to implement the plans. His strategy therefore consists of a dual track – a politician/elite process (the group) and the (more) public process (the assemblies). The speech equally called for a deepening of the Franco-German partnership, with

a new cooperation treaty. Indeed, the recent German election will have a clear impact on the success of Macron's many proposals (that is, they will likely be more difficult to achieve). Macron accepted and embraced a multi-speed Europe, but called for the willing to be able to integrate further without impediment.

Re-establishing a strategic direction for the Union

Stepping back then, Macron's ambition is in effect to disrupt the technocratic impulse of the European Union – to focus less on functional instruments for their own sake and to concentrate instead on big ideas. The call to action is for European politics to transcend individual policy morasses and to look at the wider picture. Macron has evidently set out a vision – a broad proposed outline for the way forward. The EU needs that kind of leadership (and not just from France, or Germany). Nevertheless, this single speech contained enough initiatives to occupy several Commission terms of office. Even with the level of ambition behind the 1992 single market programme, it would prove an extraordinary challenge to implement them all (though perhaps that was already understood by the president, with the expectation that only some will succeed).

Interestingly, Macron seemed to feel the need to justify France proposing EU reform. This concern about legitimation stems from the country's economic/political problems, in particular its recurring budget deficit. Now, Macron's clear assertion is that the time has come again for France to help lead the way for the EU. European initiatives from France and the Franco-German partnership certainly have the capacity to result in beneficial outcomes for the whole EU. Nevertheless, it is no longer optimal for these drivers alone to take forward an EU of 28/27 – the voices of others must matter as well. On Brexit – which, in barely featuring in this analysis, demonstrates the true wider priorities of the EU – Macron resolved that the EU will move forward and that the UK could well desire to rejoin the reimagined EU which he envisions.

The Sorbonne speech constitutes a major intervention on the future of Europe, with a strong degree of ambition. Macron's vision sets a very high bar for the EU's evolution – one which would require a transformation of European and national politics. It also ascribes a clear timetable for action (by 2024, to start). The challenges for the proposals are easy to enumerate, not least the views of other national governments (including in Germany), the immediate and pressing nature of Europe's ongoing challenges or even public opinion within France towards Macron and his policies.

Moreover, another recurring theme for the president was the importance of convergence over competition – this emphasis may worry those already concerned about a possible increase in protectionism in the EU after the UK's departure. In the face of the economic crisis and subsequent challenges, the EU has spent much of the last decade focused on damage control. Despite the uncertainty over whether the Franco-German partnership will be able to deliver, considering Merkel's now-weakened position, Macron's speech still serves as an important contribution in beginning to build a sense of direction for a Union in need of strategic anchor.