

'An EC Commissioner from the GDR?' from Der Spiegel (30 October 1989)

Caption: On 30 October 1989, the West German news magazine Der Spiegel speculates on the ways in which the countries of Eastern Europe, including the German Democratic Republic (GDR), might be associated with the European Communities.

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. Augstein, Rudolf ; Herausgeber Böhme, Erich; Frank, Werner. 30.10.1989, Nr. 44; 43. Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "EG-Kommissar aus der DDR?", p. 184-186.

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An EC Commissioner from the GDR?

The changes that have taken place in Central and Eastern Europe are putting pressure on the EC. Is a political union of the Twelve compatible with a ‘common European home’?

And how could the ex-Communist states of the Eastern bloc, possibly including the GDR, be linked with the EC without the relative importance of the Germans becoming too great?

At 6.50 p.m. on 22 October 1989, the European Community entered a new era, notionally at least. In the television programme ‘Grand Jury’, the EC President, Jacques Delors, was asked by French journalist Philippe Lemaître whether he could imagine that there would one day be a Commissioner from East Germany in the executive body at the EC headquarters in Brussels.

There was no hesitation in the answer — as if East Germany were a country with a political and economic system perfectly matched to those of the EC states: ‘Certainly. Why not?’

Delors also seemed to see no problem in the ‘historic events in Central and Eastern Europe’. For him, there was only one response to these events, and that was to speed up the work on the economic and monetary union of the Twelve.

Three days later, Delors revealed to the Parisian business paper *Les Echos* that his carefree attitude was just an act when he showed obvious concern that the Federal Republic, ‘attracted by the prospects of reunification and by the political role that it could play in a kind of greater Central Europe, was losing interest in the Community.’

So there it was: the President of the EC Commission is worried — and he is certainly not alone — that the ‘German question’ could severely unsettle the European Community and cause long-term destabilisation.

Delors is anything but a German-hater. However, his fears do demonstrate how much the status quo that has existed in Central Europe since 1945 in fact suited not only the victorious powers after the Second World War but also the EC — and that the EC might be more seriously affected by any changes in this status quo than the individual states which constitute it.

This is happening, of all times, just when the integration process of the Twelve is threatening to grind to a halt in the argument about the harmonisation of taxes envisaged by the end of 1992 and about a common monetary and social policy. The EC is being drawn into a political process for which it is not prepared and over which it has no influence. As Delors recently stated in Bruges, ‘History does not wait.’ And it has ‘many risks’ in store for the EC.

An increasingly pressing question in Brussels and in the capital cities of the EC states is the fundamental one of ‘what kind of Europe do we actually want?’

Do we want a dedicated economic and monetary bloc with a common social and environmental policy tomorrow and a common foreign and security policy the day after tomorrow? Or do we want a purely economic community of common interest that would be open for accession even to neutral countries such as Austria and Switzerland and, before long, also to the ex-Communist countries of Eastern Europe, Hungary, Poland and, possibly, the GDR?

Is there not a fundamental contradiction between the idea of a ‘common European home’, in which Russians, Poles, Spaniards and Norwegians can live peacefully side by side, and the concept of a political European Union, in which the 12 Member States that have joined hitherto pursue a common policy?

For the German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, this is the ‘moment when the course of history will be set’. Moved by the momentum of reform in Budapest and Warsaw, he even seemed prepared for a while to reduce the EC to a purely economic community: In late September, he said that he did not want a

common security policy as the political aim of the Union because he wanted to ‘maintain it as a Community that is open to neutral states’.

And yet it was Genscher who, in 1983, had been joined by his then colleague from Italy, Emilio Colombo, to force through the inclusion of political and economic aspects of security policy in the revised European Treaties, against opposition from the British, the Greeks and the Danes.

Was this German now prepared, in view of the movement towards democratisation in Eastern Europe, to be left with an EC on the back burner? Delors was alarmed.

However, Genscher I was very soon corrected by Genscher II. Bonn’s Foreign Minister spoke expressly in favour of a ‘foreign and security policy dimension’ to the European Union.

In Delors’ view, the Germans even had to have a vital interest in European unity, because it is only a relatively stable EC that can support the countries of the Eastern bloc in their process of economic modernisation. It is his conviction that solutions for rapprochement between the two German states are only possible within the political structures of a European Community.

Delors, in agreement with Genscher here, thinks that the structures in a European federal state could bring together ‘what for many people seems incompatible: the development of a unified Europe and loyalty to the nation, the homeland.’ Within the framework of a federally organised Community, modelled on the system in the Federal Republic of Germany, it is even possible for the EC President to imagine the two Germanies as ‘part of the European Community’.

The only way that the economic giant, the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR — perhaps unified, or perhaps only linked in a loose association — could be tolerable for the other Member States would be if they were anchored in the common decision-making processes within economic and monetary union.

That may well be correct from a political standpoint, but what about from an economic one? The Federal Republic of Germany is already the largest importer and exporter in the Community today, the largest car manufacturer and biggest generator of electrical power, the country with the highest trade surpluses and the greatest number of people in work.

Further opening up of the Community towards the East would also move Germany into the geographical centre of this new economic area. It would then be necessary, according to one European politician from France, ‘for the EC to rein in the colossus’.

But would the Germans actually allow themselves to be bound in this way if they really have ‘Bismarckian dreams’, as the head of Delors’ Private Office, Pascal Lamy, fears?

Early October provided a clear example of the strength of the Germans: when the German Federal Bank raised its base rate by 1 %, eight European countries were compelled to follow suit. The comment from the Brussels Finance Commissioner, Henning Christophersen, was that ‘the sovereignty of the others lasted 35 minutes’.

Delors knows that it represents a sacrifice for Bonn to bring the German Federal Bank into a European concept of monetary union with one European Central Bank. However, he hopes that the Germans could have an interest that is not only purely economic but also a ‘national interest’ in the internal market and in monetary union, and this would be to get the Community into shape for a solution to the German question.

At present, as far as Delors is concerned, it is ‘not a matter for discussion’ as to whether the EC should be restricted to the present Twelve or perhaps comprise 16 Member States (with Austria, Norway, Switzerland and Hungary). He does not intend to deal with applications for accession until the European internal market has been completed.

This does not prevent high-ranking Eurocrats from discussing hypotheses. One theory that is particularly well received in the Commission is that of ‘concentric circles’, an idea for the European Community in the new millennium that was the brainchild of two people working in the Chancellor’s Office in Bonn, Michael Mertes and Norbert Prill.

They produced the concept of a politically federal state of Europe comprising the old founder states of the EEC — Benelux, France, Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany. This political nucleus would be surrounded by the second-tier Europe of the Twelve, possibly extended to include Austria and Norway. In its turn, this economic and monetary union is surrounded by an association of further European states, particularly EFTA countries, which are added to the group to form a kind of European free-trade area.

The authors expect that ‘all European states will be invited to move into what is, for them, the next stage of integration.’

Concentrating political union in the nuclear Europe of the Six is a tempting idea for the Brussels Eurocrats, for nobody can really imagine how a constantly growing European Community could still be capable of making decisions or taking action at all, let alone be able to operate a common foreign and security policy.

The British, who, under Maggie Thatcher, are so strongly against the idea of relinquishing sovereign rights to the Community, would then be able to restrict themselves to the economic and monetary union. It is also possible that, given their neutrality, the Irish would be relieved to abandon the objective of political union.

Among the Greeks and the Portuguese, who are above all interested in the substantial structural aid from the EC, there is little manifest enthusiasm for political union anyway. The Danes, too, who are committed to showing foreign policy solidarity with their neighbours in Scandinavia, would find this purely economic alliance just about sufficient.

It would only be the Spanish who would probably be keen to join this nuclear Europe, because of their political importance and their clear commitment to the Western Alliance, and, of course, they would be welcome.

The leading statesmen of Europe have not yet progressed that far in their thinking. An idea expressed recently by the French President, François Mitterrand, in his well-known ambiguous way, to the Spanish Prime Minister, Felipe González, was that ‘it is no longer possible to develop the Community without being mindful of the relationship between it and the rest of Europe.’ No one needed to contradict him there.

However, like his countryman Delors, Mitterrand can obviously see the danger that interest in the movement for reform in the Eastern bloc could provide a distraction from progress in European integration. The European Parliament in Strasbourg received a warning from the Frenchman, who is the current President of the European Council. The ‘destruction of the structures in the East’, he said, must not be ‘automatically accompanied by the disintegration of Community structures.’

Since the ‘destruction of the structures in the East’ is quite obviously not being ‘automatically accompanied by disintegration of Community structures’, this was a warning without foundation, but it sounded as if the Frenchman would like to have a barrier erected at the Elbe.

Presumably to gain time, the Brussels Commission and the French Presidency are proceeding on the basis of a dual strategy: They are speeding up the implementation of economic and monetary union and, at the same time, with proposals for a European environment agency and the Eureka research programme, offering the non-members ‘an open system for cooperation below the entry threshold’, as called for by Genscher.

Mitterrand’s idea of a ‘Bank for Europe’ to finance large-scale projects, with the Governing Board including representatives from Poland and Hungary, ‘and — why not?’ — even the Soviet Union, also remained agreeably vague.

Nevertheless, the concept of a ‘European economic zone’ is emerging as the first ‘concentric circle’ around the Europe of the Twelve. Negotiations will begin in December between the Foreign Ministers of the EC and the EFTA free-trade area on closer cooperation between the two economic alliances.

That would mean that the interests of 12 EC Member States and six EFTA countries would have to be harmonised — a labour of Sisyphus. Delors’ East German EC Commissioner is certainly not something that is going to be seen in this millennium.