

'Ratifying Maastricht' from El País (18 May 1992)


Caption: On 18 May 1992, the Spanish daily newspaper El País summarises the European situation of the Twelve after the signature of the Treaty on European Union on 7 February 1992 in Maastricht.

Source: El País. 18.05.1992. Madrid. "Ratificar Maastricht".

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Ratifying Maastricht

The process of European unity has recently suffered so many changes of gear and so many external upheavals that it is a miracle that it is continuing at its slow pace virtually unperturbed. The fact is that, far from ensuring a new and lasting peace, world events over the last three years have complicated matters, particularly the calm atmosphere that the EC needs if it is to make progress. It is, therefore, difficult to believe that the Treaty of Maastricht was signed in early 1992 in this changed atmosphere, the three most dangerous aspects of which are the collapse of the USSR, the huge economic difficulties in Eastern Europe and the blood-letting of nationalist wars in the former Yugoslavia. It was extraordinary because, whether they wanted to or not, its signatories cast the die in terms of European integration: the establishment of *elements* of political union and the fixing of the stages necessary to establish economic and monetary union, the primary object of this editorial. This will be another step forward, though by no means the final one (the Treaty will have to be revised by 1997 or thereabouts, and additional agreements will probably have to be negotiated at that time), but, this time, there will be no going back.

At the beginning of last week, Community Member States began the process of ratifying Maastricht: the Danish Parliament gave it the green light (although a referendum will be needed to complete it), and the French Parliament did something similar by initiating the necessary constitutional reform. There is no doubt that the Treaty will win out and that the Twelve will have officially approved it before autumn is over.

And then what? Which way will the EC go?

It has traditionally been accepted that the EC has an inner circle of leading countries (Germany, France and Italy, and further away, Spain) and a recalcitrant one — the United Kingdom — that pulled all the strings. The former pushed for integration, while the latter was wary of the process and intentions of unification and of the way the Commission worked in Brussels.

After the Maastricht Treaty had been signed, the tables turned. Italy has such serious internal problems that it is not in a position to lead anything; France is facing up to the fact that discussion of the Treaty of Maastricht has opened up serious breaches in its main political groupings, while Germany, weakened by its own process of unification which is resulting in huge economic and employment problems, seems to have lost its way for the time being. John Major, meanwhile, secure after his electoral triumph, is giving lessons in moderate Europeanism, preferring to see the Community enlarged rather than its structures deepened, probably to dilute them in terms of their coordination and timetable. The British have never hidden their wariness of joining a Community that they feel is a straitjacket on their own freedoms.

As matters stand at present, Spain is probably the most pro-European country in the EC because it is the one that needs Europe most to help it to develop, prosper and maintain the social balance achieved under democracy. And, while its difficulties actually ensue from the demands of economic adjustment rather than the political complexities of union, the huge effort that the Spanish Government is calling for so that the four convergence criteria can be achieved by 1997 is clearly understandable. It is an effort that has to make up for the avarice of the Community, which has just halved the cohesion funds so arduously won by Felipe González at Maastricht.

As if the risk was not clear enough, the recent signature in Portugal of the agreement establishing the European Economic Area, formed by the Twelve and the six EFTA countries, presages in the very short-term (two or three years?) an EC enlarged to 17 members, and shortly afterwards to 20 or even 25. Community enlargement in these circumstances, without previously strengthening its institutions and ensuring its economic structure, may well be detrimental to the weakest members. It is logical for Spain to oppose any enlargement that might entail less cohesion, i.e. greater structural divergences between the North (which includes the major EFTA countries) and the Mediterranean countries. Come what may, however, this will reinforce its desire to form part of the leading group in a new Europe in which integration could ultimately be achieved at two speeds.

Austria, Sweden, Finland, Turkey, Malta and Cyprus have formally applied for accession to the EC, and Switzerland and Norway are on the point of doing so. Germany, seeing what has befallen it from the East, fostered the establishment of a buffer zone through association agreements reached with Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. If the agreement on monetary union is to come into force in 1997, half plus one of the members will have to comply with the four criteria set by Maastricht (control of inflation, the public deficit, debt and interest rates), and if the remainder have to stay outside, it is clear that, with four or five new members which are wealthier than most Community states, it will not be possible to delay the process. They will, in effect, have joined the EC with convergence already achieved. So where will that leave Spain?

Being outside the economic and monetary union established by Maastricht means missing the boat of the development, cohesion and social integration that is so dear to us. Does Spain wish to risk integrating into the as yet ill-defined political aspects of the EC, while remaining outside its undoubted economic benefits? Are we indifferent to being excluded from the inner circle of the EC, the seven or eight countries that will lead the other 14 or 15, irrespective of the number of votes each one has in the councils? The answer to both questions is clearly no.

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