

Address given by François Mitterrand on the upheavals in Eastern Europe (Strasbourg, 25 October 1989)

Caption: On 25 October 1989, François Mitterrand, President of the French Republic, delivers an address to the European Parliament in which he gives his first impressions on the upheavals taking place in Eastern Europe.

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[...]

Ladies and gentlemen, now that that general survey is out of the way, I am sure you will all agree that the most important event for Europe, perhaps for the world, since the Second World War is what is happening in Eastern Europe. We have lived for almost half a century under an order which is crumbling before our very eyes. That was the Europe of Yalta, to use the time-honoured but historically inexact phrase. That was Europe chopped into two or three: the Europe of blocs and systems. We are not finished with it yet. History is not a smoothly flowing river. To pass from one equilibrium to another, as is happening today, involves abrupt transitions, retrogressions, disturbances and crises. Are we ready for this? Are we not inclined to see a golden horizon opening up before us without realizing that man's affairs on earth are not settled in this fashion?

We were familiar with the old order. We lived with it. It had, in sporting parlance, found its stride, or in legal parlance, its rules. It had settled into habits. The new equilibrium, a basically desirable one, will require from us imagination, determination, effort and perseverance in a measure such as few generations before us have been called upon to provide. The equilibrium will be a manifold one. There will be no single answer to the questions posed. In short, ladies and gentlemen, the matter will be more complex. But what energy, what grounds for optimism! As in the great days of 1789, the clamour of the people is being heard. It is the determination of the people which is dictating the course of events, bringing down walls and opening frontiers. The people are marking out the path along which the century will move to its close, the path on which the future will embark. This is today's news. Once again the people are on the move, and when they move, the effect is decisive.

(Applause)

In the name of what? Simply in the name of freedom. Freedom to live, to think, to act, to serve or to love. Two countries, Poland and Hungary, are clearly the vanguard of this movement. But let us note that this is possible only because the Soviet Union, or at least its leadership, has recognized and accepted a trend which is pitching the Soviet Union itself into new difficulties and a far cry from the obvious step open to it under the old order - is now leading it with hesitant steps towards a future of uncertain promise. Poland, Hungary, the Soviet Union and, in the historic leading role, Mr Gorbachev, need to be helped.

(Applause)

I know that strategists almost everywhere are calculating his chances of success and are already deciding that it might be more astute to deal with his successor. We know what we have today. We do not know what we will have tomorrow. Nor do the Soviets. Let us help when we can and how we can. But let us help, let us make a contribution, without of course pre-empting the task of the authorities of that country or taking on responsibilities which are not ours. We should help to ensure that every chance exists, however slight. I believe in the will of human beings. I believe that they control their destiny, and I see that a great deal of courage is being displayed over there, even if a gulf yawns at every step. How can we help these countless and diverse peoples to adapt to the change in discipline? How can we ensure that this breath of freedom does not turn into the whirlwind which lays waste everything in its path and may well destroy what ought to be preserved?

The situation varies from one country to another. Look at the throes of East Germany. The situation is not the same. Eastern Europe, East Germany, have greater purchasing power than some Community countries. It is obviously not poverty which is driving them to revolt. It is something we have already named: the hope of freedom.

(Applause)

And that is a force which nothing can withstand, be it the harshest and most closed of systems, an already

ancient history, a strong ideological tradition or a coherent philosophical system. So everything is disappearing because something else is coming along, and that something is what we ourselves have the good fortune to possess. That is why we are here. That is why you are here, the representatives of twelve democratic countries. If I am repeating myself, forgive me, these are not empty phrases. I am talking about freedom.

We see this movement in East Germany, and I don't want to create a diplomatic incident, but how can we for one single moment imagine that the others - which you will note have not been named - will hold out, and the problem will arise only in Warsaw and Budapest - and they are the ones at the forefront (I am referring to our Hungarian and Polish fellow-Europeans).

Chancellor Kohl, with whom I had dinner last night in Paris, told me that right at the front during the events marking the proclamation of the new republic, or rather simply the republic, was a banner bearing the words 'Hungary has rejoined Europe'. Let us make sure that it does rejoin Europe, as is right and proper. It's catching. From one country to another, from one capital to another, throughout that part of Europe the movement will, we may be sure, follow the same path, encounter the same contradictions and no doubt suffer the same setbacks. Nothing is laid down in advance for the next few months or years. Yet the long-term outcome has already been determined. Let us ensure that this page of history is rapidly written - and it is within our powers to do something about this. And here I come to aid for Poland. It is the only specific case I shall address. What is needed? Immediate aid. France, in whose name I do not wish to speak for the moment, has decided within the last 48 hours, more particularly at this morning's Cabinet meeting, to step up the pace and amount of sums granted as immediate aid. And Europe? Europe is doing the same as France. Some countries are doing more and others less. There is no point in competing against each other. We ought, as several of you have suggested, to pool the immediate aid we now have available.

I suggest - and here I am picking up a suggestion I heard elsewhere - that there be a major Euro-Polish solidarity loan, an emergency plan in every country and every city to adopt a region or city in Poland to ensure dispatch and distribution and follow the process from A to Z. Long-term requirements, financial and technical requirements must be assessed. The local instruments are weak, if not non-existent, which explains what some decry as delays. Who should we speak to? To a Government, no doubt, but on what bases? Europe could conduct this overall analysis and organize a co-ordinated mission by the Twelve.

One of the major East European leaders said to me in a recent conversation: 'What we suffer from most is a shortage of managerial skills, of men and women who know how to get things done; all too often we do not know or have forgotten.' Well, we have to train these people. It is the job of the Europe of the Community to do so! By the thousands, or maybe by the tens of thousands, managers, engineers, administrators, skilled workers, youth exchanges ... Where delays have occurred, let us make up for them quickly and decide one and for all that it will be the Community as a whole which will discharge this task, in unison and without being slowed down by competition or the massaging of national egos.

(Applause)

I believe that a proper, structured European foundation should be set up without delay to help in the training of managers, and I will be putting this suggestion to the Strasbourg European Council.

Then come large-scale priority projects in fields such as agriculture, transport, telephones and finance. What financing? For my country I have been thinking of a Franco-Polish investment promotion centre, with an initial budget of 300 million francs a year, with joint banks operating along similar lines. What can Europe do? So much more! Why not set up a bank for Europe which, like the European Investment Bank, would finance major projects and have on its board of directors the twelve European countries. Not to mention the others, such as Poland and Hungary, and why not the Soviet Union and yet others?

It was done for technology and for the audio-visual field under Eureka, so what is holding us back? Is the area of finance sacrosanct, or is not being an expert or a president or chairman of the board of something a disqualification? The creation of a Bank for Europe is a highly political decision.

(Applause)

But why not go further? Why not integrate the countries under discussion according to their degree of commitment to democracy? Poland is the only one which attends the IMF and GATT. The green light could be given to the Soviet Union, and pending its membership of that majority of nations which deals with world affairs, why not give it observer status at GATT to involve it in our discussions? Let it make known its needs and the needs of those for whom it is responsible, let it get to know ours and let us compare our methods. That is what I want and what I shall be asking for in the weeks to come. There is a need to take these decisions within the next two months at most. After that, ladies and gentlemen, with your help the rest will I hope follow.

The French Presidency has heard your comments, the comments of the Parliament and certain of its spokesmen on the sum to be granted to Poland and Hungary. That same Presidency which I lead is not, I assure you, closed to a solution which, while observing budget rules, would enable more to be financed, more to be done and the call from the European Parliament to be answered.

(Applause)

In other words, I am prepared on behalf of my country to contribute and, on behalf of the others, to encourage them to increase this amount, despite the fact that government leaders are not one hundred per cent in favour of the European Parliament's generous proposals.

I am coming round to my conclusion, for there really has to be one. Who among us has not heard groups of intellectuals, journalists, politicians in debate? Eastern Europe is breaking up, but also opening up. Could this be the prelude to far-reaching transformation, to the collapse and dislocation of Western Europe? And of course, such discussions always revolve around the two Germanics. I say that with no intention of shocking our German friends here, as this is undoubtedly not the first time they have heard it said.

But there is something I do not understand. People reason as if we were in the era of balance-of-power diplomacy where we witnessed, in grave circumstances, the passing of a country - Germany as it happened - yet what other country, having played the role in the history of the world over the last few centuries of one of the peoples of Europe, of one of the European States, has not acted in the same way? The reversals of alliance have been the most obvious proof of trueness to oneself. Are we still at that stage, now that the Community of Europe already has several decades behind it? Does the destruction - and this is an argument I don't understand - does the destruction of the system or structure of the East automatically entail the dislocation of the structures of the West, or should it not produce the opposite effect? By what right could we accuse the German people of wanting to come together again, when strictly speaking what is at issue is an appeal to us all from the East, advocating values which are our own? In short, the conclusion is simple. Ladies and gentlemen, we must draw the conclusion that will consist of strengthening and accelerating the political construction of Europe; it is the only answer to the problem facing us.

(Applause)

But, at the risk of repeating myself, yes, it is the acceleration and strengthening of the Community construction of Europe which will make a major contribution to positive developments in the East. Not only will we equip ourselves with greater resources and move our Community to a higher plane but the Community will exert a greater attraction on the rest of Europe. I ask you: is that not what we have wanted from the very start?

(Applause)

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