

A 'Common European Home': The historical significance of a failed attempt

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

On 18 December 1984, Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, a young and little-known member of the Soviet Politburo, in a speech before the British Parliament, said, "Whatever is dividing us, we live on the same planet and Europe is our common home". A few months later, in March 1985, he was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party, destined to become the latest head of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

From 1985 to 1991, during six years of hope in Europe and the world over, Gorbachev launched the proposal of a "Common European Home" (CEH), opening it to inhabitants from the Atlantic to the Urals and marking one of moments of greater proximity in the controversial relationships between Europe and Russia. In the end, however, the proposal was rejected.

In seeking to explain this failure, scholars have emphasized the responsibility of Bush's America, Kohl's Germany, Mitterrand's France, and the weakness of the Gorbachev's proposal and attitude (see Rey 2004, Newton 2013, Luconi 2020). However, they may underestimate the role played by the European Community (Guasconi 2019).

The purpose of this work is to grasp the historical significance of the failed project by reconstructing the response of the European Commission, chaired by Jacques Delors, to the Soviet Union's proposal.

The paper is divided into three sections corresponding to the main stages of those six years of hope¹.

2. The early Soviet proposal and European skepticism

In January 1985, Jacques Delors was appointed president of the European Commission. At that time, the European Community comprised ten countries plus two (Portugal and Spain joined in 1986); there was an incomplete Common Market, established in Rome in 1957, a European Monetary System, introduced in 1979, and a European Parliament (elected that same year). The Delors Commission's primary objective was to promote a new treaty, the Single Act, to complete the common market by ensuring the free movement of goods, services, capital, and persons (the so-called four freedoms) within the Community by 1992.

On 11 March 1985, Gorbachev was appointed general secretary of the PCUS, succeeding the three old leaders (Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko) who died during a prolonged stagnation of the Soviet economy. Gorbachev immediately realized that the Soviet Union needed radical reform – a few months later called *perestroika* – and that to achieve this radical reform it was necessary to promote a foreign policy of cooperation and détente, so as to shift public resources from armaments to investments. In April, Gorbachev presented an action program that was adopted by the Plenum of the Central Committee, and in October he made his first official visit abroad, choosing, not

¹ On the topic, see also Nuttall (2000), Fix (2011/2012), Moulin (2022).

surprisingly, Mitterrand's France, which was particularly committed to a policy of détente at the international level. During a press conference in Paris, Gorbachev declared that "Europe is our common home". But this was merely an effective metaphor useful in pursuing the avowed aim of promoting a policy of détente. Gorbachev was neither able nor willing to outline the contents of the proposal. What did the Soviet Union want? To enter the common market or the European monetary system? And would the construction of a common European home have involved the dissolution of international alliances?

During the very first years of his government, Gorbachev addressed the leaders of the big Western countries (Mitterrand, Thatcher, Reagan) and ignored Delors's Europe. The proposal raised silence from Delors and skepticism from other Western leaders. Gorbachev himself writes: "The majority of West European countries, following in the wake of the US, publish a great many hysterical articles, but, as always, the French right-wing press is the most zealous. It is simply horrified by the very prospect of a better situation in Europe. Take, for example, the French weekly *L'Express*. On 6 March 1987 it ascribed to us a desire to establish domination over Europe. An article published under the glaring title "Gorbachev and Europe" is patterned after Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf".

In short, at the outset, the Soviet proposal to build a CEH was little more than a vague foreign policy tool greeted with silence and skepticism by the West.

3. The Prague turning point and the updated proposal

From the spring of 1987 to the summer of 1989, there occurred a turning point. On April 7, 1987, Gorbachev delivered a major speech in Prague, on November 1 his influential book *Perestroika. New Thinking for Our Country and the World* appeared, and on July 6, 1989, he delivered another famous speech, this time in Strasbourg before the Council of Europe, on the topic "Europe as a common home".

At the same time, a committee was being appointed within the European Community, chaired by Delors, to present a blueprint for economic and monetary union. As (Western) Europe was about to complete the single market, it was preparing to take the next step: the adoption of a single currency useful for the smooth functioning of the single market. The Committee, appointed in June 1988, submitted its Report in April 1989.

During these two years, both the Soviet proposal and the European response become clearer.

The "common house" becomes an "apartment building in two blocks" inhabited by Europeans. We all are Europeans, Gorbachev argues, because we have known and share the same values transmitted by Christianity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. The New Europe should have pursued a policy of cooperation, rather than integration, oriented to a twofold aim: to ensure security and to promote development. The real obstacle, Gorbachev maintains, is not, as many claim, the existence of two blocs, but the ill-concealed desire, cultivated in the West, to eliminate one.

Gorbachev (1987b: 177, 183) writes:

"We are Europeans. Old Russia was united with Europe by Christianity, and the millennium of its arrival in the land of our ancestors will be marked next year. The history of Russia is an organic part of the great European history. The Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Moldavians, Lithuanians,

Letts, Estonians, Karels and other peoples of our country have all made a sizable contribution to the development of European civilization ... Europe 'from the Atlantic to the Urals' is a cultural-historical entity united by the common heritage of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, of the great philosophical and social teachings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries".

The New Europe should pursue a policy of cooperation rather than of integration oriented to ensure both security and development:

"Our notion of the 'common European home' does not imply at all any intention to shut the doors on anyone. On the contrary, the progress of Europe would enable it to make an even greater contribution to the progress of the rest of the world ... There can be no doubt that the European peoples without exception stand for an atmosphere of goodneighbourly relations and trust, co-existence and co-operation on the continent. This would in a true sense be a triumph of the new mode of political thinking" (Gorbachev 1987a: 7).

"If security is the foundation of a common European home, then all-round co-operation is its bearing frame ... As far as the economic content of the common European home is concerned, we regard as a realistic prospect — though not a close one — the emergence of a vast economic space from the Atlantic to the Urals where Eastern and Western parts would be strongly interlocked" (Gorbachev: 1989).

The real obstacle is the Western wish to destroy the two blocs: "I know that many people in the West perceive that the main difficulty lies in the existence of two social systems. Yet the difficulty lies elsewhere — it lies in the rather widespread belief (or even in the political objective) that what is meant by overcoming the division of Europe is actually overcoming socialism. But this is a course for confrontation, if not something worse. There will be no European unity along these lines" (Gorbachev: 1989).

Delors's response is essentially contained in his January 17, 1989 speech before the European Parliament and revolves around the constraint dilemma between "deepening and widening". In line with the functionalist approach chosen by the Commission, Delors maintained that the priority should have been deepening, that is, completing the process of economic integration to arrive at a Political Union of the Community, while enlargement to the East should have taken the form and content of a policy of cooperation and good neighborliness among nation-states and supranational institutions. The metaphor of the common house is replaced by that of the village, that is, a group of houses, with that of the European community at the center: "internal development takes priority over enlargement. Nothing must distract us from our duty to make a success of the Single Act ... But the Community is much more than a large market. It is a frontier-free economic and social area on the way to becoming a political union entailing closer cooperation on foreign policy and security". Moreover, "if I were asked to depict that village today, I would see in it a house called the 'European Community'. We are its sole architects; we are the keepers of its keys; but we are prepared to open its doors to talk with our neighbours".

A few months later, in May 1989, the new U.S. president, George Bush, helped tarnish the image of a big or unique European home: "there cannot be a common European home until all within it are free to move from room to room".

In short, between the spring of 1987 and the summer of 1989, a direct dialogue began between Gorbachev's USSR and Delors's Community, and the alternative between a condominium Europe and a village Europe emerged.

4. The abandoned house and the foundation of the “European village”

After the fall of the Berlin Wall (on November 9, 1989), Gorbachev sought to accelerate *perestroika* with a rapid transition to a market economy, enabling the unification of Germany, ensuring security in Europe, and above all saving the Soviet Union by means of a renewed federation path.

Mitterrand and Delors proposed the establishment of a Confederation in a Europe of concentric circles. But with one major difference. On December 31, 1989, in his end-of-year television message, the French president argued that the new Europe should be built in two stages. First and immediately strengthening the Community of Twelve; then, during the 1990s, and on the basis of the Helsinki Accords, through a Confederation associating all the states of the continent in a common and permanent organization of trade, peace, and security.

In a speech, again delivered before the European Parliament on January 17, 1990, Delors specified: “My own view, however, is that a grand confederation will not come into being until the Community achieves political union”. He reiterated his idea that the Community should first transform itself into a true federal political union equipped with a genuine government and then, around it, form a broader European confederation. Mitterrand’s reaction was angry, reopening the old and still unresolved dilemma between deepening and widening: “But it’s stupid! Why can’t he mind his own business! No one in Europe will ever agree! By going too far, he will scupper what can be achieved” (Nuttall 2000: 48).

However, 1990 was a good year: on March 15, the European Community and the Soviet Union signed an agreement on trade and commercial and economic cooperation; on October 3, German unification was achieved, with the Community’s first eastward enlargement; and on November 21, 1990, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe was adopted, which would shortly thereafter transform the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) into the present-day Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

On the other hand, 1991 was a dramatic year, dense with fears and hopes. On December 8, 1991, the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus signed the Belovezh Accords, which sanctioned the death of the Soviet Union. The following day, a European Council summit began in Maastricht, ending on December 10 with the approval of the Treaty that would give birth to the European Union.

In short, the last two years of the Soviet Union’s life saw the closing of Gorbachev’s two-block apartment building and the opening of Delors’s village.

5. Conclusion

Between 1985 and 1991, after decades of separation and opposition, Europe rediscovered itself as a community of peoples united by common values and in search of new institutions capable of ensuring peace and development.

Gorbachev proposed building a common European house. The metaphor was effective but ambiguous and, as we have seen, triggered a prolonged and intense debate. At first it was only a vague foreign policy tool that raised fears and concerns. It could have meant the creation of a Federation of the United States of Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, but neither Gorbachev nor anyone else ever advanced such a hypothesis. Then, in the two-year period from 1987 to 1989, the

proposal took the more concrete form of a Confederation between nation-states and supranational institutions: for Gorbachev it should have included and preserved the states and institutions of the two blocs, while for Delors a true pan-European Confederation could be formed only at the end of the integration process of Western Europe with the formation of a true political Union. Lastly, during the revolutionary two-year period from 1989 to 1991, the European Union was born, the Soviet Union died, and the debate surrounding a common European home came to an end.

Through this debate, the realization has grown that Europe is a true community of peoples united by common cultural values and settled in the vast territory between the Atlantic and the Urals. But it is a community that can neither live in one big house (a Federation) nor in myriad small, scattered houses (a Confederation of many nation-states). Rather, it is a village, that is, a potential Confederation of federations, nation-states, and supranational institutions.

This seems to me to be the historical significance of the debate sparked by Gorbachev's proposal to build a common European house.

Some believe that Gorbachev's proposal was a missed opportunity to bring Russia closer to Europe and did not produce concrete accomplishments. Yes, it is true: compared to the hopes raised, there were no immediate tangible results. With the passage of time, however, it is better understood that there were no political conditions to form a confederation between an as-yet-unborn European Union and an already-agonizing Soviet Union. Some concrete and historic results were achieved, however, and above all, the conscience was strengthened that Europe is indeed a supranational community that stretches from the Atlantic to the Urals, but that requires appropriate institutions in order to thrive.