

A Europe of different speeds. Concepts of regional cooperation

First some remarks regarding Europe of different speeds. This concept is debated since many years. Also Macron in his famous Europe-speech at the end of September referred to this concept just as Angela Merkel, who said, that “we need to have the courage for some countries to go ahead if not everyone wants to participate. A Europe of different speeds is necessary, otherwise we will probably get stuck.” There are of course very critical voices concerning this concept, being afraid that the concept of different speeds will deepen the differences and lead to separation instead of integration. But in the face of the very different situations and the heterogeneity we have in Europe a Europe of different speeds is reality. And perhaps it would be even better to speak of a core Europe and the periphery.

In this context the axis France-Germany plays a major role. It was also stressed by Macron saying that the cooperation between France and Germany should be the motor for the European development. In his speech at Sorbonne he demanded a closer European cooperation and more joint activities. He wants that the EU-structures are more efficient and in particular he demanded a minister of finance and a own budget for the Eurozone which was immediately criticized very hardly. And of course it's very doubtful that the problems of Europe could be resolved by strengthening the Eurozone not taking into consideration the big economic imbalances in this zone which are threatening the Euro itself. There have been also some alarming parts in his speech concerning the militarization of Europe. But the most interesting part of his speech was the demand for an offensive in investments regarding important fields like energy, climate change, digitalization etc. The reaction of the German government to Macron's proposals was very interesting. While Gabriel highly appreciated Macrons initiative, Schäuble insisted on fiscal stability as the most important issue. There is no doubt that both Macron and Schäuble as well support and promote a neoliberal economic policy – I just refer to Macrons neoliberal change of the French “Code du travail” - but there are different concepts within the neoliberal framework. The focus on fiscal stability on which Schäuble insisted is a major obstacle for an offensive investment policy demanded by Macron. Thus the crucial question is not just to cooperate or not, but the question

the cooperation is based on.

The main problem are not different speeds or how close the cooperation should be but the political concept. It's a matter of contents. One of the greatest obstacles concerning cooperation is the economic imbalance between Germany and the other countries. While Germany has a big surplus other countries have a big deficit concerning the balance of trade and of transactions. Therefore the German surplus has to be reduced by strengthening the internal demand increasing salaries or in the framework of a European transfer union. European cooperation is needed in many fields. And in this respect in spite of it's neoliberal orientation some elements of Macrons initiative are interesting. One of those fields regards certainly the energy policy. I think this is linked also to the industrial policy becoming an essential topic on the European agenda. Also the trade unions launched initiatives in this direction – for example the ETUC's proposal with the title “A new path for Europe” suggesting an investment program of 2 % of the European GDP in sectors which are important for the societal development – education, housing, energy, mobility, healthcare.

Our subject, however, is not the cooperation in general, but the concepts of regional cooperation. What does that mean – regional cooperation? According to the official documents European regional policy is the development of the different European regions in order to avoid regional disparities. In this respect different types of regions are identified – developed regions, regions in transition and regions less developed. The main instruments are the so called structural funds, that is to say European development fund and European social fund. These activities are also known as policy of cohesion. This is a part of European policy very often under estimated in the debate about European politics. That's a pity because cohesion politics are very important for the development of European regions. The resources of these funds which in particular underdeveloped regions are receiving are often decisive for concrete regional and structural activities. Very often active labour market politics are financed by the ESF. I can say this with the background of having been member of the regional parliament in Saarland for eight years.

Saarland is a good example for a functioning and also for non-functioning European cooperation. Saarland is a part of the so called “Greater Region” better known as “Saar-Lor-Lux” including however not only Saarland, Lorraine and Luxembourg, but also Wallonia and Rhineland-Palatinate.

With the summit of the Greater Region there is also a political-administrative structure which has of course more coordinating functions than executive ones. And there are some interregional institutions. A good example is the Interregional Labour Market Observatory. The objective is the observation of trends in labour market, in education, living conditions and economic performance. The results support decision-making in regional ministries of labour, employer's associations, trade unions, educational institutions and other players in the field of labour and economic policy. Furthermore I would like to mention EURES, the European Employment Services, dealing with cross-border workers and seeking jobs in the cross-border regions collaborating with job centers in the different regions and organizing job fairs. Those activities shouldn't be overestimated, but they are concrete examples for a functioning European regional cooperation. On the other hand, however, their influence on politics is limited and they can't substitute the missing general concept of regional cooperation. The instruments like the structural funds mentioned above are first and foremost used for national regional purposes and they are not an instrument of European-orientated regional cooperation and development.

With the Interregional Parliamentary Group exists also a political cooperation in the Greater Region which regularly meets in order to discuss issues like cross-border mobility and communication, ecological and problems of regional development. But the influence on the politics in the different regions is nearly zero. More interesting is the Interregional Council of Trade Unions founded in 1976. Beyond the regular exchange of information there are also some joint activities regarding social policy and trade unions issues. Unfortunately it's more an institution of officials not always tackling the real problems of the workers and employees. And there are many common problems in this region traditionally characterized by coal and steel. The coal mines are closed now. But there is still an important steel industry with, however, very different structures. While the steel industry in Lorraine and Luxembourg is owned by the private investor Mittal ("Arcelor Mittal") the steel industry in Saarland is owned by a foundation which has consequences for the corporate strategy. Mittal closed the furnaces and reduced the steel activities considerably whereas in Saarland offensive investments have been made. Some years ago there was a steel-conference in this region in order to discuss the different strategies and the future of the steel industry organized not by the Interregional Council of Trade Unions but by the left political forces. This is only an example for necessary interregional cooperation regarding the future regional development.

I referred to this kind of regional cooperations because I think these are good examples for a concrete European cooperation tackling the working and living conditions of the people. And I'm convinced that those regional cooperations are particularly important for the Left who should be interested in improving and in intensifying this form of European cooperation.