

Sovereignty in the 21st century

by Nicola Eisenborn, political scientist

Reflections on an aspect of the speech by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, held at the press conference on December 24 2020 on the outcome of the negotiations between the European Union and the United Kingdom.

On December 24, 2020, the European Union and the United Kingdom finally signed a deal. In extremis, an agreement was reached on the new trade and political relationship between the two parties. Hence, there will be neither customs barriers nor any quotas. Following the signing of the agreement, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who is the most influential authority in the EU, made "interesting" remarks about sovereignty.

*"Of course, this whole debate has always been about sovereignty. But we should cut through the soundbites and ask ourselves what sovereignty actually means in the 21st century. For me, it is about being able to seamlessly do work, travel, study and do business in 27 countries. It is about pooling our strength and speaking together in a world full of great powers. And in a time of crisis it is about pulling each other up – instead of trying to get back to your feet alone. The European Union shows how this works in practice. And no deal in the world can change reality or gravity in today's economy and today's world. We are one of the giants."**

The above statement may astonish anyone who knows the meaning of the term "sovereignty". Personally, I find it problematic for two reasons:

First of all, Mrs. von der Leyen distorts and misrepresents a concept whose meaning is not debated. Indeed, the definition of the term "sovereignty" is the subject of a broad consensus at

the international level and in academic circles. Éditions Larousse's definition is representative of this consensus and very accurate: "Supreme power of the State, guaranteeing the exclusivity of its competence on the national territory (internal sovereignty) and its absolute independence in the international order where it is limited only by its own commitments (external sovereignty)". Certainly, free movement of people is a positive thing in the minds of many Europeans, but sovereignty has absolutely nothing to do with the ability to travel, study, or to work in 27 countries. It is about the ability of a state to make decisions and act independently and freely, without having to answer to any supranational authority. Also, contrary to what Mrs. von der Leyen says, "sovereignty" does not mean "speaking with one voice". Indeed, a sovereign country must be able to have its own voice, even if the latter is at odds with the majority of other states. By the way, it seems to me the EU is not really known for respecting dissenting voices (Poland, Hungary etc.).

Secondly, it also seems to me that the President defends a very clear idea: small national sovereignties belong to the past! When listening to her speech, it seems the world is made of "great powers" and only the latter, as well as the unions of states forming "giants" are worthy of sovereignty. This point of view – widely accepted in the EU's spheres of power – is worrying for small countries like Switzerland.

With the issue of sovereignty being at the centre of the debate on the Swiss-EU Framework Agreement, it is not surprising that in recent months more and more citizens, politicians, trade unions and businesspeople have been demanding that the Federal Council break off negotiations on the Swiss-EU Framework Agreement.

* Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvM-VFY_yO_0 (from minute 2:20)