

"Europe frozen by French *non*"

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Europe frozen by French 'non'

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Not long ago, an American political analyst compared France's loss of influence in Europe following its ["no" vote in the 2005 referendum](#) on the EU constitutional treaty with the country's surrender in 1940. A provocative analogy, but is it apt? The collapse in 1940 revealed the fragility of France's democracy and its loss of confidence in the country's capacity to face outside threats. In rejecting the European constitution, France expressed its fear of, among other things, globalisation.

A better analogy for the no vote was the rejection in 1954 of the treaty to establish a [European Defence Community](#) (EDC). In both cases, a major historical mistake was made. France had to a large extent initiated both treaties and had managed to get them accepted by its European partners, but in the end vetoed its own undertakings.

Why, in both 1954 and 2005, did the French - in one case the National Assembly, in the other the electorate - reject proposals that France itself had conceived? Both projects sought to construct a genuinely supranational Europe. The EDC would have created a European army, in which even German troops would have been included. The proposed defence treaty was also to be buttressed by plans for a European political community whose main features were to be defined by a constitutional commission made up of members of national parliaments. In effect, this commission would have been the precursor to the 2003-2004 [Convention for the Future of Europe](#), which, presided over by former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, drafted the constitutional treaty.

The political community of the 50s that France had persuaded its five European partners to accept was supposed to absorb both the European Coal and Steel Community and the EDC. It was to have both diplomatic and military powers, as well as a legislative assembly much like today's European Parliament - just as the 2005 EU constitutional plan would have extended the parliament's powers and created a European minister of foreign affairs.

But now, as back then, fear and doubt won the day. Political parties and others who mobilised opposition to the EDC feared a remilitarised Germany and a threat to France's sovereignty. Today, those in France who opposed the EU constitution succeeded in stigmatising "Europe" as the threat. They trumpeted France's invasion by "Polish plumbers," calling into question Europe's two principal achievements: the introduction of a single market, which has undeniably boosted the French economy, and EU enlargement, which has done so much to foster democratic transition in new member states.

But the failure of the referendum in France carries more serious consequences than the EDC's rejection. Back in the 50s, the founding nations' foreign ministers promptly turned to their Belgian colleague, [Paul-Henri Spaak](#), for fresh proposals. After intensive discussion among the six, and especially between France and Germany, the Treaty of Rome was drawn up and signed within two years of the EDC debacle.

By contrast, two years after the French and Dutch No votes, there is no sign of a plan B, despite the claims of the French politicians who helped mobilise the no vote. Europe's Franco-German locomotive has broken down and ratification has stopped, even though member states that had yet to ratify the treaty could have completed the process of ratification.

France's loss of influence in Europe is no longer at stake today, because the notion of influence presupposes that the overriding preoccupation of EU member states is to advance their own national interests. If Europe were only about gaining the upper hand, it would generate perpetual conflict. The reality is that Europe does manage to move ahead, but step by step through mutual compromise.

The real question has more to do with France's credibility and its capacity to remain a driving force in Europe. A journalist recently expressed the view that France's special role in Europe was due to its "centrality," meaning that the French are, in equal measure, both open to the world and attached to their nation. They also participate successfully in a market economy while seeking to preserve an egalitarian social model.

The no vote sullied this image of a balanced France. Indeed, the French themselves are among the first to lament their bleak situation, inventing a new concept - "[la déclinologie](#)" - to describe this loss of self-confidence.

Moreover, the no vote has given a new legitimacy to euroscepticism in other member states. To be sure, the rise of populism in Europe was not caused by the French; nationalism is deeply rooted in Europe's history and has many causes. But France's referendum result fuelled other European governments' fears that any new proposal they might put forward to re-launch the EU constitution would fail in the face of domestic and Europe-wide opposition.

But reducing European aspirations to the goals of [realpolitik](#) is no answer to today's crisis. Europeans need to recognise that strength lies in unity, and that Europe's integration cannot be guaranteed without a common constitutional framework that promotes a common identity. Until we think in terms of European sovereignty, rather than fret over risks to national sovereignty, the present crisis cannot be overcome.

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