

**« WHAT FRANCE MUST DO TO REPAIR  
THE NO VOTE'S DAMAGE »**

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From the outside, it looks as if the French, once passionate believers in European integration, are going through a period of doubt over their country's role as a pillar of Europe. What is this and where is it taking us? Not long ago, an American political analyst Steven Philip Kramer wrote in "Foreign Affairs" that France's loss of influence in Europe after the mid-2005 referendum on the EU constitution is such that the French "No" vote compares with the unexpected surrender of the French in 1940. It is a provocative analogy, but how appropriate is it? The collapse of 1940 revealed the fragility of France's democracy and a loss of confidence in its capacity to face outside threats. Today, in its surprise rejection of the European constitution, France is expressing its fear of, among other things, globalisation.

I, for my part, would prefer a different comparison; one that may be less striking but is certainly more apt. The 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 the treaties in question, had managed to get them accepted by its European partners, but in the end vetoed its own undertakings.

Europe has never quite recovered from its failure to adopt the defence community. Ever since then, EU member states have been unable to agree on what constitutes a real political project for Europe. The fragile consensus on the EU constitution when it was signed by the Union's 25 national leaders in 2004 was itself something of a miracle.

The analogy between the failure of the EDC and of the European constitution should give us all pause for thought, and particularly we the French. To be European requires us to be positive towards the EU project, for the Union is a unique enterprise without precedent. It is not enough merely to recognise which are the paths we fear to tread, either as French or European citizens. In this day and age we need to understand exactly where it is we want to get to. This in turn means that we have to understand that the EU is today far more than a free trade zone; it is a federal entity, even though it still requires the agreement of all its member states if it is to come fully into being.

So why was it that in 2005 and in 1954 the French – in one case the electorate, in the other, the National Assembly – rejected the very 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 of the 2003-4 Convention for the Future of Europe that was presided over by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and drafted the EU's constitutional treaty.

The political community of the 1950s that France had persuaded its five European partners to accept, was supposed to absorb both the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the EDC. It was to have been invested with diplomatic as well as military powers and would have had a legislative assembly much like today's European Parliament in Strasbourg. By much the same token, the 2005 EU constitutional plan provided for an extension of the European Parliament's legislative powers and the creation of a European minister of foreign affairs. The main difference between that scheme of the far-off 1950s and that of the European Union half a century later lies in the fact that not just governments but citizens too are nowadays seen as stakeholders. The inclusion of a Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU constitution clearly illustrated this, even though French citizens failed to appreciate that message.

Now as then, however, it was fear and doubt that won the day. Political parties and others who mobilised opposition to the EDC expressed their fear of seeing a remilitarised Germany, and also warned of the threat to France's sovereignty – that was in itself something of a paradox, seeing that the very strong French Communist Party in those times was firmly under the Kremlin's thumb. The present day parallel, perhaps, was that those in France opposed the EU constitution succeeded in stigmatising "Europe" as the threat. They trumpeted France's invasion by "Polish plumbers", and in so doing called into question the two principal achievements of Europe: the introduction of a single market that has undeniably boosted the French economy, and, the enlargement of the EU that has done so much to continue to foster the democratic transition of new member states.

But the failure of the referendum in France carries more serious consequences than the EDC's rejection. Back in the 1950s, the six founding nations' foreign ministers promptly turned to their Belgian colleague, Paul-Henri Spaak, for fresh proposals. After a bout of intensive discussion among the six, and especially between France and Germany, the Treaty of Rome was drawn up and then signed within two years of the EDC debacle. This time around, getting on for two years after the French and Dutch No votes, nothing at all has happened. There has been no sign of a "Plan B", despite the claims of those French politicians who helped mobilise the No vote. Europe's Franco-German locomotive has broken down and ratification has stopped, even though it would have been possible – and in my view highly desirable – for member states that had yet to ratify the treaty to complete the process.

I would argue that it is not France's loss of influence in Europe that is at stake today. The notion of influence only confuses the real issue because it pre-supposes that the overriding preoccupation of EU member states, and of candidate countries now waiting in the wings, is simply to advance their own national interests. If Europe were only about gaining the upper hand, it would generate perpetual conflict between member states and contradict the very purpose of European construction. The reality is that Europe *does* manage to move ahead, but step by step and through mutual compromise.

The real question has more to do with France's credibility and its capacity, to the advantage of all, to remain a driving force in Europe. A journalist recently expressed the view that the France's very special role in Europe was due to its "centrality". This centrality means 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 at the same time to preserve an egalitarian social model.

The No vote blurred and indeed sullied this image of France. Consequently, when the EU Commission takes action against France to correct perceived breaches of EU law, such as Brussels' challenge last year to a French decree it deemed protectionist and in breach of the single market, the case was widely interpreted as a sign that France had deliberately flouted EU law and could thus no longer claim to be a driving force behind Europe. It is clear to anyone who moves in diplomatic circles that the French are nowadays less trusted by their European partners than before. No longer is France viewed as singularly well-placed to help other Europeans find common solutions to their problems.

The country's public image has also been tarnished by almost daily reports in the media of unacceptable violence in French suburbs and of the difficulties outsiders face in finding their rightful place in society, of the selfish attitudes of French corporations that enjoy unjustifiable privileges, and of the state's general inability to fully ensure justice and the rule of law.

The French are themselves among the first to lament their present situation and their bleak future prospects. A new concept – “la déclinologie” – has been invented to describe the regrettable loss of self-confidence currently rife in the nation. Even though this is a fact, I do not subscribe to this point of view.

If the No vote has had a negative impact on France’s reputation at home and abroad, it has also had unfortunate consequences elsewhere in Europe. It has given a new legitimacy to euro-scepticism in other member states. I do not mean to suggest that the rise of populism in Europe has been caused by the French No vote. Nationalism - “the most horrific plague of all”, as Stefan Zweig once said - is deeply rooted in Europe’s history and has many causes. But I am convinced that France’s referendum result has fuelled other European government’s fears that any new proposal they might put forward to re-launch Europe would fail in the face of their own domestic and even Europe-wide opposition.

To borrow from the title of a conference at the Brookings Institution in Washington DC last July, “Is Europe failing?”. I don’t think so, but its future success will depend on France making a comeback on the European scene. And this, in turn, will demand dramatic changes in the French political and social model, despite the success of French companies in Europe and around the world. Happily, these are changes that seem to be at the top of the agendas in the country’s presidential election campaigns.

Beyond France, the European project also requires changes in the way the EU is presented to their citizens by other EU member governments. Europe will not survive if it is systematically represented as a source of economic insecurity and loss of national identity. The whole can be greater than the sum of its parts, so Europe that fulfils its full potential could become this greater whole.

At the risk of sounding naïve, which I am not, I would argue that reducing European aspirations merely to the goals of *realpolitik*, such as an “entente” between nation states or a free trade zone, is no answer to the present crisis. The real answer requires, primarily, a common awareness among all European citizens of the serious problems inherent in the current international situation. Europeans need collectively to recognise that strength lies in unity, as well as in numbers. We cannot take the risk of becoming less and less independent, which is a real risk militarily as well as in terms of energy resources. Many new proposals could and should be made, not least by France, that would reinforce European integration in these two major areas.

Europe’s future integration however, cannot be guaranteed unless Europeans, including the French, adopt a common constitutional framework that would promote the feeling of being united. Until we think in terms of European sovereignty, rather than fret over risks to national sovereignty, the present crisis cannot be overcome. The day must come when we see the truth of what Plato said so many centuries ago: “You cannot conceive the many without the one”.