

TO BE OR NOT TO BE EUROPEAN

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Abstract

The article examines the current political development of the integration process of the EU. The author takes a closer look at the electoral votes of three very important EU members of the EU. The result of the EU referendum in three EU member countries shows a different opinion and ideology of the European citizen. Spain's weak and meek "yes" to the EU constitution obtained through a massive campaign by the political establishment and jointly by government and opposition alike. The result "no" in the Netherlands has shown signs nationalistic backlash towards EU constitution. A part from Holland social decline, the "no" from the left was this time based on the EU lack of appeal. And the French "no" with high electoral participation was based on the excesses of the free market system within the EU constitution., necessarily implying a lessening of the French social welfare system, increased unemployment, and lowering of living standards. The author concludes with the questions: what the EU will be to the European Union? and where the process of the EU integration or disintegration will lead?

Introduction

The spectacular rejection of the European Union Constitution by the Dutch and French electorates in June 2005 is a key obstacle to the further integration process of the European Union with 10 states holding referenda on the ratification of the constitutional treaty and fifteen others proceeding through parliamentary voting. The ratification created no problems for the most recent EU members (Hungary, Slovenia, and Lithuania) but negative warning signals flashed during the Spanish referendum (February 20, 2005). Spanish electoral participation was at a record low (42%) and was a prelude to the firm rejection of the EU constitution by the French and Dutch voters with respectively 56% against (70% participation) and 61% in favor of the "no" (63% participation).

Three implications: for the integration process, for the EU's global role, and

for socio-economic and political situations within EU member countries.

The consequences of the Spanish, French, and Dutch votes can at present be seen at three main levels: at the level of the European unification process, from the point of view of Europe's world role, and within the social, economic, and political contexts of individual EU states (and the European Union's collective context).

1. Integration or disintegration?

Questions arise as to where the process of EU integration (or disintegration) will lead when the observer takes a closer look at the electoral votes of three very important members of the EU. Political themes for and against a more integrated Europe vary from country to country and could lead to more national oriented policies within the EU in spite of the Union's monetary and territorial integration. In the final analysis this could lead to political resistance to the globalization process. *L'Europe des patries* or Europe of nations (and Fatherlands) as envisioned by Charles De Gaulle could once again become an actual and current theme while the concept of a United States of Europe steps into the background.

1.1. Country Variations

The Spanish "yes" was a very weak one in light of the benefits in funds and subsidies Madrid has reaped from its adhesion to the EU in 1986. The foregone (wrong) conclusion was that Spain would be one of the strongest supporters for the ratification of the constitution. But the lesson to be learned from this event is perhaps that Spaniards don't vote blindly. Polls have shown that 90% of the people did not know what the constitution was about (with more than unexplained 400 articles). Not even a massive promotion and public relations exercise through the media and the coalition of parties of the country's political establishment could overcome the record electoral low in Spain's

history as a democracy since the end of Franco's dictatorship in 1975.

The fundamental implication of Spain's weak adherence to the European constitution was that the American option (participation in the Iraq war with former Prime Minister Aznar) had been rejected and that the European consolidation alternative facing America (as proposed by Prime Minister Zapatero) had received very weak support. It has clearly underlined the political and social divide between Madrid's political establishment and a Spanish population refusing to choose between a pro US government and an increased European integration mainly based on (European) free market principles.

The French “no” with a high electoral participation was based on the excesses of the free market system within the EU constitution, necessarily implying a lessening of the French social welfare system, increased unemployment, and a lowering of living standards. In spite of the campaign for the “yes” by Prime Minister Raffarin's government, President Chirac and his political majority, and the leaderships of the Socialist and Green opposition, a strong majority of the French electorate refused further free market European integration. A crisis in the process of further regional integration can be anticipated as France is one of the six founding members of European Community (before the EC became the EU).

Historically, throughout the decades of the European construction process, France has maintained a constant coordination policy with Germany. And the (approval of the) European constitution was to become the ultimate achievement of this strategic national policy of maintaining Germany within the bounds of a European Union with France. Meanwhile, Paris could then continue to play an independent role in a multi-polar world in line with the French past and France's position as a nuclear military power. It was symbolized and heralded by President's Charles De Gaulle and Conrad Adenauer's historic embrace at a Franco-German treaty signing.

France's consistency to avoid confrontation with Germany can be seen from the post World War II period from the Coal and Steel Community in 1951 to the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 establishing the European Union. Slow but steady progress had been made from the EEC (European Economic Community 1957) to the politically more coordinated EC (European Community, 1967). Until the 2005 referendum the European Union has indeed suited French international strategy of coordination with Germany, highlighted by both countries' opposition to American unilateralism in Iraq. But the political (and economic) challenge to America has in fact been weakened by the end of the Cold War, resulting in the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the reunification of West and East Germany.

A strengthened Germany strategically positioned facing Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation was to be held in check through the European common currency, the (eventual) European military force, the freedom of movement of capital and population, and the unification of entry and exit policies of persons from third countries into the European Union. And the EU was enlarged from 10 to 25 countries. But, the 15 former Socialist countries of Eastern Europe had in fact their own agenda in becoming members of the EU. There was the trauma of the Hitler-Stalin pact between Berlin and Moscow, strengthened by the fear that Paris could also join such a Putin-Schroeder "axis". Its most recent manifestation has been Warsaw's expression of displeasure at the signing of the agreement on a gas pipeline linking Germany and the Russian Federation and bypassing Poland and its territory (August 2005).

EU enlargement, instead of strengthening France's position has instead opened possibilities for Washington to pursue its unilateral policies even further by offering alternatives to a European Union with French and German predominance. And the example had been given by the United Kingdom as the EU's member country closest to Washington (non member of the EU monetary Union and Schengen immigration treaty) as well as Spain's Aznar and Italy's

Berlusconi.

French clout within the EU has necessarily been reduced with the corollary that her interest in accrued European integration has also been lessened, thus opening the possibility for France and Germany to consider more national interest oriented policies facing a unilateralist US. Eventual policy changes towards the US could become reality when US unilateralism will be unable to face an increased number of conflicts and economic difficulties. What European integration will then become is an open question.

The Dutch “no” with a 63% electoral participation and more than 61% against was particularly important in light of the very low interest for European elections shown by the electorate previously less than 40%. As in France, the political establishment of the Netherlands campaigned all out for the “yes” but to no avail. Mixed signals are to be seen from this Dutch referendum. Unlike France, Holland has been free market oriented for decades, from the beginning of European Community to the recent developments of the EU but economic stagnation, unemployment, and the decline in social welfare have been capitalized by the far left and right convergence to reject the Dutch center right government of Prime Minister Peter Balkenende. The political murders of the political rightist leader Pim Fortuijn, the film producer van Gogh, and Turkey's application to the EU were used by the far right against Muslims and Dutch immigration and refugee policies whereas the far left warned against the European free market and the loss of national sovereignty. Here again no amount of arguments from the political establishment could convince the Dutch voters to vote “yes”. Not even reminders of World War II or the pleading to the electorate by the Prime Minister to dismiss his government in the 2007 elections in exchange for a vote for the “yes”.

1.2. National orientations

Contrary to the French case, Dutch ambitions at a world role within a fully integrated EU are practically non-existent. But on the other hand European "primordialism" pierced a political landscape long renowned for its liberal traditions and tolerance. The extreme right of the Netherlands (LPF and VVD) has argued on nationalistic and xenophobic grounds against further European integration. While condemning EU bureaucracy (an effective argument with the Dutch traditionally mindful of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness) they also based their case on the loss of sovereignty and the dangers of immigration as well as the entry of Turkey with its big Muslim population into the EU.

To what extent the Dutch population is turning its back on a more integrated Europe remains to be seen as the Dutch far left also rejected the European Constitution on the grounds of hostility against neo liberalism, decline in living standards, and the defense of the Dutch national entity within a large borderless EU dominated by other free market and political forces.

This left and right mix turning its back on further European integration is perhaps a "historical first" for a very pro European oriented Holland. The extreme right turns it back on Dutch a liberal and humanistic tradition, whilst the far left seeks to battle on themes of sovereignty and living standards of living threatened by an excess of free European market. Center left and centre right alternating in power are thus left in the lurch, European integration, on its part, can only go so far.

The observation of France's center left and center right which have been alternating in power for the past decades also offers an interesting insight into the poverty of ideas on their societal and global visions of an integrated Europe. Some elements of the center left socialist party argued that voting against the Constitution was tantamount to voting for the extreme right (Le Pen and his National Front who had taken the votes from socialist leader Lionel

Jospin and helped Jacques Chirac to gain another presidential term with the ensuing dismantling of the French social welfare system).

A major center right leader, Nicolas Sarkozy, and president of the governmental Union for a Popular Movement, partially used a Dutch rightist theme (against Turkish entry into the EU) to plead in favor of the Constitution and a leftist argument (against an excessively free European market) to justify the reasons for the “yes.”

France's extreme right is not negligible with its racist and nationalistic elements against the “yes” to the European constitution but the “no” from part of the French left and the population has perhaps the biggest critical mass against European integration.

1.3. Against globalization.

There is for instance the French ATTAC (Socialist party oriented) which is affiliated to the European ATTAC anti globalization movement. ATTAC's justification for the “no” was based on European Commission's lack of a European societal vision based on cooperation, solidarity, and equal justice (instead of capitalist competition and free markets).

This theme was confirmed by left and right wing Socialist leaders who did not wish to neglect “the demands emanating from the “left of the official left” in favor of the “no”. Added to that was also a theme based on “European nationalism” with a European Union taking on a leading role in the affairs of the world and not politically weak and adrift in the global market. Proponents of this theme argued that the proposed Constitution did not offer this alternative (e.g. former French Prime Minister Laurent Fabius right wing socialist). Extreme left organizations and the Communist party joined this bandwagon in favor of the “no” and the internal conflict within the left has led to a spectacular “no” to the European Constitution

The Spanish, Dutch, and French popular consultations reflect perhaps

the divide between a European Union as conceived by the political establishments, the free marketers, multinational companies and entities, and techno-bureaucratic structures facing a democratic and progressive groundswell as expected (or hoped for) by the citizens of the European countries concerned.

2. EU's world role

From the point of view of the EU's world role these developments necessarily question European global ambitions and objectives as a free continental market able to economically face the United States of America, China, India, and the rest of Asia.

2.1 Old Europe?

Objectively, economic developments are at present not in favor of the EU with an aging population and declining birth rate, a slow growth (1% against 3% in the US and 7 to 12% in China), and 20 million unemployed. If recent referendum results are added to this background Europe will have to become more realistic in her ambitions, e.g. creating a bigger economy than that of the United States by 2010 - seemingly more difficult to attain than before. American unilateralism could also deal with more ease with a disunited Europe with more collaboration or cooperation from some EU countries or, on the contrary, more opposition from others. European international presence in the rest of the world could be seriously affected. And the EU's immense human, economic, scientific and cultural heritage could remain a relatively untapped historic capital compared to its huge potential.

2.2. Adiminishing EU role in spite of the Greater EU, from 15 to 25 member countries?

In the past Nazi Germany's *Drang nach Osten* or drive to the east was based on military conquest and domination. Although the EU's integration of Eastern European countries has nothing to compare with the previous pre World War II situation, geopolitical and geo-economic realities do come to the fore. The inclusion of former socialist countries of Eastern Europe is not merely based on political considerations of European unity (as a continent with a common heritage) or the consolidation of democracy and the free market but also on considerations of gains for the economies Western Europe member countries of the EU. Free circulation of capital have allowed them to establish themselves without restriction throughout the EU zone and to take over the most lucrative parts of the former socialist economies (e.g. Germany's Volkswagen's takeover of Czech Skoda) while encouraging increased capitalism and diminished public welfare systems, lesser public expenditure, and reduced corporate taxation at the tax payers expense. Free circulation of labor amounts to the possibility of having a cheaper but highly qualified Eastern European labor force against their more demanding Western EU counterparts. But these developments do not seem to outweigh (in favor of the EU) the economic dynamics in other parts of the world.

2.3. Military and economic ambitions and ambivalence at multiple levels..

The EU constitution ambition is to have a military development and consolidation with the above economic outline. The convergence of public opinion and governments in France and Germany against the American and British war against Iraq did, in fact, not exclude a separate military agenda for the German and French authorities who had the ambition of establishing an EU military force capable of defending European economic interests throughout the world. It would differ from American unilateralism in its form by

respecting United Nations resolution on war and peace and by relatively better relations between the EU and the rest of the world but would nevertheless be able take care of European economic and geopolitical interests.

Steps apparently contrary to this objective can be perceived through Spain's participation with the US forces in Iraq. Although Spanish troops were withdrawn after the terrorist bombings in Madrid in March 2004 they have again been sent to Afghanistan in low profile manner. This was not only Madrid's action to regain the good graces of Washington after its Iraqi withdrawal but it also has a European vision of getting accustomed to military presence in other parts of the world. Germany's military presence in Afghanistan is in the same perspective as well as that of other EU countries.

The question to be raised is therefore how independently the EU can act and react to maintain economic and military interests globally in a world facing multiple conflicts and geo-economic crises from energy to trade and other issues.

European and American positions at the WTO have met stiff resistance at the WTO as Third World countries led by India and Brazil have strongly resisted EU and US trade and agricultural policies. Over and beyond the difficult trade conferences in Cancun and Dubai lie in fact the economic shifts of balance of economic and commercial power in the world e.g. growing (unbalanced) trade between China and the US and the EU (e.g. the huge accumulation of quota restricted Chinese textiles in European ports), the growth of Chinese industry and Indian technology and services, etc. If China is described as the factory of the world and India as the office of the world (because of software and information technology developments) there is also the Middle East (in spite of the Iraq war) to be described as the world's future financial center all the more so with the oil boom for petroleum producing Middle Eastern countries and the energy crisis for oil importing nations.

These elements are probably behind the European Union's policy

towards the Middle East, whether on the Iraqi and Palestinian questions or the nuclear processing problems of Iran.

Europe's immense heritage in human, industrial, scientific and cultural capital could achieve an optimum result economically and culturally for the EU and the world if problems arising from the process of European integration are resolved in the near future. European economic and legal experience is very relevant to the rest world from city transport planning in Paris (known as one of the best worldwide) to the management and/or privatization of state owned enterprises (SOEs). Indonesian SOEs are for example based on continental (Dutch and French) legal dispositions because of Indonesia's colonial past but are now adapted to anglo-saxon (US) criteria and framework. The sharing of experience in market systems would have been mutually beneficial to Indonesia and the EU. In spite or precisely because of its colonial past European countries also have a strong tradition in human rights and good governance and here again a weak European presence because of a weaker EU would neither benefit Europe nor the rest of the world. European education (and culture) considered as the most prestigious and the most sought after in the world is now lagging behind those of the US, Japan, and Australia. To recover its former position the EU also needs to overcome present divisions on the EU constitutional issue. This is not to speak of Europe's extremely rich diversity in history, arts and culture, and way of life as a fundamental contribution to the world.

3. Individual countries determine EU integration and global role.

To say that the EU is at the crossroad of existence is probably an understatement because what is at stake is not only the European Union's legal and constitutional framework but also her very nature i.e. the Europe of fatherlands, the Europe of peoples and nations versus the Europe of multinationals and bureaucracies. Even multiple political parties in many

European countries have difficulties grasping the new realities. Not grasping these realities they are grappling with these realities while the world moves on from crisis to crisis.

3.1. Spanish tango or valse d'hesitation?

Spain's center left (socialist) government and party led by Prime Minister Luis Rodriguez Zapatero in coalition with the center right barely succeeded in convincing Spaniards to vote "yes" as the more than 400 article of the proposed European constitution did not propose a societal alternative for the European Union i.e. a constitution which did not only propose a free market continental economy and society but also a community of social progress, equality between peoples and nations, and a role for Spain worthy of its past and Spain's return to the community of democratic nations since Franco's death in 1975.

Political and economic situations in individual member countries reflect several types of attitudes towards the EU constitution and further European integration. They vary from the empirical and the hesitant attitude to the nationalistic (cum xenophobia) to the social-political and patriotic and can be found in varying degrees and combinations throughout the 25 countries.

Spain's weak and meek "yes" to the EU constitution could be called a *valse d'hesitation* that is more a tango than a European waltz. No doubt inspired by the UK example of following the American line on Iraq and the eventual advantages to be gained from an active participation in US operations in Iraq, former Prime Minister Aznar was roundly and resoundingly voted out of office by the Spanish electorate after the Madrid bombings in March 2004. Spanish troops were withdrawn from Iraqi soil by Prime Minister Zapatero soon afterwards. The Spanish "yes", obtained through a massive campaign by the political establishment and jointly by government and opposition alike, was also in part to mask the hostility to the Iraq war at the national and popular

levels and regain US favor. Further in this same direction Spain also offered to participate in operations in Afghanistan. Spain is not the only country to practice the tango towards the European Union constitution as Poland is in a similar situation with a government siding with Washington and a population apparently hostile to Warsaw's participation in US operations in Iraq. Other Eastern European members of the EU had even less qualms in siding with the US and gave US Secretary of State Rumsfeld the possibility to state that there was 'new Europe and old Europe (with France and Germany as core founders of the European community).

3.2. A lesser humanistic Holland.

Interestingly, one the most liberal European countries and as such very open to the European Union, the Netherlands, is showing signs of a nationalistic backlash towards the EU constitution. The Dutch government coalition of Christian democrats, neo-liberals, social democrats, and green parties were not able to face the "no" vote and were at a near 15% popularity level against rightist populists launching campaigns hostile to Muslims and Turkish entry into the EU (a "primordial" European reaction?). Apart from Holland's social decline, the "no" from the left was this time based on the EU's lack of appeal. The Dutch electorate had the last say in the "no" in spite of numerous hostile statements against the potential "no" voters before the referendum.

3.3. Non a la mondialisation

This time around France as the past proponent of the Gaullist concept of *l'Europe des patries* has been far less nationalistic than the Netherlands in the referendum. Opposition to the free market and the excesses of *mondialisation* or globalization were directed more at the policies of the

United States rather than at the European Union Constitution treaty where France has always had a dominant position. French opposition to the EU project were more based on the fact that it was seen a “sub free market system” endangering the French social welfare system as a societal model and element of pride for many French citizens. Added to this hostility were also the accumulated popular disappointments with successive socialist and conservative governments unable to face (or propose alternatives to) the onslaught of neo-liberalism, “free marketism”, and all-out globalization. It was also the Europe of peoples (not only nations and fatherlands) against the Europe of technocracies, bureaucracies, and corporate multinationals. ATTAC, the European anti globalization movement, relished the referenda results as the first positive step in favor of European national and popular interests at large.

Conclusion

What the EU will be to Europe and the world at large now remains an open question. European integration (or the EU's progressive undoing) will be the key to world history. Not only because of the European Union's commercial weight and economic clout but also for the example it will or will not set throughout continents in the long march towards regional integration, social and economic harmony, political accord, and historical unity (or disunity).