



OCGG Government Section

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# Beyond the referendums: Europe in need of a dream to chase

by Leonard Novy

At the end of May, when France holds its referendum on the European constitution, the saying that the European Union would come to a standstill without this founding member and driving force of integration could come true with a slightly different twist. About a dozen polls have indicated that the Grande Nation will cast a No vote. And despite a recent rise in positive voting intentions, it remains far

from certain that the French give their support to Europe's Constitutional Treaty.

A rejection of the treaty in the home country of Monnet and Schuman, the fathers of European integration, would be tantamount to an earthquake. It may very well spell the end of the reform document, which, in view of future rounds of expansion and the strengthening of a common

## MAIN POINTS

The opposition to the Constitution reflects a gap between the European project and its citizens created by the failure to champion a strong political vision of Europe that informs and educates people about how the EU protects their interests and improves their lives in the place of the flawed Lisbon-agenda.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leonard Novy is an Analyst in the OCGG Security Section. He is a PhD-candidate at Cambridge and currently a Visiting Fellow at Harvard. He is director of Think Tank Berlinpolis and contributes regularly in German and European media. He can be contacted at [lnovy@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:lnovy@fas.harvard.edu)

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foreign and security policy, is set to bring about a number of crucial changes. Even before the ratification process has kicked into gear, the gloomy word “eurosclerosis” is bandied about yet again. And a number of countries, which have been considered uncertain from the start have yet to hold their own referendums: the Dutch vote only days after the French, followed by Denmark, the Czech Republic and the notoriously eurosceptic British public.

What would happen if the constitution were to be rejected by one or several member states remains unclear. Possible scenarios range from new referendums, perhaps following additional negotiations, a split of the Union in an integrationist core adopting the constitution and a group that would simply continue on the basis of the existing treaties to the end of the entire constitutional project (and a cancellation of the upcoming referendums). The actual measures to be taken in the event will certainly depend on the country or countries that vote against the treaty. While a second referendum would certainly be attempted to obtain a Yes vote in the case of defeat in a smaller country, a referendum loss in France could put an early end to the constitution. A No in Britain, where the Labour government has made contin-

ued EU membership contingent on the referendum, on the other hand, would, provided the scheduled referendum becomes reality, not only be irreversible; it would also most likely precipitate Britain’s exit from the EU.

Panic is now setting in in Paris, Brussels and elsewhere in Europe where governments would not covertly be pleased to avoid holding their own referendums as a result of a No vote in France. The wave of popular resistance seems to have taken the supporters of the constitution in France by surprise. For a long time - too long, in fact - they were too busy with party-political skirmishes and therefore neglected to inform their voters of the benefits of the constitution. And this notwithstanding the fact that similar complacency in 2001 led to the defeat of the Yes-campaign in the Irish referendum on the Nice treaty that prepared the EU for enlargement. Engaged in party-political rivalries and relying on the approval of its traditionally pro-European population, the main political parties had left the field wide open for the opponents of the Treaty and lost the first referendum.

Moreover, the gap between the European integration project and its citizens is well documented. Polls show that more than half of all Europeans are indifferent to

whether their country remains in the EU or not. More and more people are convinced that their country does not benefit from EU membership. Voter participation in the elections to the European Parliament has continuously declined since the first election in 1979 and reached a record low in the summer of last year.

The constitutional convention, intended to bring the way in which European institutions work closer to the citizens and to trigger debates that were to strengthen support for the constitution, did not change that. Still, the level of knowledge about the constitution is poor. This very lack of information could prove to be the downfall of this project as the support for the constitution correlates with people's knowledge about it. Furthermore, a low turnout for the referendum will usually benefit the No side of the campaign, which generally tends to be better at mobilising its voters.

The motives of opponents of the constitution across Europe are as diverse as the EU itself; in France, we also see a significant degree of fragmentation across the nation. If there is a common denominator among opponents, it would be less a matter of a fundamental rejection of supranational institutions (except for Britain) than a deep-seated uncertainty

about what Europe stands for and where it is heading.

The EU has a communication problem. More than ten years after EU citizenship was introduced (supplementary to national citizenship), European Integration, in the eyes of the EU citizens, still primarily stands for the integration and liberalisation of the Single Market. Add to this the mounting pressures from external competition, globalization of production and finance, combined with the policy constraints of EMU, under which many European (welfare) economies crumble, and it is no wonder that «Europeanisation» is seen by many citizens as nothing more than a take-over by global turbo-capitalism, loss of jobs and the erosion of national welfare systems. A primary example, which features prominently in the French campaign, is the controversy around the so called «Bolkestein Directive» on the free movement of services in the EU. Causing fears of dilution of labour and social standards and wage dumping by the new member states in many states, it has come to embody the concept of integration «Brussels style».

What is often overlooked is that the Directive is draft legislation that has already received the thumbs down in its present form from the heads of state. It

has as such has nothing to do with the constitution, which, to the contrary, would give the EU a long-needed social foundation in the form of its charter of fundamental rights. Moreover, the majority of the European Parliament shares the concerns and has been busy modifying the draft directive on core issues. Speaking of the European Parliament: it has long been mocked as a «toothless tiger» and largely been ignored by the media, but it has grown into a powerful and increasingly self-confident player in the EU arena. Paradoxically, the criticism of the democratic shortcomings of the EU is now released on a document that would strengthen Parliament and, despite all its deficiencies, overall give the EU more legitimacy, transparency and better ability to act.

Blame rest in part with the EU itself, which, as Margot Wallström, Vice-President of the European Commission, recently admitted, has relied for too long on one-way communications and preaching to the converted. But it is also with a fault of national politics: Taking credit for the successes of the Union, while blaming mistakes on «Brussels» or other member states, national governments have long justified the EU on the basis of technocratic and economic necessities and marketed it as an extension of national

politics. It does not come as a surprise therefore that voters refuse to regard it as a political system in its own right and instead hold Brussels responsible for mistakes of all sorts or use referendums on European politics as a way to teach their national politicians a lesson.

Whether the eleventh-hour activism of French supporters of the constitution is enough to save the day remains to be seen. One thing is clear: The «genie» of direct democracy will be freed from its bottle with the referendums scheduled over the next few months (if they take place), as Daniel Keohane, fellow at the Centre for European Reform, put it. More referendums, on issues such as enlargement, are likely to follow. This will help to defuse the criticism that the EU acts undemocratically and over the heads of its citizens. But it will bring with it a set of challenges, which will require all those involved to change their style of communication.

European unity can no longer be taken for granted and sold to the public in terms of economic imperatives or lofty European ideals. Especially since the discussion on the nature and future of the EU is far from over, even if agreement is reached on the constitution. The constitutional treaty is essentially “a statement of

the level of integration achieved thus far, but phrased in improved legal terms”, as Hans Jürgen Papier, president of the German Federal Constitutional Court, observed in the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. As for the question as to where the EU should be headed over the long term, its geographical scope and competences, the document does not provide any clear answers - apart from the traditional formula of an “ever closer Union. Is the constitutional treaty just another document towards integration or does it define the final stage of European integration policy? Where, in economic, cultural and diplomatic terms, lies the future of the European model as opposed to the American? The EU, so far, has failed to communicate its *raison d’être* beyond negative integration, to demonstrate where it indeed protects the interests and improves the lives of its citizens in ways that the individual member states are incapable of.

One thing that appears a near-certainty, is that the objectives of the Lisbon strategy “will not help to bring Europeans closer together,” as was pointed out in the final report of the Reflection Group on the Spiritual and Cultural Dimension of Europe established by former President of the Commission, Romano Prodi. It is revealing that it should take an American,

such as Jeremy Rifkin in his book «The European Dream», to spell out a positive vision for Europe that goes beyond catchwords such as security, regional competitiveness and subsidiarity. While painting an all too rosy picture, he has managed to do what European politics has failed to achieve so far - to explain that the EU is more than just an out-of-control single market.

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141 Rampart Rd  
Salisbury SP1 1JA  
United Kingdom

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