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The EU in Crisis (June 2, 2005)

The rejection of the EU constitution by French and Dutch voters was a signal that European leaders had to take seriously. In this article, Martin Klingst reviews the reasons for the “no” vote and calls on EU politicians to clearly explain the tasks and limits of European policies to Europe’s citizens in order to win them back over to “Project Europe.”

He Who Does Not Heed the People

It Would be a Grave Mistake to Downplay the ‘no’ to the European Constitution

First the good news: the French *non* and the anticipated Dutch *nee* (the final outcome of their vote was still unclear when this went to press) to the constitutional treaty will not destroy the EU. The idea of Europe is too important for that to happen. The Union is too strong economically, too stable politically, and, despite its enormous problems, too attractive to the world for that to happen. From Ukraine to Turkey and on to Morocco, all EU neighbor states that strive for peace, freedom, democracy, and prosperity want to join the Union. Also, the opponents of the constitution do not form a united front; only a minority strictly rejects the EU, while the vast majority is battling for the Union – but for a more social-minded, slenderer, and more easy-going version than the present one.

But now the bad (and, at the moment, more pressing) news: the *non* and the *nee* are an expression of a profound crisis in Europe, and they reflect a basic sentiment that extends far beyond the borders of France and Holland. Anyone who claims the opposite and who still thinks that this is only a matter of the people of two countries punishing their national governments is gravely deceiving himself and everyone else too. The “no” of the two founding nations [of the European Economic Community], who previously had the reputation of being irreproachable, downright eager-beaver super-Europeans, is also being directed at the EU – especially the route that the European Union has taken over the past few years.

It is a wildly chaotic muddle of voices and moods. Things are going too fast and too far – or not far enough – for most French and Dutch citizens: the enlargement of the EU, the liberalization of the economy, the Brussels superstructure, the curtailing of national social standards and basic rights. If the Germans were asked directly, they too would shout “halt.” Right now, there is fierce fighting about the right path for Europe – just at a time when the heads of state who hold sway in

Europe are in decline: Gerhard Schröder is almost down for the count, Jacques Chirac is staggering, Tony Blair is being counted out, and Silvio Berlusconi is up against the ropes.

It would be fatal if the EU heads of government simply continued with business as usual. Luxemburg's prime minister Jean-Claude Juncker and France's ex-president Giscard d'Estaing are already recommending that French voters be allowed to vote again until the result comes out right. And this sentence is also an expression of the arrogance of power: "There is no alternative to the present path!" But that would mean the end of all politics – why should people even vote at all? If the government heads want to save the European Union they have to stop and take a deep breath, review things, and make some readjustments – and do everything possible to win the citizens over to the EU.

Despite all the colorful advertisements, fairs, and charm offensives in Brussels, the European Union remains foreign and even a bit threatening to the people. The French sociologist Alain Touraine, an ardent supporter of the European Union, was correct when he said: "In actuality, the conflict between 'yes' and 'no' is primarily a conflict between top and bottom." Those "at the top" have lost their footing. What is tragic is that those "at the bottom" are taking their displeasure out on the constitution, which is precisely what could finally bring "Spaceship EU" back down to earth. Who knows, there might have been a different outcome if all European countries had voted on the same day. Maybe then there would at least have been a whiff of a sense of unity in Europe for once.

The European strategy of the 1990s was to expand and intensify. But it is impossible to do both at once. Instead of introducing internal reforms to strengthen all the EU member states for worldwide competition, so that it would be possible to easily add additional members later, the "Happy 15" expanded to include ten new countries and thereby botched the intensification part. The result is a threefold crisis: greater external competition with the United States and Asia; internal competition with the new Eastern European EU countries; and the infirmity of the old welfare states, a condition brought on by huge budget deficits and sinking birthrates.

The citizens are now experiencing the repercussions of Europe's many incongruities firsthand. The people of Poland, Slovakia, and the Baltic states are pushing their way into our labor market, but the old EU countries like Germany, France, and Holland can't even manage to integrate their long-time resident minorities from North Africa and Turkey. The EU might even be willing to admit Turkey as a member, but in Berlin, Amsterdam, and Marseilles, there is heated debate about whether Muslim immigrants are willing or even able to accept the values of the European Union and make those values part of their everyday lives.

Another incongruity: it is not only China and India that are pressuring the good old welfare states. All of a sudden, competitors from Poland, Latvia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic have entered the ring, and together they are experiencing how Western businesses are taking over in their countries. Securities that people have become accustomed to are dwindling, social standards are eroding, the Polish plumber is becoming a threat to *securité sociale* and one's

own little sheltered world. Europe is not a bulwark against external globalization. On the contrary, it is experiencing its own small globalization process within its borders. The heads of government did not prepare their citizens for this hardship. They never openly admitted that a common welfare state is a chimera.

According to the great EU promise, Europe is a space of freedom, security, and rule of law. But the people fear that this Europe could turn into a space of insecurity for them, with Polish wage dumping and the danger of having to serve sentences in Estonian or Romanian prisons some day. The fears “at the bottom” cannot simply be erased “at the top.” Therefore, anyone who considers Europe important, who holds it near and dear, cannot simply say “the show must go on” at the summit in mid-July. It will of course be complicated to steer twenty-five EU countries into the future without a constitution. The Union needs a new mechanism in order to function. Therefore, the constitution might become a reality some day after all, but in a modified, slimmed-down form.

Something else must take top priority at the moment: winning the citizens back over to the idea of European integration by telling them, for example, where false hopes are being placed on the EU, hopes that can actually only be fulfilled by the individual countries. And by telling them where Europe’s borders are – substantively and geographically. By admitting that although Romania and Bulgaria will definitely be included in the next round of enlargement, this doesn’t have to happen automatically in 2007 or 2008. And whether Turkey can belong to the EU should remain a question for the future.

More than ever, we will have to get used to a European Union in which the various countries progress at very different speeds, sometimes alone and sometimes in small groups. It is impossible for all 25 to move at the same speed all the time. A Europe of 25 will have to be a confederation of open states – and a community of citizens to which the [various national] elites must pay greater heed. The course must be set by insightful, active government heads. Schröder, Chirac, Blair, and Berlusconi do not have the strength for this.

Source: Martin Klingst, “Wer auf das Volk nicht hört. Es wäre ein verhängnisvoller Fehler, das nein zur europäischen Verfassung kleinzureden” [“He Who Does Not Heed the People. It Would be a Grave Mistake to Downplay the ‘no’ to the European Constitution”], *Die Zeit*, June 2, 2005.

Translation: Allison Brown