

*Disenchantment in Slow Motion***Highlights**

- ★ In France, Europe basically expresses four objectives: peace, parity with Germany, economic development, and leveraging French power. But today, the feeling abounds that none of these objectives are really being achieved.
- ★ For most French citizens it seems that the EU is unable to explain which path it follows. This disaffection is important at a time when national institutions are also contested in several European countries. However, the French are themselves ambivalent on the best path forward.
- ★ For the French there was, and maybe there still is, a European project which unites philosophical, political, and technical dimensions. However, it is essential to revitalise its political dimensions. Three key challenges need to be resolved: the Greek crisis, the migration crisis and the neighbourhood crisis.

**Building Bridges project**

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



## About the author

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## About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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## What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?

A few months ago, positive feeling in France towards the EU registered just 26% - in 2003 it was at 63%... A real problem in a country which is one of the "Founding Fathers" of European integration, and officially one of the most committed to "creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe".

In France, European policy is basically expressed through four objectives: peace, parity with Germany, economic development, and leveraging French power.

*Peace.* The initial aim is evident: Franco-German reconciliation ended a hundred years of rivalry and wars for hegemony on the continent, and it suppressed even this very concept of hegemony in Europe. The idea of European integration guarantees peace between Europeans, even if defence against external hegemonies or aggressions remains NATO's core task.

*Parity with Germany.* During the Cold War, some geopolitical parity was achieved between Paris and Bonn: diplomatic-military power on one side, economic efficiency on the other. The deepening of European integration at the beginning of the 1990s – spearheaded by Paris and Bonn – was aimed at maintaining this parity in light of the German reunification and its potentially destabilising effect.<sup>1</sup>

*Economic Development.* The building of the Common Market has been a decisive element used to explain the "*trente glorieuses*" (the roughly thirty years of economic prosperity after the end of the Second World War) – particularly for French agriculture. Until the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century and despite contestations, Europe was closely linked to economic dynamism.

*Leveraging French power.* The French maintain the traditional view that the role of power remains dominant on the international scene and that international relations are determined by the changing balance of powers.<sup>2</sup> This view is, however, balanced by the perception that European countries – including France – are individually too weak to yield any efficiency in this world of powers. European integration is thus necessary either to give France – as Europe's dominant diplomatic actor – the means to support its ambitions, or to erect Europe as a real power, in order to compete with other big actors, such as the US, China, and previously the USSR.

Although these four objectives are still present in French political mythology, they nonetheless look ever more unreachable. The European Union seems ill-equipped to foster economic development in times of crisis. Germany is dominant. And Europeans are absent from major international issues. Moreover, peace in Europe is now challenged. Threats are emerging more from our neighbourhood, rather than from internal rivalries, but they are not seriously addressed by NATO.

An additional aim could have played a positive role in the perception of Europe in French public opinion: a decisive posture to protect European peoples and economies from what is viewed as an aggressive globalisation.<sup>3</sup> However, actual perception is the exact opposite. Since the middle of the 1990s, "Brussels" has been viewed as the main proponent of an uncontrolled opening up to global markets, and as the manager of a competition not between European and other markets, but between Europeans themselves – a situation which is dividing Europe instead of unifying it.

Precisely what French citizens hope to gain from their membership to the EU is thus quite vague. Broadly speaking, outside of the “globalised elite” - the majority of political, economic, academic and media leaders, supposed in France to be getting the best out of globalisation – the French stand somewhere between the conviction that Europe is necessary, inevitable even, and the hope that it could be steered in another direction, with a new definition of its political and economic goals.

**Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?**

The argument laid out above helps to explain why the EU no longer appears to be a clear and identifiable project to most French citizens. This feeling is actually shared across the public opinion and by intellectual and political elites alike, although the reasons may differ. Despite this, all would probably agree on the need to probe a little deeper into understanding the path we are currently on.

The aim of this project looks unclear: “ever closer union” describes a process, not the type of union being built. Are we attempting to shape a coherent actor in the international system with a common will and common means to obtain specific results in line with our identity and our interests? Do we intend to stabilise a geographical area – but who will define the geographic limits of this area? Is there a coherent goal in the decisions to enlarge, and does this fit with the model of an efficient international actor?

Similar questions arise at the economic level. Are we building a coherent, geographically identified, and somehow protected, economic space, capable of competing with other areas in

a globalised world? Or are we opening up our economic space while stirring competition between Member States? What appeared clear for the French in 2015 was that both the Greek crisis and the pork crisis over the summer, were the outcome of the same decision to organise competition within the EU.<sup>4</sup> The question here is twofold: What sort of economic efficiency and political solidarity are we looking for? In other words, what sort of Europe do we want? Is Europe designed as a political project – a way to build a “French Europe” – or is it an area of open economic competition – a British Europe?

As a consequence, it is hard for the French to describe how Europe is or how it should be governed. Its governance structure is very complex. To some extent, it is inevitable after the rapid rounds of enlargement over the past fifteen years. But this complexity is also the product of uncertainty: European integration vacillates between federalist and inter-governmental logics, and, in the end, combines both for each problem. The European Council, the European Commission, the Eurogroup – and maybe tomorrow an “economic government of the Eurozone” - the European Parliament, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund all played a part in the Greek crisis. This complex network of actors does not help to present a clear picture of how the EU is governed. The impossibility of understanding what is going on in Brussels, and how it works or could work, was clearly a reason for the French refusal of the constitutional project in 2005.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the only clear element is that Member States make decisions in line with their national interests – exactly the opposite of what has been thought for decades, keeping in mind the objective of building a common solidarity. This revelation calls into question the

democratic dimension of European governance. The European Parliament does not offer a credible response to this lack of democratic legitimacy. In the end, European legitimacy seems to materialise only when democratically elected heads of state or government decide together within the European Council.

For most French citizens, it seems that the EU is unable to explain which path it is following: it appears inefficient in the economic field, impotent in security matters, and even unable to protect its so-called basic values – the Greek crisis and the refugee crisis have been evidence of that. And this disaffection is important at a time when national institutions are also contested in several European countries.

### **Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?**

France has always held contradictory positions regarding the adequate level of integration. It is both one of the most ancient nation states in Europe, favouring a strong state, and one of the founding states of the European integration process. This initial contradiction is at the very core of traditional Gaullist thinking: the preservation of French interests and of its capacity to decide on the one hand, while also promoting proposals for unification on the other hand (see in the 1960s the well-known “plan Fouchet”). It is not hard to imagine that this contradiction has been revitalised by the present uncertainties on the EU’s objectives and choices.

Concerning the economy, the French support further integration. They greatly benefited from the Common Market, and more

precisely the Common Agricultural Policy. Nowadays, they are conscious that the very existence of the single currency presupposes at least a convergence of economic policies. If the popularity of the far right *Front National* in the polls is any indication, it shows that a significant portion of the population is less convinced. The party is indeed advocating for the end of the euro and of any sort of integration that would limit national sovereignty in the economic field. In any case, the French are cognisant of the important divisions, which still exist between Member States on the fundamentals underpinning national economic policies. The French thus seem to be divided at two levels. They favour, in theory, economic integration, but not on political issues they do not approve. The current path undertaken by “Brussels” seems to strive for economically liberal and deregulatory policies that they oppose. Secondly, what is approved by the political elites of the country (more budgetary constraint and control, a growing convergence of national economic policies etc.) is probably not widely supported by French public opinion.<sup>6</sup>

At the political level, France is actually more ambivalent than it lets on. Despite many statements, it favours a rather low level of integration – precisely because Paris knows that the majority of Member States are not ready to go its way. France affirms the necessity of greater integration concerning fiscal or migrations issues, but is in fact conscious of the limits to the common approach. Paris also knows that its diplomatic and military identity is useful for Europe as a whole, but fears that it could be diluted in a sort of federal political integration. The different rounds of enlargement have led to profound divergences between national interests and conceptions on what should be a more integrated political

Europe. France has, during the last decade, very much favoured the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy – it could have been a good compromise between national interests and common capacities. But here, despite official encouragement and support, the failure is clear.

There are other reasons explaining French reluctance for more political integration. First, European institutions did not set up real democratic mechanisms. Europe is not anti-democratic, but its democratic dimension is essentially defined by inter-state negotiation. Secondly, focusing too much attention today on further integration would be sensitive. The crisis of the European political decision making process could combine with the crisis of domestic institutions (in France as in many other Member States), which is rooted in the crisis of representative institutions, the rise of populist parties and of electoral abstention to name but a few examples. This crisis of internal institutions is said to be partly due to an indecipherable European institutional integration process.<sup>7</sup>

**According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?**

The idea of belonging to a common space, a common history, a common culture, and even a common project of peace and economic development – the European Union – is not questioned in France. A good example of it was given at the height of the Greek crisis in 2015. The German position was harshly criticised in France by some leaders and experts.<sup>8</sup> However, it did not provoke serious clashes between Paris and Berlin, and such a clash was never seriously considered by the majority of French citizens, as if the sentiment of a common destiny was a

certainty that could not be challenged by current events.

The problem, here, is not one of communication about the EU's achievements or lack thereof – give me a good policy and you will have a good communication. The blame does not even lie with the institutions. They in fact embody a political will to act together. But thinking for example that electing a “president of Europe” would dramatically change the situation is fanciful. It could not be the president of the European Council, who has to be chosen by the Member States. A direct election of the president of the Commission would change as few things as the election of the European Parliament, finally, did. This is a typical false dilemma – to hope that technical solutions can solve political problems.

Institutions must change to adapt to new circumstances. It is now time, for example, to define a new and serious governance for the Eurozone. But institutions cannot, by themselves, define and develop the peoples' feeling of belonging to a European community. This feeling can only derive from a growing consciousness of the existence of a European people – and that can be helped by the creation of common policies, rather than by institutional logics.

There will not be a unified European people for a very long time to come. For better or for worse, our diversity – geography, history, language, culture, etc. – can explain that state of affairs. In the meantime, the only solution is to show that we are driven by common references and values, and that we can be efficient in defending and promoting them. These common values should be inherent in our defence of democracy, and the promotion of democratic mechanisms within the European Union – think of the Hungarian drift, and of the pitiful

responses to migrations from the Middle East and Africa – that create solidarity between Member States.

For the French, European integration has to be much more than a negotiation between national interests, which does not mean that the latter should be diminished. De Gaulle was supposed to favour a sort of confederation,<sup>9</sup> but the French have tried in recent decades to go beyond that by pursuing a path more akin to the odd expression Jacques Delors once coined: we are building a federation of nation-states. This phrase actually describes an ambiguity.

Today's expectations are that Europe must provide more cohesion around basic values and a demonstrated efficiency. Three fields are particularly important: the economy, the environment and climate change, and relations with the neighbourhood.

Much more than institutional changes, a large debate on the European project is needed. For the French there was, and maybe there still is, a European project which unites philosophical, political, and technical dimensions. The time is ripe for a check-up: do the Member States and their peoples agree on that? Could we make more precise the content of the project? Public opinion – and especially in France, a country with a very political population - will mobilise in favour of European integration only if the project goes far beyond technical negotiations. While technical agreements can be necessary, they are always provisional and reversible.

### **Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?**

Four important issues will determine, over the coming months and years, the European

Union's credibility, and incidentally how the French public will feel about European integration.

The first issue is the Greek crisis. It is certainly not over and all the solutions found to date are unlikely to last. The debate on keeping the country in the Eurozone will come up again and again. The basis of the problem is still there. If, for one reason or another, Greece was forced out of the Eurozone, the repercussions on the stability of European economies would be negative. More profoundly, the fallout on the idea Europeans have of themselves and of the European integration, would be immense and probably very negative.

The second issue relates to migration. It has three underlying dimensions. First, it begs the question of whether the EU is capable of coping with a crisis that was largely expected. Second, the management of the free movement of people inside the Schengen area will be highly scrutinised – and relatedly the future of the Schengen Agreement itself. Third is the relationship of the EU and its Member States with the destabilised areas of the Southern Mediterranean. To sum up in a political question: is European integration only about quiet negotiations on commercial interests, or could Europe help solve problems imposed by a new international environment? To say it in one word: does “European solidarity” mean anything?

The third issue deals with Russia. The crisis in Ukraine has a local and regional dimension, but also a continental one. More broadly, it raises the question of our relationship with Moscow. EU strategies towards Moscow, have, for a long time, been contradictory or technical<sup>10</sup> – in this classical way of thinking of the European bureaucracy whereby political problems always have technical solutions.

Will Europeans be able to rapidly adopt a common position recognising both the right for Ukraine to remain an independent state – which presupposes massive economic and political assistance to build a real and effective state - and the fact that the European continent cannot be stabilised without a special partnership between the EU and Moscow?

Fourthly, Europe will have to address the crises around the Mediterranean. Migration tragedies suggest that it is impossible for Europeans not to have common strategies on how to stabilise the Southern Mediterranean. This raises the problem of the impotence of the present “common diplomacy”, and of European military inefficiency, despite relatively high military spending. Responses that will be given, or not, in the coming months, to the problem, will also define the credibility of the EU as an international actor in the eyes of its publics. If Europe reveals itself unable to manage internal and external dimensions of the migration problem, the implications in terms of people’s adhesion to the European project could be terrible.

We are back to the core problem. Do we want the EU to remain a forum of discussions, where various national interests are confronted – which could be worthwhile but quite limited considering the problems that need to be managed - or do we want to progressively create a common actor in international relations? And what would be the relationship of this actor vis-à-vis the sovereignty of Member States?

This is, once more, a debate on the European project. Such a statement will probably seem

abstract, intellectual, so typically French even. However, the divisions within an enlarged EU appear to be so important, uncertainties so wide, in a world no more regulated by dominant Western powers, that it would be irresponsible not to open the debate. Europe seems so wealthy, but so weak when confronting the political dimension of these problems. The main actors of this debate should be within civil society. It is now time to ask Europeans what they really want for Europe: opinion leaders, experts, academics, and *think tanks* all have thus an important role to play. The real question here is how to organise this debate. But outside of such a debate, the solutions to present problems will remain bureaucratic, abstract, and unintelligible to the public, besides being provisional.

Europe is today threatened by division and dilution. Dilution could pave the way for political divisions, which would limit the discussion on the fundamental problems the EU is facing. The EU would then survive only as an open market, and its political dimension would progressively disappear. This would then lead to the risk of a re-nationalisation of the problems and of public opinions.

Such a large debate on a project for Europe would not automatically lead to an agreement on all objectives from all European opinions. But it would tell us if Europe wants to go on as it is now, or if it is time to imagine a new architecture, such as the articulation between a large area of economic cooperation and a more reduced area with a stronger political identity and consequently a deeper integration.

## Endnotes

1. Hubert Védrine, *Les Mondes de François Mitterrand : à l'Élysée 1981-1995*, Paris, Fayard, 1996.
2. See the convergent views of Alain Peyrefitte, *C'était de Gaulle*, tome 2, Paris, Ed. De Fallois, 1994, and Hubert Védrine, *Les Mondes de François Mitterrand*, *op.cit.*
3. On the French approach to globalisation, see Hubert Védrine, *La France et la Mondialisation*, rapport au président de la République, 2007.
4. Dominique David, "La crise grecque, crise du projet européen", in Thierry de Montbrial, Dominique David (eds.), *RAMSES 2016*, Paris, Ifri-Dunod, 2015, pp.188-191.
5. A general analysis of the referendum in Annie Laurent, Nicolas Sauger, "Le Referendum de ratification du Traité constitutionnel : comprendre le « Non » français", Paris, *Cahier du Cevipof*, No. 42, 2005. An Ifop Poll for *Le Figaro* revealed that ten years later, in 2015, 62% of the possible voters of 2005 would say "No", and only 38% "Yes" - 45% in 2005, *Le Figaro*, 28 April 2015.
6. See the poll mentioned in Note 5.
7. On the debate on Democracy in Europe, see Vivien Schmidt, *Democracy in Europe – the EU and National Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.
8. President Hollande was, during the July 2015 negotiations, the main supporter of an agreement with Greece, against the dominant German position in Brussels.
9. Charles de Gaulle, Press Conference, 12 November 1953 ; Charles de Gaulle, Press Conference, 15 May 1962 ("There cannot be another Europe that Europe of states") ; Interview with Charles de Gaulle by Michel Droit, December 12th 1965.
10. Philippe Lefort, "La crise ukrainienne ou le malentendu européen", *Politique étrangère*, No 2/2014, 2014.