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## Is France still a pivotal power in the EU?

### Reflections on the country's declining agenda-setting role

**"You don't do what is necessary.** In Europe, you have the best geographical position. You don't have a political handicap as we have, since you were on the side of the winners of World War II. You keep an international influence, which is higher than your real power [...]. You have the best set of cards in your hands in order to be the first power in Europe. You should be the first power in Europe, but you don't do what is necessary."<sup>1</sup> These words don't date from these days, but were pronounced in 1974. It was Helmut Schmidt, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, who admonished the newly elected French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to play a more assertive role in Europe and to assume the leadership within the European institutions.

The issues raised by Schmidt have not lost their pertinence, though the map of Europe has profoundly changed since then. The European Union has enlarged to 28 member states; Germany has been reunified and grown demographically and economically. However, the assets for a French leadership in the EU remain virtually unchanged. It still is the only country, which due to its geographical position, can build a bridge between the Southern, Northern and Western states of the EU. It is, together with the UK, the only member state with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and disposing of nuclear weapons. Its weight in international organisations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund is considerable. It can look back on a century-old tradition of skilful diplomacy and a forward-thinking foreign policy.

However, the vast majority of observers would agree that France is currently falling behind as to its role as a European leader. From all corners of the EU, its government receives exhortations to finally engage into structural reforms, which should make the country fit for future challenges. The French nominee for Commissioner for Economic Affairs, Pierre Moscovici, struggled to gain his approval from the European Parliament, because several deputies were not convinced of his capacities to oversee budgetary discipline in Europe. Since the May 2014 elections, 23 out of the 74 French deputies of the European Parliament belong to the far-right

Front National, not attached to any of the political groups and thus without an impact on the workings of the parliament.

When asked for the reasons of the decline of French leadership within the European Union, observers are inclined to give a seemingly evident response: It is because of the recent crisis and its repercussions on the French economy. With zero per cent growth, an unemployment rate of 9,7 per cent, and a budget deficit exceeding the commonly agreed threshold of 3 per cent, the country is now often labelled as the "sick man of Europe" and thus considered unsuitable for leadership within the EU. However, its economic problems are not a sufficient reason for the ineptness of France's current European policies. There is no causal link between economic success and European leadership, nor between economic slump and its absence. Certainly, the leverage of France would be higher if its economic performance was better, but this factor alone does not explain why the country is no longer identified as an agenda-setter in the EU.

The deeper causes of France's declining leadership are to be seen in an increasing *désamour* of the public for the idea of a supranational Europe. As numerous authors have convincingly demonstrated, European integration is no longer exclusively an elite-driven process accompanied by an indifferent public opinion. The times of the "permissive consensus" are over and have made place for a "restraining dissensus", as L. Hooghe and G. Marks have convincingly argued.<sup>2</sup> This finding is particularly true for France, where European politics are no longer part of the *domaine réservé* of the President of the Republic, but are negotiated in the public arena. Long before the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis, several indicators proved an increased alienation of the public from the integration process. From the presidential elections of 2002 is mostly remembered the staggering qualification of Jean-Marie Le Pen for the second round. It is, however, often forgotten that in the first round of the elections, 42 % of the voters expressed their preference for candidates fiercely or moderately opposed to European integration.<sup>3</sup> The referendum on the Constitutional

Treaty three years after only reinforced an already existing trend: A strong minority within the Socialist Party around Laurent Fabius had in the meantime discovered the electoral potential of Euroscepticism and declared its opposition to the treaty. The 54,6 % of votes against the constitutional treaty demonstrated the strength of anti-EU arguments from the left as well as from the right.

Since then, France has not overcome the shock of the constitutional referendum. Instead of encouraging the citizens to espouse again the idea of a supranational Europe, politicians have professed to "understand" the voters' alienation from the EU and have rhetorically flattered their Eurosceptic opinions. In this regard, the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy constitutes a telling example: On the one hand, the president contributed significantly to the conclusion of the Lisbon treaty, on the other hand, he established at the same time a new Ministry devoted to "national identity" and avoided any principled commitment to supra-nationalism as a solution to France's current challenges. His rhetoric hailed an "economic patriotism" and let voters believe that the EU as a space of open borders was - at least partly - responsible for the country being allegedly "flooded" by immigrants.

Sarkozy's successor has certainly adopted a softer rhetoric on issues like immigration and national identity, but has not adopted a significantly new approach on communicating European integration to the citizens. In May 2013, François Hollande bluntly refused any interference of the European Commission into the country's internal affairs when stating that it had "not to dictate France what it has to do."<sup>4</sup> The night of the 2014 EP elections showed France's political leaders in a particularly disconcerted state, when their vast majority claimed they had "heard" the message which the voters had tried to convey to them by massively voting for Front National; however, virtually nobody engaged in rebutting and disproving the anti-EU propaganda of the far-right party.

In conclusion, the French political elite, as to its stance towards the EU, appears to be a prisoner of the Front National. In order not to lose voters to the extremist party, they don't dare to publicly commit to European integration and propose ambitious objectives for its agenda. Thus, French leadership is currently a victim of the domestic political arena of the country. Its restoration will certainly be facilitated by a better economic performance of the country. But only a patient, principled and unstinting pedagogical effort among its population will make it possible that France recovers its lost role as an agenda-setter for the EU.

(1) Helmut Schmidt quoted in: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, *Le pouvoir et la vie*, Vol. I, Paris 1988, p. 136.

(2) Liesbet Hooghe/Gary Marks, *A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus*, in: *British Journal of Political Science* 39 (2009), p. 1-23.

(3) Aggregated votes for: Jean-Marie Le Pen, Bruno Megret, Robert Hue, Arlette Laguiller, Olivier Besancenot, Jean Saint-Josse, André Gluckstein and Jean-Pierre Chevènement.

(4) Cf.: "Hollande: 'la Commission n'a pas à nous dicter ce que nous devons faire'", *Le Point*, 29/05/2014.

[http://www.lepoint.fr/economie/hollande-la-commission-n-a-pas-a-nous-dicter-ce-que-nous-avons-a-faire-29-05-2013-1674318\\_28.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/economie/hollande-la-commission-n-a-pas-a-nous-dicter-ce-que-nous-avons-a-faire-29-05-2013-1674318_28.php)