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# France and the European Union: a story of reason rather than love

*Christian Lequesne*

In France, the push for the European integration process has come historically for a large part from the political and administrative elite. Over the past 60 years, they have expressed not only interest but also belief in European integration, as the US scholar Craig Parsons has rightly noted.<sup>1</sup> Three beliefs about the EU have been recurrent fundamentals for French political and administrative elites:

1. The EU must have a 'core' consisting in the major member states which exercise a leadership on the rest. In this regard, France and Germany must share the role of motor or driving force.
2. The EU must not be limited to a single market. It should develop as a political project including a foreign and security policy. This is usually called in France *l'Europe puissance*, a term difficult to translate.
3. The EU governance should be a combination of supranational and intergovernmental institutions.

The dramatic changes of 1989 in Europe clashed with these representations of the EU forged by the French elites. Several issues emerged after the reunification of Germany and the more general collapse of the Soviet bloc. Was this the end of the complementary asymmetry between Paris and Berlin (which replaced Bonn as the capital of a reunified Germany in 1990)? Is there a deep contradiction between *l'Europe puissance* and this rapid EU enlargement towards the East that will first favour a market-driven project?<sup>2</sup>

For France as for many other EU member states, the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht represented the end of the 'permissive consensus' among the public, identified in the 1970s by the US scholar Ronald Inglehart.<sup>3</sup> The European integration process left the sphere of the elites, becoming increasingly politicized. As a consequence, the EU has become more a matter of party competition and, not least, of party-internal splits. Also Euroscepticism has become more institutionalized, on both sides of the political spectrum. In France's September 1992 referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, a small 'yes' (51%) won. Thirteen years later, in May 2005, the French people declared a firm 'no' (54%) to the European Constitutional Treaty.

Opposition to Europeanization has become increasingly routinized in elections and has helped to legitimize parties of both the far right and the far left. In the European elections of June 2014, the far right party, Front National, came in first, winning 23 seats of a total of 72. The Front National developed its campaign against French membership in the euro but also against a EU that was held to be killing off the welfare state. It denounced the negative effects of globalization on the French labour market, where unemployment stood at 10.4% in 2014. This discourse has an appeal for blue-collar workers who used to vote for left-wing parties. Denunciation of an EU which brings increased illegal migration, negatively affecting the welfare state, has been an additional argument used by the Front National.

Euroscepticism has left behind the Gaullist discourse on the preservation of national sovereignty to focus more exclu-

<sup>1</sup> Craig Parsons, *A certain idea of Europe*, Cornell University Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Lequesne, *La France et la nouvelle Europe. Assumer le changement d'échelle*. Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Inglehart, "Public Opinion and Regional Integration", *International Organization*, 24/04, Autum 1970, pp. 764-795.

sively on economic and social issues. This development is confronted by the firm realities of the welfare state. In 2014, 55% of French GDP was still devoted to public spending, despite a public deficit and a public debt that exceed the thresholds allowed by the EU Treaties: 93.5% of GDP for the public debt (instead of the EU-stipulated 60%) and 4.2% of GDP for the public deficit (instead of 3%).

These basic problems make the situation schizophrenic for any governing majority (left- or right-wing) in France. For a left-wing government, like the current Valls government, it is necessary to promise no drastic changes in the French welfare state, in order to win the election – and then, when in power, reduce public expenditures. For a right-wing government, there is the obligation to develop a discourse on financial rigour in order to win the elections, and then the difficulty of cutting public spending once in power.

Any French government has to cope with the challenge of complying as much as possible with the EU convergence criteria, without abandoning the national policies of the welfare state. This forces any French government to consider both the German discourse on *Sparpolitik* and the domestic discourse on the preservation of generous distributive policies (healthcare, retirement). It helps to explain why France has signed treaties like the *Fiscal Compact* introducing the Golden Rule into its domestic law and asks at the same time regularly for postponements in implementing its obligations. It puts France somewhere in the middle between the Northern and the Southern member states of the EU. On the Northern front, France has no other choice than to accept compromises with Germany, its primary trade partner, on the rationalization of public finances. On the Southern front, France regularly expresses its solidarity with the Mediterranean countries that have heavy public debts and deficits, and supports the principle of financial transfers towards these countries – directly from the national budgets, or from the European Central Bank and the European Stability Mechanism.

The margin of manoeuvre at the EU level for the Valls government is a very narrow one. There is no other alternative than to introduce unpopular reforms to bring the economy of France in line with its EU commitments. This means putting on the agenda questions like increasing flexibility for the job market, new reforms of the pension and healthcare systems, and corporate tax facilities for companies. In discursive terms, it means explaining to the people that France has ‘external’ constraints and that politics is not a matter of black and white between the left and the right, but requires consensus. This is what President Hollande and Prime Minister Valls are experiencing, in contrast to the idealistic legacy of the French Revolution that any good politics means a dual confrontation between two camps. It goes against the political culture and explains the low support of the population

towards President Hollande (14%), the Valls government (17%) and the established political parties (8%).<sup>4</sup> The main risk of this strategy is of course the rise of the far-rightist Front National, which perpetuates the fiction that doing politics is a matter of voluntarism and not of consensus. It is difficult to say how many structural reforms the Valls Government will be able to implement in order to raise economic performance and to restore French credibility at the EU level. President Hollande and Prime Minister Valls have understood that turning their backs to the EU will be a form of economic suicide. Despite the rise of the Front National, the fact remains that, in April 2014, only 26% of the French population felt in favour of leaving the Euro when 56% were against.<sup>5</sup>

The difficulties of the French economy have worsened the gap with Germany which, ten years ago, was the ‘sick child’ of the EU economies but has recovered, following a series of major domestic reforms (the ‘Harz Laws’). Co-leading together with Germany has become more difficult. As French politicians have not renounced exercising a form of leadership within the EU, it has had to invest in another dimension: foreign and security policy.

CFSP has always been considered by French political and administrative elites as a means to maximize national diplomatic action. Participating in military interventions is consubstantial to the perception of an efficient diplomacy. The socialist President Hollande did not revise in 2012 his predecessor’s decision to reintegrate with the NATO Military Command that President De Gaulle had left in 1966. He insisted on having, in parallel, a more common defence strategy within the EU. This political goal is not easy to achieve, because of domestic as well as EU constraints. The main domestic constraint is the regular decrease of the French defence budget, which still represents 2% of GDP in 2015. The EU constraint concerns the difficulty of moving forward on any new project for a European Defence Policy with the United Kingdom as the traditional partner in this field, because this partner comes with the difficult domestic debate on remaining in the EU or leaving it.

Paris can no longer limit the consolidation of the EU Defence Policy to a privileged partnership with London: alternative scenarios must be explored. The 2013 government *White Book on Defence and National Security* supports the idea of activating the relationships with Germany and Poland, in the defence field, together with other countries like Italy and Spain in a ‘Weimar Plus Triangle’.<sup>6</sup>

4 [http://www.bva.fr/data/sondage/sondage\\_fiche/1622/fichier\\_bva\\_-\\_lobs\\_-\\_francois\\_hollande\\_-\\_bilan\\_de\\_mi-mandat75e6c.pdf](http://www.bva.fr/data/sondage/sondage_fiche/1622/fichier_bva_-_lobs_-_francois_hollande_-_bilan_de_mi-mandat75e6c.pdf)

5 <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/elections-europeennes-2014/20140428.OBS5361/europeennes-56-des-francais-opposés-a-la-disparition-de-l-euro.html>

6 <http://fr.calameo.com/read/000331627d6f04ea4fe0e>

On defence issues, France has not hesitated to intervene militarily in various configurations: with the NATO 'coalition of the willing' in Libya (2011), alone against the Jihadi armed groups in Northern Mali (2013), with the US air force against Daesh in Iraq (2014). Starting with Sarkozy and continuing with Hollande, French governments have abandoned their pretention to distant their diplomacy from the USA in the Middle East. The negotiations on the future of the Iran Nuclear Plan are another example where France has acted as close ally of the USA. This marks a shift compare to the Gaullist paradigm of distancing from Washington. The main reason for this change is that France's foreign policy, as in many Western democracies, is more and more concerned about the defence of global liberal values and not only national interests. Paradoxically, it is when the power of the West is declining at the international level that France has begun assuming a more explicit Western identity.

The other reason is that France knows that conducting any efficient military operation outside Europe will be difficult without the material resources of the US Army. In September 2013, French President Hollande had to abandon his plan of military invention against the regime in Syria because US President Obama decided –without any constitutional obligation- to ask the Congress before committing US troops and got a negative reply.

France's solidarity with the Western camp has been unshakable during the Ukrainian crisis. France agreed with the USA and the EU partners to launch sanctions against Putin's Russia. President Hollande also agreed to delay the delivery to Russia of the helicopter-carrier *Mistral*, which had been negotiated in 2011 under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy. It appears increasingly likely that France will refund to Russia the advance payment rather than deliver the vessel. On the other hand, France – like Germany – is not in favour of additional sanctions against Russia at the moment. There is also no enthusiasm for supporting Ukrainian membership in NATO, to avoid the 'politics of the worse' with Putin.

France is a clear example of a state whose economic future is totally bound to the EU. Europeanization has become a concrete reality that any French government, leftist or rightist, cannot escape. Socialist President Hollande and Prime Minister Valls have launched several structural reforms of France's economic policy under the strong constraints of its EU commitments. The process of domestic change has fuelled Euroscepticism, also within the government's majority. But even if Eurosceptics should get ruling responsibilities in the future, it is far from obvious that they will be in a position to escape France's EU commitments.

France exemplifies a two-level game model: what a member state decides at home directly influences its position in the EU, and what the EU decides directly influences the course of that state's domestic policies and politics.

This is why, rather than a story of love, the EU has become a story of reason for France. However, domestic reforms shaped by the EU still depend on the French decision-making culture, where conflict still predominates over consensus. This is why reforms in France take longer time to be implemented than what some other EU partners (Germany in particular) often expect.

There can be no doubt that France still aims to be reckoned among the leading EU member states. Given the considerable difficulties with its economic policy, French governments have tended to engage more actively in the sphere of foreign and security policy as a compensation strategy.

France in 2015 is an active contributor to the cause of world peace, but it would like to find more committed allies in the EU. Cooperation is sometimes easier with the USA, and this is why France has been tending to follow more the US foreign policy line, in contradiction to the Gaullist legacy. Regarding the EU, French public opinion has not been vocal about governmental activism on foreign and security issues. Clearly, it is economic and social policies that engage the attention of the French public and nourish the debate about the EU.



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### About the Author

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