

'The pot boils over in Brussels' from Pravda (3 July 1965)

Caption: On 3 July 1965, the Soviet daily newspaper Pravda reports on what is referred to as the 'empty chair' crisis which is paralysing the work of the Community institutions in Brussels.

Source: Pravda. 03.07.1965, n° 184. Moskva. "Brussel'skii 'vzryv'", p. 3.

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The pot boils over in Brussels

Brussels is no stranger to meetings that run long into the night. Since the 'Common Market' is made up of the competing economic groupings of France, West Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries, reaching consensus is no easy task. But this week, the pot boiled over.

At daybreak on Thursday, after three long days without interruption, the meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Six came to an end. Journalists, weary of waiting, were called to a special press conference at which the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, motioning towards Bonn, announced that the meeting had failed as 'delegates were not imbued with the urge to reach consensus'. The following day, a statement came from Paris declaring that France would cease to cooperate with the Common Market 'for the time being'.

The current crisis in Brussels is proof of the sharp worsening of disagreements within the Common Market, particularly between France and West Germany.

During the first stage, economic union between the six countries of 'Little Europe' concerned primarily the industrial sector. The main benefits of this went, of course, to West Germany, the strongest of the Common Market countries in manufacturing terms. Germany's monopolistic groups achieved a far greater concentration of power than their French counterparts and are successfully conquering the Common Market. Towards the end of last year, Paris secured an agreement on the removal of customs barriers in the agricultural sector, the one sector in which France is stronger than its partners. It seemed that everyone was ready for this decision to be implemented. However, having made this concession, in return Bonn is now seeking not only more privileges for its industrial sector, but also to force the Six into a political union.

The permanent Commission of the Common Market is headed by the West German politician Walter Hallstein and has an obvious pro-Bonn stance. The Commission proposed that agricultural funding be taken out of the hands of individual countries and given to the central organ of the Common Market. It was proposed that customs revenue from trade with third countries provide the basis for the Six's own budget. The decision to collect this revenue into a 'common fund' was taken in 1962. The sovereign right of control over the distribution of the budget was to be transferred to the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Thus Paris would have only limited use of its chief weapon in the Common Market, agriculture, and the European Parliament would secure supranational functions.

However, trouble was already brewing in Brussels on Wednesday morning. The agreement reached on Monday to abolish customs duty on agricultural and industrial goods from 1 July 1967 was under threat. The French Foreign Minister denounced the attempts to use the issue of agricultural funding to strengthen the role of the Brussels Commission and the Strasbourg Parliament.

The situation became more frenzied as midnight approached. At two minutes past twelve, as luck would have it, the assembly hall was plunged into darkness — the fuses had blown. At a quarter to one, the Ministers of the Six and Mr Hallstein left their advisers behind and retired to the hall known in Brussels as the 'Hall of Catastrophes'. After an hour and a quarter, Maurice Couve de Murville, chairman of the meeting, stated that 'unfortunately, we must announce that we cannot reach consensus on the most important issues and that, for the moment, negotiations have failed and we must therefore end this discussion.'

The Ministers filed out of the Hall of Catastrophes one by one. The Netherlands delegate, Minister Joseph Luns, disgruntled by the failure, left the meeting before it was officially closed. Relations between the French and West German delegates deteriorated. When Mr Couve de Murville went to enter the press conference hall and saw that the Bonn delegation was already at the table, he turned to the journalists and stated: 'There is no longer anything I can do here.' He returned only after the West German Foreign Minister, Gerhard Schröder, had left the hall ...

Details can sometimes clarify situations and yet, at other times, they simply confuse matters. Is this really the beginning of the end for the Common Market? It is difficult to say. However, several conclusions can already be drawn. The integration process is being more and more influenced by West Germany's economic

weight and the aggressive stance of its economic, political and military groups. The integration process has now reached the stage where the clashes between the idea of unification and the national interests of the individual nations are so severe that each country has been left wondering whether to remain an independent sovereign state or whether to become part of 'Little Europe' under the military, political and economic aegis of Bonn.

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