

'What prospects now for Community?' from Le Soir (12 July 1965)


Caption: On 12 July 1965, the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir comments on the causes of the empty chair crisis and outlines its institutional and political implications.

Source: Le Soir. Bruxelles. "Histoire d'une rupture. Quelles chances reste-t-il à l'Europe communautaire?", auteur:Rebuffat, Charles , p. 2-3.

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How the rift came about. What prospects now for Community?

It was the successes of the Six as well as the conflicts between them that made the crisis inevitable, and it has cast the spotlight on the real issues affecting their solidarity.

by Charles Rebuffat

Did the death knell sound for the European Community on 1 July 1965 at 1.55 a.m.? The likelihood is that the damage is not irreparable. Paris has pushed the 'empty chair' policy to the absolute limits of the tolerable, but has stopped there. So a glimmer of hope remains on the horizon. But the situation is still fraught with danger. Even if all are doing their best, on both sides, to avoid 'provocation' — with the exception of a handful of extremists — there is a definite risk of rapid deterioration. If harmony is to be restored, the Six do not merely need to reach a compromise; they have to look for one as soon as possible.

The first question to be resolved is, of course, to establish whether everyone wants to continue with the experiment. The economic interests of all — both industrial and agricultural — argue strongly for a positive response. The political interest is just as keen. As far as France is concerned, by smothering Little Europe, it would be kindly handing over to Great Britain what one observer rightly called 'its greatest victory since Waterloo'. Alternative, and more or less off-the-peg, solutions do in fact exist (and, indeed, a 'Community of Five' would itself be a viable proposition). However, leaving France in splendid isolation would have catastrophic political consequences for the whole of the Western world and, more particularly, for the Fifth Republic's partners within the Common Market.

Leave your prejudices outside the negotiating room

Unless madness prevails, we are therefore entitled to assume that no-one is deliberately planning to deal a fatal blow to Community Europe and that, while this is no passionate affair, all are prepared to continue with the marriage of convenience. But, and this is the first condition on which renewed agreement depends, a marriage of convenience requires at least a minimum of mutual esteem, understanding and, more basically, good manners.

In this instance, these are not platitudes. Throughout this account, we have highlighted the importance of psychological factors, sensibilities and collective or individual resentments in the European crisis. There is another point that must also be made, and not even the least perceptive of observers can fail to have noticed this during these regrettable weeks. A chauvinism of the most outmoded and idiotic kind insidiously and gradually took hold of all those gathered around their champions on the field of play. Suddenly, everyone's 'honour' was on the line, both spiritually and on the terraces of a stadium carried away by its heroes' footwork.

And so one thing is now certain: if we genuinely want to save the Community, every responsible statesman (in both the political and psychological sense) must do his utmost, however eminent he may be, to suppress any desire that he may have to force the enemy to capitulate or to demonstrate his rhetorical skills. There are pressures, threats, unilateral gestures or even unfortunate words which cannot be tolerated as feelings stand. In one country or another in Little Europe, there is no doubt that a government that swallows another insult will immediately explode. The most illustrious of living Frenchmen once made the point that prejudices should be left safely outside the negotiating room.

That kind of approach, which basic politeness demands and the haughtiest of nationalism does not forbid, is an absolute necessity. It offers the only way of recreating the atmosphere that is vital if we are to be clear-sighted and work towards a compromise. The Six will be very much in need of those virtues if they want to pass, second time around, the serious test to which Paul-Henri Spaak has invited them. Abandoning complexes and animosity, it is paramount, now above all, that they should try to see clearly and to disengage the fundamental roots of the crisis from merely secondary or emotional issues.

The pretexts for the crisis

The crisis broke out on 1 July, prompted by circumstances particularly propitious to it. In a psychological climate that had dramatically deteriorated, largely because of certain complaints ascribed to France, some of France's partners were unable to resist the temptation to exploit its position as complainant to the extreme. But it was by chance that the crisis broke on that particular night. It was not the deliberate outcome of an 'anti-Gaullist' conspiracy — that may be seen plainly from the divisions between the 'Five'. Nor was it the result of too subtle a 'supranational' movement: while the allegedly 'supranational' governments may have backed the Commission's proposals, the effect was that of the rope supporting the hanged man. Quite the reverse; the way in which Mr Couve de Murville disengaged, on the pretexts with which we are familiar, is clearly of a tactical nature. Had his partners had really been so unpardonably in breach of their obligations, the Common Market should have been dissolved on 30 June, at the twelfth stroke of midnight and not one second later.

Nor is the crisis the result of irreconcilable differences on the technical issue of agricultural funding. An objective analysis shows that the compromise was within reach. The Six had practically agreed to implement the customs union and the common agricultural policy simultaneously on 1 July 1967. In practical terms, that twofold operation was already achieving a very broad balance between the interests of the six countries. Furthermore, in relation to agriculture, France had shown a degree of understanding for Italy's legitimate financial grievances, and one more little push could have resolved matters. Mr Fanfani doubtless gave the impression that, in two years, he could demand that the system of financing based on levies on agricultural imports be abandoned. But, assuming he could have won the argument in 1967, he would have had to accept, in accordance with the 1962 agreements, a return to the levy system 30 months later. Furthermore, even for that fixed period, France would probably have acknowledged, along with Italy, that the use of levies alone was not very fair and would have accepted corrective mechanisms which took greater account of the real level of prosperity of each state. Consequently, the ultimate dispute concerning the period of application of the new financial regulation did not amount to much.

The scapegoat

But agreement on that point would not have resolved the crisis. Or if it had, then the crisis would have broken out a little later, on other pretexts. In fact, if it broke on 1 July, it was because the technical issues to be resolved indirectly faced the Six with the crucial problems posed by the existence and further development of their Community — problems which they were not yet ready to resolve.

In some circles, it is currently fashionable to blame everything on the Hallstein Commission. It is even possible that this scapegoat may be sacrificed for the sake of reconciliation among the Six: there are those who maintain that at least some heads must fall. Let us be clear about this: that kind of action would be totally inappropriate and akin to cowardice. The fact is that, were it appropriate in this affair to penalise tactlessness and excess, certain Ministers would also do well — and be first in line — to abandon political life. That action would be all the more unjust since it is to the Commission's credit that, by submitting its proposals, it raised genuine problems. It is true that this approach may perhaps have had the effect of precipitating the crisis. But what would have been better: to take a short-sighted view of Europe, or to compel the Six to take on board the fact that their enterprise is forcing the pace of history?

For his part, Mr Spaak paid tribute to Mr Hallstein when he said, on 30 June: 'I appreciate what the Commission has done. Its role is to be bold and in the vanguard. I therefore understand that it is putting very important proposals to us, even if they seem to us to be premature.' The Commission may well have proposed solutions to these real problems that some found excessively attuned to the supranational solution. But could it do other than continue to pursue the specifically supranational approach of the Treaty of Rome? That is its only option. And did anyone else come up with other solutions? Certainly, there has, for 18 months now, been talk of a 'political revival'. But, for some, this is only to serve electoral ends, while others dream of diplomatic glory. Nobody believes in it and, moreover, the latter (France) is vetoing it ...

The mere fact of opening political negotiations has, for too long, seemed inevitably to mark the victory of the foreign policy views of some and the defeat of others. But these negotiations are now vital for internal

Community reasons. At issue are not just external or defence policy, but the institutional structures of Little Europe itself. That is the first genuine problem that needs to be resolved, and all credit to the Commission for raising it.

Coexistence of Community and States

Why does this arise? Because the institutional system laid down by the Treaty of Rome was going to be inadequate as soon as the Community emerged from its embryonic form. It has largely now emerged, and in any event should have emerged, on 1 July, with the customs union and the common agricultural policy. The very solutions that the Commission is advocating (establishment of own resources and boosting the powers of the European Parliament) require a revision of that Treaty. It could, of course, be claimed that this required simple adjustment, a natural extension of the Treaty, and that it would have been very simple to go along with that, if the nationalist views of the Fifth Republic had not sought to check it.

Doubtless, General de Gaulle did nothing to simplify matters and definitely not to maintain the European faith of the early days throughout Community territory. But, on closer scrutiny, it is less his theory of national realities that is the obstacle than certain hegemonistic tendencies in his European policy. The latter are, of course, unacceptable. But is the former really so out of date? Is it not the case that, within the Community, there are six national realities, including a Luxembourg version? Are they ready to merge in a denationalised entity? Would there not actually be other problems to resolve before we can achieve that, in addition to the problems of practical interest, the 'big money' matters? Can we really claim that, throughout the history of Europe, it was the finance ministers and not the military leaders who waged war on each other?

Even taking the most optimistic view, these realities will persist for a great deal longer and, at the same time, the States will evince a natural resistance to allowing themselves to be deprived of their political authority (just like the unwillingness of the Brussels municipalities to sacrifice their independence to a Greater Brussels). But alongside that, there is developing, asserting and imposing itself another reality, supranational and even federal, that of the Community. Unless we abandon it once and for all or stop it in its tracks, we shall not be able to prevent it establishing effective institutions, including a genuine executive body and a directly elected Parliament with real powers.

It would, in a way, be enough to tap the resources of the three European treaties to resolve the latter problem, but not to solve the problem of the coexistence between the supranational Community and the national States. But resolving that problem is becoming a matter of increasing urgency as the Community is developing in such a way that, with each day that passes, its responsibilities encroach further on the domain traditionally reserved for national sovereignty. The requirements of a common commercial policy are a clear illustration of that.

What kind of foreign policy?

Here we are entering into the sphere of foreign policy and the second real problem that the very existence of Little Europe raises: that of its place and role in the world. That question alone would certainly merit a lengthy study. But who can fail to see that the 'Community phenomenon' has effects that extend largely beyond its borders and must inevitably, General de Gaulle or no General de Gaulle, have an increasingly significant impact on international policy? Have we forgotten the negotiations with Great Britain or the major dispute over tariffs in the 'Kennedy Round'?

Above all, have we forgotten that the Community includes one country that still has territorial claims to assert? Can we avoid that question, which is the key to lasting peace in Europe, and not be interested in finding out whether, one fine morning, as a result of inevitable progression towards a federation of the Six, German claims will not have become European claims? Of course, the Community should not become a mere instrument of French policy. But nor should it become the instrument of a certain German policy — like the policy set out in a little paper surreptitiously tabled on 30 June which, in terms of commercial policy, involved just as much pleasing the Americans as annoying the Russians.

Those are the real problems afflicting the Six — just because they have been successful. They are vast problems, but at least the Six will have the time to resolve them, the time that they did not, it would appear, have the other day. On 1 January of next year, at intergovernmental level, and aided by the suggestions of the future single Commission, they are going to negotiate the revision of the Rome and Paris Treaties. They will have two years, during which time the Community can perfectly well continue to grow economically, to develop institutional structures that are both effective and balanced. Pierre Werner, Luxembourg Prime Minister, has already proposed that procedure. It is quintessentially wise.

Moreover, the process can be completed without the solution adopted prejudging the Community's diplomatic approach. That matter, on which the Six are far from reaching agreement, will not be resolved through a mere 'institutional revival', but by demonstrating to the States the need for solidarity it can certainly encourage the search for a constructive compromise, as beneficial to Western cooperation and to peace as a proper concept of independence.

That is the real challenge that the crisis of 1 July has set its authors. It may be taken up with a little more wisdom and a little less pride; a little more of the statesmanlike and a little less of the vengeful; a little more 20th-century citizen and a little less nostalgia for past failures.