

The European revival and the Rome Treaties (1955–1957) – historical context

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Historical context

With the failure of the European Defence Community in August 1954, efforts to achieve European integration on the political and military fronts temporarily ground to a halt. It seemed from the successes achieved by the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) that the economic domain and atomic energy offered the best chances of reviving the process of European unification.

Responding to an initiative from the governments of the Benelux countries, the Foreign Ministers of the six ECSC Member States met in Messina from 1 to 3 June 1955 to consider how best to pursue efforts towards European integration.

The resolution adopted by the Foreign Ministers of the Six in Messina provided the decisive impulse for a resumption of the European integration process. The Ministers instructed a group of experts to assess the scope for economic integration, with particular regard to the development of common institutions, the creation of a common market, the progressive harmonisation of social policies and the establishment of an organisation for the peaceful use of atomic energy. This intergovernmental committee met in Brussels from July 1955 under the chairmanship of Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian Foreign Minister, its remit being to find ways of achieving these aims. Proposals submitted by the national delegations were studied and discussed in four technical committees and subcommittees.

The United Kingdom withdrew from the negotiations during the discussion process, the British Government being interested neither in a customs union nor in an atomic energy community. Following tough and protracted negotiations, drafting of the report to the Foreign Ministers began in February 1956 on the basis of the working papers drawn up by the various committees. What came to be known as the 'Spaak report' was finally approved by the Heads of Delegation on 21 April 1956; it foresaw the creation of a Common Market and the founding of an Atomic Energy Community.

Guy Mollet, the French Prime Minister, proposed that negotiations on the European Atomic Energy Community should constitute the first step. Mollet could not count on securing a parliamentary majority in France in favour of the Common Market and hoped that success on the atomic energy issue would provide the desired impetus for the subsequent negotiations. The French proposal did, however, meet with great resistance, especially on the part of the German Federal Government which feared that, following a successful conclusion to the atomic energy negotiations, the French Government would not throw all its weight behind the founding of a Common Market. This was why the Federal Government under Konrad Adenauer insisted on the previously agreed package which included both projects.

The French Government eventually bowed to pressure from the negotiating partners and, at the Conference of Foreign Ministers of the Six held in Venice on 29 and 30 May 1956, approved the Spaak Report as the basis for Treaty negotiations in respect of an Economic and an Atomic Energy Community. The intergovernmental conference began work on 26 June 1956 at the Château de Val Duchesse near Brussels. Once again, the Belgian Foreign Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, was asked to chair the proceedings.

The Conference set up two committees, one for the Common Market, the other for a European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom). As with the previous year's discussions in the intergovernmental committee, progress in the negotiations was slow. Some of the main contentious issues were inclusion of the Overseas Territories in the Common Market, harmonisation of welfare provisions and Euratom's monopoly on the supply of fissile material.

The delegations' positions appeared irreconcilable. And when even the Foreign Ministers failed to achieve any significant result at the Paris Conference on 20 and 21 October 1956, the entire project seemed on the brink of collapse. What is more, the British Government chose this time to put forward its proposal for a European free trade area. This was again a boost, in the various countries, to the opponents of the quest for political integration.

Two factors were instrumental in pulling the negotiations back from the brink: these were the international

situation and bilateral discussions between the French and German Governments. The escalation of the Suez crisis, on the one hand, and the signing in late October 1956 of the Luxembourg Treaties, which allowed the Saar to become part of the Federal Republic, brought the negotiating partners closer together again. At the intergovernmental meeting between Guy Mollet and Konrad Adenauer in early November, a compromise was finally secured which allowed the Treaty negotiations to resume and to proceed to a successful conclusion. Work in the individual committees accelerated, and they were able to complete their tasks by March 1957, shortly before the Treaties were signed.

The Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) provides for the progressive establishment of a common market on the basis of a customs union. The market created in this way aims to achieve a common transport policy and also encompasses agriculture. It was, however, agreed that the matter of a common agricultural policy would be settled later at an intergovernmental conference. Other key features of the Treaty are the creation of a European Investment Bank and of a European Social Fund, the idea being to improve employment opportunities for workers and raise their standard of living.

At the meeting of the Heads of Government on 19 and 20 February 1957 in Paris, it proved possible also to reach agreement on the Overseas Territories. The Overseas Countries and Territories were to be associated with the Common Market and, through the creation of an investment fund, supported for a period of five years.

Compared with the progress being made on the Common Market front, progress with the Atomic Energy Community was slow, not least because of a failure to reach agreement on a number of important issues, for example, the construction of a European isotope-separation plant; the Atomic Energy Community thus lost some of its importance. Euratom's fundamental objectives were to foster research into and utilisation of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes within the Six and the development of relations with other countries.

The Rome Treaties were formally signed on 25 March 1957. The Interim Committee for the Common Market and Euratom was established on the same day with the task of clarifying, in the time that remained before the Treaties came into force, those issues that were still outstanding. Since it had not proved possible to settle on a single seat for the Community bodies, it was agreed that the work would proceed in Brussels on a provisional basis.

The Rome Treaties went forward to ratification by the parliaments of the six Member States without any major difficulty — thanks, in no small measure, to the persuasive efforts of the Action Committee for the United States of Europe, established in 1955 at the instigation of Jean Monnet. Finally, on 1 January 1958, the Treaties establishing the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community entered into force.