De Gaulle and the European Communities

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1. Introduction

There have been several personalities with great importance in the European building process. Most of them were supporters of European integration, such as Jean Monnet, Spaak, Spinelli, Delors, etc. Generally they can be encapsulated into two main streams and two different ideas of Europe.

One of these two streams was that of the followers of integration i.e. the creation of a supranational power and the creation of a new political superstructure, a European Federal State. One of the most important figures in this group was Jean Monnet, a French citizen who believed in a united Europe, where real and effective power would lie in common institutions. The second group, less heterogeneous and more differing in ideas, supported European cooperation, emphasizing the role of national states in some sort of confederation, with all power concentrated in national governments and not held by any outside institution. Charles de Gaulle was a member of this latter group, maybe the most important of them in European history, because his long term as president of France gave him the opportunity of leaving a deep imprint in the European building process.

2. Facts about de Gaulle

Charles de Gaulle was born in 1890 in Lille, a French city near the border to Belgium. He was given a conservative, catholic education and soon decided to follow a military career, studying in various military schools until he graduated. He fought in WWI, was injured a few times and showed bravery. In the beginning of the battle of Verdun he was injured again and taken prisoner. He made a number of attempts to escape, but failed (Charles de Gaulle 1954, p 67). De Gaulle was a good officer by now, but not yet a well known figure in the French army. Until the beginning of WWII he became a public figure, a leader, thanks to his theoretical knowledge and various writings, which had a great impact on France.

In the beginning of WWII and after the decisive defeat of the French Army in a very short time, he showed strong determination to go on fighting and resisting the German occupation. He flew from England to France, urging the French government to go into exile and continue the war from the French possessions in Africa. This was his first contact with the concept of integration. Jean Monnet was in Britain and elaborated a plan to keep France fighting against the Germans. His idea was that both countries, France and Britain, would unite to defeat their common enemy, sharing the rights and duties. The best way to effectively unite both countries according to Jean Monnet, was by integrating them, creating a new political structure, combining both countries to the extent of a common citizenship. De Gaulle, a French nationalist, convinced of the greatness of the French nation and its privilege to become one of the main world powers, accepted this plan as the only way to keep his country fighting, as the only way to save French honor, even though he disliked Monnet.

This was not the last time that he sacrificed his political views for the sake of France, it was also evident in his foreign policy and his relationship with the European Community. De Gaulle made many political mistakes in his career; many times his actions were old fashioned and unrealistic but he showed a strong pragmatic sense, being able to adapt to new situations and transform his ideas.

The plan itself did not work as the French government rejected it and surrendered to the Germans. De Gaulle stayed in London and tried to gain the leadership of "Free France". Once he was recognized as the one in charge (thanks to the help of Jean Monnet), he struggled to maintain the illusion that France was still at war and that France was one more of the allies. As leader of a country with no power, supported by the allies as a secondary actor in order to maintain the illusion of a national French opposition against the Germans, he had a lot to deal with. He tried to act as the head of government of one of the most important countries in the world, equal to the US, Britain or the Soviet Union – the natural position of France according de Gaulle. But in fact he was just a general commanding a small group of soldiers fighting for a flag which had no more territory than its colonies.

This was the source of some of de Gaulle's problems with the US and Britain. The American president F. D. Roosevelt did not like de Gaulle, his pretentious manners and his thoughts of greatness that did not fit with his stature. The French contribution to the war compared to the US was minor and so Roosevelt treated de Gaulle as what he was: a minor figure in the

context of WWII. De Gaulle never forgot this, but was obviously more pained for his country. Representing France, any mismanagement against him became mismanagement against France. The British premier Winston Churchill had a good personal relationship with de Gaulle (Booker and North, p. 80), but he was beholden to the USA. Britain could not face the power of the Germans without the support of the Americans and the former number one world power now found itself in American hands (http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html).

Once France was liberated by the allies, comprising American and British forces and some token French unit, de Gaulle was appointed by the allies as head of the provisional French government. His main aim was to normalise political life and restore the prestige of France by behaving like one of the powers which had won the war. That illusion was tolerated as such by the rest of the allies but in reality France could never have an effective say or even an influence in the main post war decisions. So in May 1953 de Gaulle withdrew from active politics, but was ready to come back when the circumstances would permit it (http://www.charles-de-gaulle.com).

In 1958 the Fourth Republic was threatened by certain factors, mainly economic, but also those concerning the colonies, especially Algeria. That was when de Gaulle appeared again to save France from its enemies, as he liked to point out. Once elected as president of the Fifth Republic, he took measures to reform the French economy and succeeded. In the political sphere, he drafted a new Constitution and decided to solve France's main issue, the colonies, by withdrawing from Algeria thus ending the colonial system. Not that he was convinced of its rightness. France was simply not strong enough to keep its colonies in the context of the cold war. By this de Gaulle showed that he could sacrifice his ideas for the sake of France. His dream of his country as a world power, an active participant in the world affairs was unattainable. France lacked the power to maintain its influence in the colonies and after the French withdrawal from Algeria, the political and economic situation stabilized (Still, supporters of French Algeria tried many times to assassinate de Gaulle). De Gaulle turned his eye towards Europe.

3. De Gaulle and Europe

After WWII the world was divided in two main blocks: the USA with its allies and the USSR with its supporters. While the two superpowers were

fighting the cold war for world supremacy, the dreams of de Gaulle of restoring France to greatness were impossible to achieve by conventional means. He needed a new approach. In the beginning, he tried to maintain a policy of independence from foreign powers, most of all the United States. American influence would mean the end of French independence. He was aware though that Europe was defended against the Soviets only by the American army and was aware that Western Europe rested free only thanks to the collaboration with the USA.

So, he started working in two ways, reassuring French independence and developing nuclear facilities in France. The latter, according to de Gaulle, would again take France to the top league of global politics, and keep away the threats. Harold McMillan actually tried to convince de Gaulle to support the enlargement of the European Community to the United Kingdom, offering nuclear technology in exchange, but the French president rejected this offer. British nuclear technology was reliant on the USA, on the Polaris missiles, and de Gaulle wanted full autonomy. Getting the American missiles would have meant dependence on American supplies.

As a political gesture he moved the headquarters of NATO from Paris to Brussels and withdrew France from the military structure of NATO. It was clear that his country alone could not stand independent in the world, so he had to look for partners that would accept the preeminence of France, or at least an equal partnership. The British were close allies of the USA and hence could not join an alliance with France. His partners should help him in creating a third way in the bipolar affairs of the Cold War and should not be tied to either side. With the intention of getting France recognized as a third force in world politics, he went to Moscow and other Soviet countries, but came back with minimal results: the only effective consequence of these trips was propaganda (http://www.charles-de-gaulle.com).

It was clear that France alone was too weak to play an active role in the world as it lacked economic and military resources to do so. Here, the French president made another change in his political views. The only possibility of an effective alliance would be West Germany. As a prisoner in WWI he had declared that cooperation between the Germans and the French would be impossible in the future. After WWII, he had supported the idea of allied domination over West Germany as the only possible mean to prevent another rise of German power. Now cooperation with the eternal enemy of the French nation would be the only possibility to rebuild the greatness of France… In other words, his political vision was old fashioned and unable to understand the new circumstances of the world. One could

say that luckily for him and for the Germans, the USA did not accept the ideas of de Gaulle. The United States gave full independence to West Germany because they were interested in a strong West Germany as the first battlefield in a hypothetical European war against the Soviet Union.

Cooperation with West Germany was developed through the European Community because the Germans wanted it and it was one of their conditions. De Gaulle always preferred bilateral contacts between the two countries. He promoted the meetings with Adenauer, the Chancellor of West Germany, to discuss community issues, trying to reach an agreement with the Germans and then to present a common position with them in the Community meeting. A common position of the two most important member states was unlikely to be rejected. The influence of this bilateral conception, and the influence of de Gaulle can still be noted in our days.

The issue of West Germany shows us a change in de Gaulle's political views, because according to his ideas, the nation was the last political structure, there was nothing beyond that, but if he wanted to cooperate with the Germans he had to do it through the European Community, the diplomatic channel open between both countries. And the essence of the Community was supranational institutions where the national states gave up sovereignty to an upper sphere, the common institutions. So de Gaulle accepted the cooperation with Germany through the EC because it was the only possibility to increase the influence of France, and because he was wise enough to realize that many economic problems of his country could be solved in the framework of the EC thanks to the economic power of West Germany. This shows that he had the illusion that he could change the essence of the Community from within, from supranational to intergovernmental, but he failed in this.

West Germany from its perspective was eager to embrace the collaboration with France as it was the country defeated in the war, very many millions of people had been killed and the Germans were still blamed for it. They needed to get past this, so they needed to normalize their diplomatic relations with the rest of the world and they needed to demonstrate German generosity and solidarity through such an idealistic project as the EC and also they could minimize the French influence over West Germany in a wider Community with four more members. To be accepted by France as a partner in the Community, with the political preeminence of France and an economic cost for Germany as the main contributor to the common Budget of the EC, was seen as a fair price to pay for the normalisation of West German external relations. De Gaulle also

paid the Germans a kind of diplomatic price by supporting a united Germany. This issue was of great importance for Adenauer, after the defacto recognition by the USA and the UK of East Germany which ended in the partition of the country.

So De Gaulle found a perfect partner to improve France's economic and political position and his acceptance of the EC can be understood as a means towards his ambition to restore French greatness (Booker and North, 120). But he did not accept the development of the EC into a supranational entity. He fought against it from within and even tried to change the whole Community through his Fouchet Plan, supporting the power of the national states. In a Community of six of France, West Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Italy, the preeminence of France meant that in a Community lead by states France could play the main role without the risk of national ideas melting in supranational institutions or in a 'European' influence.

The idea of de Gaulle using the EC for the benefit of France was clear during all his years as president of France and this influence can be seen in the main issues of de Gaulle's relations with the EC, i.e. the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the empty chair crisis, the enlargement to the UK and the Fouchet proposals. It can still be seen – the heritage of de Gaulle is still alive in many circles of French society and France's actions as an EU member are still influenced by his legacy.

4. The enlargement to the United Kingdom

The European Community began as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in the 1950's. Since the beginning of the negotiations the UK was interested in the new project, but as a supporter of national sovereignty as opposed to supranational power it agreed to a Community of intergovernmental cooperation instead of the integration of the ECSC. Hence the UK retired from the negotiations and later created another model of a European Community. This was based on a free trade area without common power institutions able to impose resolutions on the member states, working through negotiations and agreements between the member states. The creation of the European Free Trade Association with the Treaty of Stockholm in 1959 expressed the wishes of the British.

When the idea of a Common Market was launched in the Treaty of Rome, the UK was again interested, but retired from the discussions for the same reason, opposition to supranational power. Afterwards, because of different

reasons such as the economic crisis in the UK or the success of the EEC, the British tried to join the Community. By logic the ideas the British government had about Europe should have coincided with those of Charles de Gaulle. It was even considered that since France had a new president in 1958, the character of the new Europe might be moving away from dogmatic emphasis on supranational technocracy. (Milward, 443)[1] Both countries agreed with the idea of primacy of national sovereignty over any common institution and political cooperation as opposed to political integration. But in reality, de Gaulle became a bitter enemy of the British application, blocking the enlargement twice, in 1961 and 1967. The reasons for de Gaulle's vetoing of the UK's admission lay mainly in fear. The links between the UK and the USA were viewed negatively and also the UK represented a threat to the hegemony of France in the EC and as a result a threat to developing the CAP. (Moravcsik, 2000, 101-106).

In de Gaulle's time the Community was clearly dominated by France and the French had and still do have some sense of ownership of the EC. De Gaulle viewed the EC as an instrument to empower France, this being the only reason for him to be inside it. Other European countries entering the association would not have been a problem, since their size in terms of population and economy were relatively small, but Great Britain was a big country, powerful enough to maintain its independence and hence, to dismiss the influence of France. This new member would rival the influence of France and could ruin de Gaulle's desire of placing France at the center of the European stage.

It was also a threat to the perception of a close relationship with West Germany. The French president thought that a powerful and independent big country in the EC could overshadow the influence of France and could also affect the development of a Franco-German alliance which had aquired symbolic force with the signing in 1963 of a friendship treaty between West Germany and France. This alliance was the core of French influence. It was clear for de Gaulle that there was not enough room for two main powers in the Community and hence the enlargement to Great Britain had to be blocked.

A special relationship between the UK and the USA also played an important role in the refusal of the French president to the enlargement. De Gaulle was suspicious of the UK's close links with the USA, and thought

[1] Foreign Office officials used de Gaulle's repeated denunciations of the Federal Europe concept to justify 'the lack of discussion about sovereignty'

they would pave the way for American penetration into and domination of Europe and consequently, of France. According to the ideas of de Gaulle, France had to stand independently between the great powers, the USA and the USSR. De Gaulle was afraid that with the UK the Americans would join the Community via the back door. He was afraid that the UK would promote a free trade agreement with the USA and Canada inside the Community and this of course was unacceptable, because the economic power of the USA would lead to economic domination of the EC. France would lose the European market, which at that moment was an indispensable market for such sensible French products as the agricultural ones. In his speech announcing his personal veto to Britain's entry, de Gaulle claimed that Britain was not yet sufficiently "European" in her outlook, and still too closely tied to the USA (Booker and North, 102).

The third main reason for de Gaulle's personal veto against the UK was the Common Agricultural Policy. This European policy was settled in the Treaty of Rome, but did not start working until some years later, even after de Gaulle's term as president of France. It was still under discussion at the time of the petition of Britain to join the EC and de Gaulle did not want the British to interfere in the negotiations or the final result of the communitarian agreement, because he thought that it might be against the interest of France. The CAP was a good deal for France and represented many benefits for French farmers (Moravcsik, 2000a). Agriculture was still very important for France and it needed huge subsidies to face the cheaper production of other parts of the world, like Argentina, Canada or Australia. The French state was having considerable financial problems because of support to agriculture, so the Community was going to pay for this European policy for the benefit of French farmers and their government.

On the other hand, the high artificial prices of agricultural products because of the subsidies lead to a boom in production – farmers produced as much as possible because the guaranteed prices supported by the government made production profitable. As they produced more than the French market was able to absorb, they created a tremendous surplus. France had to sell this surplus in the international market, because these were perishable products and could not compete with cheaper international prices. It meant that they had to sell below cost, losing money and creating a supply distortion in the international agricultural products market, which in turn meant a decrease in international prices.

The idea of the CAP was to get finances from the European Community and at the same time dealing with the surplus on the European

market. The CAP was going to be the most important policy at the European level in terms of finance, absorbing most of the European budget - 55000 million of euros in 2007, and making France one of the most important beneficiaries. That is one more reminder of de Gaulle we can still feel today.

The UK had developed another type of agricultural system. It was based on imports and the liberalization of the market. It meant a reduction in the importance of the British national agricultural sector but low prices and advantages for the colonies and British industry, which could access the labor liberated from the countryside. De Gaulle was afraid that with the UK as a full member of the Community, the CAP which was against British interests would disappear or lose designed entity. The negotiations were not finished, so it was crucial for France to keep Britain out of the EC over this period – according to Community law, any country that joined the organization had to fulfill different requirements, one of them was to accept all the rules, laws and policies of the EC. Once the CAP was approved by all the member States, the UK had no choice but to accept it if it wanted to join the Community, so it was very important to keep the UK out of the EC until an agreement was reached on the CAP.

5. The empty chair crisis

De Gaulle was against any supranational integration that could reduce the independence of France, but he had to accept the Community for the good of France. During his mandate he had numerous clashes with the European Commission president, the German Wallenstein, a supporter of European integration. The main crisis is known as the “Empty Chair Crisis” and came from the opposition of de Gaulle to the advance of integration in the Community; this consisted mainly of proposals to allow the Community source its own income and to award greater powers to the Assembly. De Gaulle was also against what he saw as the increasing political importance of the Commission and against the imminent prospect of the Community moving into a stage of development in which there would be more majority votes in the Council, all proposals leading to the implementation of a supranational Europe (Moravcsik, 2000a).

Accepting that decisions would be made by the majority could have meant in de Gaulle’s eyes that France would be forced to accept the orders of the EC if the other five members supported any proposal against the interests of the French. It was a big change, because the Community started working with a voting system based on unanimity, based on agreement

between all the member states. The majority winning meant loss of sovereignty, because member countries gave power to the European Institutions. The member countries were forced to accept the result of the vote, even if they were against the regulation voted in, or if that regulation was against its interest. De Gaulle could not accept this because his political beliefs were based on national sovereignty and because of his nationalistic views on France and the Community. European Integration was supposed to be a tool to increase the power of France, not decrease it.

When Community income was discussed, De Gaulle yielded, even though he believed that the EC should get its income from the national contributions, never from its own sources. The economic independence of the European Institutions could make them dangerous and out of the control of the national governments and too independent and hence a threat to national autonomy. But on the other hand there was the issue of financing the CAP, which was going to give huge benefits to France. In order to get the money required for the CAP, de Gaulle accepted the EC sourcing its own income. The CAP itself was another important factor in the crisis and a constant issue in de Gaulle's relationship with the EC. The negotiations to implement this policy were blocked because other members of the EC did not want to finance the farming sector of France. De Gaulle threatened his European partners with leaving the Community if the CAP was not approved.

De Gaulle withdrew the French ministers from the meetings of the Council, stopping the activity of this important institution. The crisis continued for six months and ended only after the French government, under strong pressure, accepted a deal at a special Council meeting in 1966, known as "The Luxembourg Compromise". The accord meant that in the case of decisions which could be made by a majority vote, any member state could veto it if its national interests were at stake. In other words, national governments were to keep their sovereignty in sensitive issues. The compromise had no constitutional status, but it had a huge influence in the decision making of the Council. As a consequence, most decisions were to be made by letting deliberations and negotiations run until an agreement finally emerged. The national veto was invoked less than a dozen times between 1966 and 1985, but its effect on the negotiations made the Community slow and ineffective. The influence of de Gaulle through the "Luxembourg Compromise" lasted until 1986, when the Single European Act expanded the circumstances in which a simple majority vote was allowed, leading to the final demise of the Compromise.

6. Common Agricultural Policy

The CAP was a constant issue in the relationship between de Gaulle and the European Communities as we have already seen and it was also one of de Gaulle's biggest successes at the European level.

In 1961 agriculture in France still accounted for 25% of all employment and state subsidies and gave a huge boost in output and caused downward pressures on prices. The living standards of millions of small farmers were threatened and the consequent movement of people from the countryside to the cities where jobs were scarce and no housing was available made agriculture the main issue in French domestic politics. Farmers kept the land through state subsidies and the expenditure was heavy and difficult for the French Republic to afford. When de Gaulle took power in 1958, France's farm surpluses had already reached crisis point. (Moravcsik, 1998, 144)

At a crisis Cabinet meeting in August 1962, de Gaulle declared that agriculture was "the most important problem" France had to face. Even de Gaulle affirmed that if the problem was not solved "we will have another Algeria on our own on soil".(Booker and North, 109) The problem of the state subsidies was that production increased as a result of it, because it altered the market balance between supply and demand, artificially raising the prices and hence production. De Gaulle had to find new markets for the surplus of French farmers and he also had to find another way of financing this policy because it cost a lot and the revenues of the state were exhausted.

The situation was dangerous and again de Gaulle had to choose between his political convictions against supranational institutions and the French national interest. He, as before, showed pragmatism and chose the latter. The CAP was already included in the Treaty of Rome, but just as vague declarations. In 1958 the conference of Stresa developed this policy, but it was almost eleven years before full agreement was reached thanks to de Gaulle's work, even though the final negotiations finished under the mandate of Pompidou, successor to de Gaulle.

France secured the economic support of the rest of the member states of the EC, especially that of West Germany when the policy was made European, changing the national subsidies into European subsidies. It also secured the European market for French production, as a high level of protectionism in agricultural goods at the borders of the European area was

agreed to. Imports from Argentina, Canada or Australia had to face high duties when crossing into the borders of the member States of the EEC.

It is clear that France got the CAP as a reward for its membership in the EC and Europe, especially West Germany, paid for the CAP to have France as a partner in the European building process. (Moravcsik, 1998, 113) It was a great success for de Gaulle, because it was his personal veto of enlargement to the UK and his threats to the EC of France withdrawing from the organization and the "empty chair crisis" launched to blackmail the other member states that led to an agreement on the CAP. In other words, de Gaulle's lack of commitment to European integration, his full dedication to France and his intransigence made great benefits for France possible and created the most important European level policy up to now. The influenceof de Gaulle can still be felt nowadays, with the biggest part of the European budget going to the CAP (Moravcsik, 2000b).

7. The Fouchet Proposals

If the CAP was a great success of de Gaulle's policies, the Fouchet proposals were the biggest failure. De Gaulle tried to change the Community from the inside to a model closer to his beliefs. It is clear that he did not like the supranational character of the EC but was forced to collaborate with the Community because of the various reasons discussed above. He thought that once inside and securing benefits for France, he could transform the essence of the EC "into an intergovernmental framework which has already become a Community" according to Jean Monnet (Booker and North, 106).

To achieve this transformation, de Gaulle proposed through the Fouchet Committee, which was dominated by him, a new Community composed of a voluntary union of independent states. He also proposed moving the location of the institutions from Belgium, Luxembourg and Strassbourg to one location, Paris, where the new secretariat would work instead of the European Commission, an institution that represented the European level. The French president wanted to have the institutions in Paris in order for his country to benefit from the presence of a center of power (Moravcik, 2000a). Moreover, he thought that if the European institutions where located in Paris, the French government could control them better and the influence of France could grow, creating an association of Western European countries with France, which was different from the original idea of a Community where all the members had the same rights and duties.

His ambitions to substitute the Commission with a secretariat were an obvious attack on European integration, substituting the independence of the Commission for national control, mainly French control. And its commitment to the European good made this institution the representative of all de Gaulle hated. He attacked the Commission constantly, accusing Wallenstein of behaving like a head of state without legitimacy, complaining about it mot being representative of the European societies it was meant to serve, in other words a dictatorship created by civil servants without any democratic support (http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html). Another proposal was of course, an extensive national veto over common policies, which in reality meant cooperation instead of integration and a safeguard of the national sovereignty of the member states.

All these proposals could have meant the end of the European building process and the end of the Community. Because in a Union of States, de Gaulle pretended to maintain the influence of France over the other members without any commitment from France itself, expressing the real point of view of de Gaulle about the Communities – they were to be a toy in the hands of France, for the benefit of France. But on this occasion, de Gaulle miscalculated the muscle of the European dream of an union between equals, the power of the people who were working for a European supranational state and of course, he overestimated the power of France.

This time West Germany stepped aside and did not support the reforms proposed by de Gaulle, defeating his aims and making the Fouchet proposals the biggest failure in de Gaulle's policy. Denying the reality of the European Community, not accepting the fact that the world was changing, trying to go back one century to restore great France, de Gaulle showed his limited political understanding of the world. His position would have meant a reduction of the European Community to a minimal expression, articulating an idea removed from reality from a politician too old to understand the new realities. It could have meant the final fall of Europe from world affairs and hence of France, the end of the independence of Europe and of France, because in a globalised world the influence of separate European states would be minimal, far less than the central role he wanted.

8. Conclusions

De Gaulle had a huge influence in developing the European building process, in slowing the speed of integration, but he could not change its essence. He made the mistake of thinking it was possible to have a nationalist approach more typical for a politician of the XIX century, still worried about the greatness of France, not realizing that the only option for France was to stay inside a strong Community and to never again be a sole power. His biggest value was a capacity to adapt and change his views as many times as needed for the sake of his country, treating the integration into the EC as a minor ill.

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