Chirac's European vision unleashes controversy in France

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French President Jacques Chirac's speech to the German parliament on June 27 outlining his vision for a future Europe has given rise to considerable tensions between the Gaullist president and the Socialist Party-led government.

Chirac proposed in Berlin the creation of an “avant-garde group”, which under Franco-German leadership was to pave the way for further European integration. He also raised the question of a European constitution, taking up issues raised earlier in a speech by German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer. Speaking at Berlin's Humboldt University, Fischer had expressed his support for a European federation—a call, however, which Chirac does not share on the scale advocated by the German Minister and Green party leader.

Following Chirac's *Bundestag* speech, France's Minister for Europe Pierre Moscovici publicly accused the president of not representing the view of the French authorities. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin also showed little enthusiasm for Chirac's utterances, saying that although interesting, they were contradictory and unrealistic. Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine warned against engaging in a premature intellectual discussion regarding the future of Europe.

The president, who under the French constitution has overall control of foreign policy, immediately rejected this criticism in a statement saying that he had spoken in his official capacity. France speaks with a voice, he said.

The public dispute between president and government was unusual, given the customary diplomacy that characterises the “cohabitation” of the conservative Chirac and the social democrat Jospin. Most commentators saw it as an anticipation of the presidential elections due in 2002, when Jospin is expected to challenge Chirac. Others interpret it as an expression of purely tactical differences: While the president considers a discussion about the future shape of Europe to be useful, in order to advance the intended structural reform of the European Union, the government fears an open discussion could deter other EU members and make implementing the reforms more difficult.

In fact, the Gaullist president's conceptions of European policy barely differ from those of the Socialist Party-led government. Both agree that the European institutions must be systematically reformed during the French presidency of the EU, which began on July 1. In the end, this comes down to a strengthening of Franco-German leadership, as Chirac proposed in his Berlin speech.

Moreover, Chirac's advocacy of greater European integration is of recent vintage. In the 1970s he had accused the then president (and Gaullist ally) Valéry Giscard D'Estaing of “betrayal” and of “France's subjugation” because he supported European unity. The Socialist Party count as pro-Europeans since François Mitterrand's presidency in 1981.

One might easily dismiss the controversy over Chirac's speech as an insignificant political quarrel, occupying the headlines one day and forgotten the next. However, that would be too superficial. It reflects the sharp social conflicts, breaking out with the further development of the European Union and tearing apart traditional institutions and parties everywhere.

Both the government camp and that of the president are split over the European question. In the government coalition, the Communist Party and the Citizen's Movement of Interior Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement have strong reservations about further European integration. There is also a euro-sceptic wing in the Socialist Party, while the Greens, with their European Parliament delegate Daniel Cohn-Bendit (a close associate of German Foreign Minister Fischer), emphatically welcomed Chirac's speech.

The Gaullists are torn by strife over the European question. On Chirac's side stand the last Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppé and Jacques Toubon, who made a name for himself as the author of a law protecting the French language. On Chirac's behalf, Juppé has been occupied for months formulating a European constitution, which goes substantially further than Chirac did in his Berlin speech. Juppé is even suggesting the creation of a European Union president to lend the EU “one face and one voice”.

Other prominent Gaullists have broken with Chirac because they regard his European course as an attack on

French sovereignty and the traditions of Gaullism. Charles Pasqua, Interior Minister in the last conservative government, has created his own right-wing party. Philippe Séguin resigned the presidency of the Gaullist RPR (Rassemblement pour la République—Assembly for the Republic) in 1999 in protest, and in the meantime has returned to the political stage as the official RPR candidate for Paris mayor against Chirac's opposition.

Chirac has justified his advocacy of stronger European institutions and the formation of an "avant-garde group" with regard to the forthcoming EU expansion into Eastern Europe, which he considers indispensable in order to strengthen Europe's position against the United States, a traditional target of the Gaullists.

Expansion from its present 15 to almost 30 members, runs his argument, would paralyse the EU if the past method of weighting votes and the veto right of each individual member is maintained. Therefore, the large countries must be given greater influence and be able to outvote a minority of countries by majority decisions. Moreover, countries wanting to advance further and more rapidly would have to be able to collaborate more and, if required, also seek cooperation outside the European Union. This view is shared, to a large extent, in German government circles.

Behind these arguments concerning the technicalities of EU expansion and the methods to be employed lie explosive social questions. Living standards in Eastern Europe are far below those in the EU. Poland alone would need 10 years of high annual growth rates in order to achieve the same level as the poorest European Union member at present. In countries such as Romania, situated further to the east, the position is even more catastrophic. In the meantime, there are numerous studies showing that EU entry would not improve their position at first but worsen it. Numerous industries, and above all agriculture, would collapse if they were fully exposed to European competition.

No measures are planned to overcome this social gap, as was the case when the poorer southern European states were integrated. Such a policy would contradict the austerity programs that form official government policy today throughout Europe. In order to deal with the inevitable social explosions, the EU must change its character. It is increasingly changing from an economic alliance into a political, military and a police alliance, which can impose order by force if necessary.

The urge to reform the European institutions arises not least from the fear that weak governments in the new member states could not withstand the social pressures from below and would not be able to maintain the strict financial discipline of the EU. Therefore the most powerful European Union members want stronger powers in order to be able to dictate policy to them.

In the specialised literature it is openly discussed that multiparty democracy is not suitable for these countries. A contribution in the magazine *Berliner Debatte* (11/2000) states that such countries must have "stable structures to mediate various interests, to channel and trap social conflicts. Therefore, liberal corporatism appears to be the best way of mediating extra-party interests, because it involves a higher degree of stability than pluralism." In plain language this sociological jargon is advocating the Pinochet model ("liberal corporatism") as a more suitable means for controlling social conflicts than parliamentary democracy ("pluralism").

The changing character of the EU is also causing greater tensions among the existing members.

The development of a Franco-German axis is seen particularly in Britain as a threat to its own position, where press reactions to Fischer and Chirac's speeches were accordingly hysterical. Smaller European Union members—particularly in Scandinavia—feel pushed toward the edge by the Franco-German initiative. And finally—particularly in the wealthier areas of Europe—regionalist movements are raising their heads, determined to defend the privileges of the regional elite against the claims from poorer regions.

Behind it all rises up the social question: the sharp tensions between the mass of the population, who carry the burden of the EU in the form of sinking incomes and welfare cuts, and the economic and financial elite who profit from it.