

France and the Convention : between national interests and a european vision

(Maxime LEFEBVRE, IFRI, february 2003)

France was very soon involved in the european constitutional process. In june 2000, in his speech in the Bundestag in Berlin, Jacques Chirac supported the idea of a European Constitution, proposed one month before by Joschka Fischer. France tackles the process of the European convention with the aim to reinforce the european integration in the perspective of enlargement, but also to preserve its specificity and its own ambitions (« doing Europe without undoing France », said Lionel Jospin in a speech of may 2001).

Consequently, the french vision of the european Constitution departs from Germany's one (especially from the Laenders') which would aim at « parlamentarizing » the european institutions and establishing a watertight sharing of competences between the european, national and regional levels. Pierre Moscovici, the representative of the french government until november 2002, rose up several times against a transposition of the german federal model. President Jacques Chirac for his part supported the idea (of intergovernmental inspiration) of a president of the European Council in order to better represent the EU on the international stage and to ensure a bigger continuity in the European Council's activities.

French positions of course do not make up a monolithic bloc.

1/ Regarding institutions, very different solutions have been proposed. Pierre Lequiller, representative of the National Assembly in the Convention, suggested for example a single president of the European Council and of the Commission. Robert Badinter, deputy representative of the Senate in the Convention, suggested an original solution combining a « president of the Union » elected both by the Parliament and by the European Council, and a « prime minister of the Union », designed by the European Council and invested by the Parliament, who would lead both the Council (developed to a real government, and composed of permanent representatives of governments in Brussels) and the Commission (transformed into an administrative body).

Frenchmen are otherwise attached to the reinforcement of the role of national parliaments in the european integration, in particular for controlling the subsidiarity principle. This is the sense of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's proposal to create a « Congress » assembling members of the European parliament and of national parliaments.

If France is in favor of the reinforcement of the prerogatives of the European Parliament through the codecision procedure, it doesn't want it to apply to the field of Common agricultural policy because its own interests could be attacked.

2/ Regarding the sharing of competences, there is a general consensus towards maintaining the present competences inside the EU. Almost unanimously, France wishes a reinforcement of the coordination of economic policies at the European level. The left wing, namely through the voice of Pervenche Berès (European deputy and member of the Convention), advocated a more ambitious approach of social Europe. Some like Alain Lamassouze (European deputy, member of the Convention) defended a very federalist approach, including on foreign policy. On the contrary, the so-called « sovereignists » deplore the giving up of national sovereignty faced with the European integration process.

3/ The will to restart the French-German engine led to common initiatives of the two governments, first on a security and defense union (Nov. 2002), then on home and justice affairs, on economic governance, and finally on the whole institutional framework (15th January 2003). These texts are a compromise between the French and German antagonistic approaches. Germany came over the ideas, supported by France, of a President of the European Council and of an implication of national parliaments in the control of subsidiarity of competences. France came over the ideas that the President of the European Commission should be elected by the European Parliament, and that the qualified majority voting should be extended to common foreign and security policy matters, presently ruled by unanimity. The two countries agree however to maintain unanimity in security and defense issues, and to resort to enhanced cooperations in this field.

In home and justice affairs, both countries appealed to the creation of a European public prosecutor's office and a European police force for border control. But the common will to put an end to the separation between the « communitarian pillar » and the intergovernmental « third pillar » is questioned by the reaffirmed intention of France to maintain unanimity in police and penal matters.

As a whole, the Convention surely raises in France a certain degree of mobilization through the public opinion and the media, but the stakes are not always clearly perceived. The enlargement to the East raises some doubts and interrogations. France tries to defend its immediate interests without having a very clear vision of Europe's future.