

The Common Foreign Policy

The first months of the French Presidency were marked by the Six-Day War in Georgia. The Presidency was quick to take a cease-fire Plan to Moscow. Under US pressure, the Georgian President accepted the cease-fire plan, having no option, including a late addition which authorized the Russian forces to patrol in a buffer zone beyond South Ossetia. The agreement did not prevent the Russia from sending its forces to roam freely over large stretches of the country, disabling, they said, Georgian military assets or from renegeing on undertakings to withdraw from parts of Georgia far from the breakaway areas.

Background: EU-Russia relations

Within two years of the fall of the Soviet empire, the EU had concluded a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with the new Russian Federation. Although the EU suspended the agreement to show its displeasure at the Chechen Wars, when operative the agreement provided for close contacts between the parties, including summit meetings. It expired in 2007 and was due to be replaced by a new strategic agreement. Prospects were not too promising, given growing Russian assertiveness and harassment of EU companies, especially in the energy sector. (There was also a Polish blockage, in protest against a Russian ban on imports of Polish meat.)Russia draws great benefit from its natural gas resources, which meet some 40% of the needs of EU member states and for which there is no substitute source of supply. Politically Russia co-operated in the attempts to discourage Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, in anti-terrorism and in the quest for an Israeli/Palestinian peace settlement. It made no difficulties when the US established a base in Khazakstan as part of an Afghan supply line. It responded favourably to Western suggestions that it should join the World Trade Organisation. Russia held its peace when old Warsaw Pact countries joined the EU and even when they joined NATO. Although Russia has an ambassador to NATO it still regards the organization as an instrument which was designed to contain it. But it reacted more strongly when integral parts of the old Soviet Union, Georgia and Ukraine showed aspirations to join NATO; and, in its traditional role as protector of the Slavs, when the US and others pushed through the independence of Kosovo from Serbia.

The Russian attack on Georgia was an event waiting for a trigger, and it was provided by Georgia's attempt to squash the quasi-independence of pro-Russian South Ossetia. Other hot spots where Russia believes that its interests are threatened are Ukraine including the Crimea, which belonged to Russia until Khrushchev gave it to Ukraine as a gift and Moldova, where there are Russian "peace-keepers" in Trans-Dnistria, a dissident part of the country

The European Council reacts

With its Presidency acting as peace-broker, EU leaders had to show some impartiality, which restrained their initial reactions. But with Russia disregarding the cease-fire agreement it had accepted, President Sarkozy convened the second ever emergency

meeting of his EU colleagues to adopt a policy line. Counsels were divided between the hawklike and doveslike and the scope for a muscular response was narrow. The illegal Russian recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and of Abkhazia was condemned. It was clear from the beginning that there would be no military engagement and that sanctions, the standard civil response to truculent states, would make no sense if gas continued to be imported. Humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to victims of Russian aggression was an automatic measure. An EU monitoring team will be placed in Georgia to keep abreast of developments, but it will not deploy in the break-away parts unless the Russians allow it in. The most forceful action decided by the European Council was the suspension of the next stage of the talks about the strategic partnership.

In truth, the EU is left where Winston Churchill was in October 1939 when he said that he could not forecast what Russia, then Hitler's ally, would do: "*It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.*"

Money Matters

Back in 2005 there was an understanding that the "Thatcher" abatement of what we pay into the EU budget is linked to the future of the Common Agricultural Policy, which absorbs 40% or so of Union funds. This was set out in the decision to invite the Commission

"to undertake a full, wide-ranging review covering all aspects of EU spending, including the CAP and of resources, including the UK rebate."

By 2008, the link was weakening. Can it be that we expected the Doha Round of trade talks to yield cutbacks in the CAP, without financial cost to us? If so we are back to Square One. It will be a very long time before the trade talks pick up from where they broke down, and with no greater guarantee of success next time round.

...including Agriculture

The French Presidency has a clear view. In its programme it sets out:

"The Presidency will propose to partners that they take a *broader view* of the issues and the objectives that European agriculture and agricultural policy will have to meet in the future. Agriculture is *at the heart* of issues confronting our society and the sector currently faces many *challenges*, including the safety and security of European consumers based on a regular *accessible* supply of food whose quality is guaranteed, helping to achieve *balanced global food supplies*, combating climate change and *improving the environment* and preserving the environmental balance within Europe."

(*Key words italicized –Ed*).

There is no mention of new opportunities for European farming in markets where prices are soaring. It does not read like a blueprint for cost-cutting.

“Open Europe” - Closed Minds

In August, Open Europe, a Europhobic body, provided proof of how deeply Europe has penetrated the nooks and crannies of everyday life with the startling revelation that “Europe” employs all of 170,000 people, busily drafting and enforcing the mass of EU regulations.

Asked how many of the number were paid from the EU budget, the Open Europe spokesman flannelled. It emerged that he had counted anybody serving unpaid on a consultative organ plus the national civil servants who work in Brussels, whom he fancifully described as working “part-time for Europe and part-time for their own governments”. Commission staff serving abroad, administering aid programmes were also counted in, as were the teams of interpreters (oral) and translators (written) needed for work in the Union’s clutch of languages.

This kind of misrepresentation would be laughable if it was not so deplorable.

Flagging spirits

In another silly season venture the local Press inflated a story about flying the Union flag. Your then Chairman had mildly suggested that on Schuman Day the flag should be flown in six public buildings in the wider area and not only in the city proper; and also flown on the day of the elections to the European Parliament. When he presented this suggestion to the responsible City Council Committee, several Conservative councillors decried the idea rudely. One respondent in the local newspaper scrapped the other Union of 301 years’ standing by proclaiming fealty to the Cross of St George (who was not a Merry Englishman, being either a North African bishop or a Roman martyr). Another unbelievably asserted that the blue and gold flag is the badge of slavery. There was a robust rejoinder from a correspondent who recalled that we are all European and have no need to pretend otherwise. A website also drew several strongly pro-Europe contributions

How can we ever have a rational debate, even on a subject of minor importance, in the greater scheme of things? The French Presidency has fewer inhibitions. Its logo depicts the Tricolour and the European Flag, both draped. The French national flag, it is explained, shows that France has retained its identity; the European flag is larger to show that Europe is a wider concept.

Lisbon Treaty

Silence reigns. Heads of State and Government meet in October when Item 1 on the agenda will be a statement by the Taoiseach who will be expected say whether his government will conduct a second referendum; if not, what it considers to be the Union’s way forward. The talk is of explanatory statements which might be annexed to the Treaty

to assuage Irish voters' doubts about national neutrality, voting rights in the Council and the security of tenure of an Irish Commissioner. Thankfully talk of an inner Union with Ireland out has died down.

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***** Opinions expressed in this Newsletter are not necessarily those of the European Movement****

Annex

As we went to press the fuss about the flag continued. In additional letters to the Editor correspondents continued to attack the EU and one Alan Forrest. Your own Editor responded as below, but with doubt whether the paper would publish it.

From: william nicoll
Sent: 07 September 2008 10:14
To: 'kentishgazette@thekmgroup.co.uk'
Subject: More Flag fury

Alan Edwards (Letters, September 4) hits the nail on the head. The trouble is the number of people who have little knowledge of the political structures of the EU. Alan Forrest is not one of them. He has more insider knowledge of the EU than your correspondents can offer. When he says, correctly, that we had been in the EU for 35 years he is sparing your readers the EEC/EC/EU formula which is pedantically correct.

But a lack of genuine knowledge comes out unmistakably in what is presented in your columns as EEC/EC/EU handiwork:

- Home Information Packs have nothing to do with the EU;
- The frequency of waste collection has likewise nothing to do with the EU;
- The decline of the fishing industry is something the EU (and its predecessors) tried for years to avert by restricting overfishing. Admittedly its efforts were at best half-hearted;
- The closing down of local post offices is not dictated by the EU. The relevant regulation, supported by the Labour Government, opens up national postal monopolies to competition.