

Business Europe / By Bijan Khezri

The End of an Age in Europe

During the months leading to Sunday's vote on the EU Constitution in France and the Dutch vote today, little was said about the constitution itself as governments have been paternalistically hijacking the debate as a matter of embracing or rejecting Europe altogether.

But in the heat of the debate ahead of this week's referendums, it has gone unnoticed that they have given birth to a "Silent Spring" revolution, irrevocably redefining the relationship between the electorates and their governments. This revolution is transforming for the better, more than any "no" or "yes" vote, Europe's political agenda and, hence, future shape. It would not be the first time for the electorates to be proven more rational than the very governments that purport to lead them.

An age in which grand European political designs are implemented with little debate and citizens increasingly regress into infancy is coming to an end. Unless Europe's leaders, in politics as well as business, embrace this awakening consciousness among Europeans and radically rethink the meaning of progress, their very apocalyptic predictions of the consequence of the "no" vote will materialize.

It must have escaped the attention of Europe's leaders that the EU, in particular since last year's enlargement to 25 member states, can no longer credibly attempt to serve its founding members' electorate as a source of political identity. Misleadingly, the power-consolidating constitution has been packaged as a pull-of-the-future remedy addressing the unmistakable devolution of democracy into a self-aggrandizing Brussels bureaucracy. Instead, as other projects of European integration be-

fore, the constitution has been another push of the past, alienating Europeans' desire to embrace their future with a fresh look.

For the founding members, the driving rationale of the European integra-

*This spring has brought
a political revolution.*

tion process was to make Continental peace irreversible. For all subsequently joining states, it was, more or less, a matter of economic calculus. Regarding all prospective candidates, in particular Turkey and Ukraine, EU membership has degenerated to a political lever, strongly embraced by the U.S. out of geopolitical considerations. Rightly or wrongly, Europeans take peace and the free movement of goods and people for granted and consider it irreversible.

While last year's enlargement has irrevocably eroded the EU's political cause, the introduction of the euro has undermined any credibility of deeper economic integration. The euro, a politically motivated undertaking that defied economic sense from the start, continues to rob its economically ailing members of a badly needed monetary-adjustment tool. Simply put, Europeans are tired of rubber-stamping grand political designs that are not only irreversible and, once realized, beyond any legislator's control, but, most importantly, surpass even the political leaders' ability to fully grasp the very dynamics they set free.

The debate around the EU Constitution, however, is symptomatic of deeper forces that mark the end of an age. That debate reflects Europeans' increasing political detachment and evolving consciousness as they question their identity and course within the path of history.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe's relative weight in the world has been steadfastly declining in economic terms. Europe's governing elite has dedicated all of its political capital to the integration process as an end in its own right. Overdue structural reforms of national economies have been defied. Instead, grand political designs such as EMU, enlargement and lately the constitution have been sold to the electorate as a golden egg that shelters its peoples from economic sacrifices while establishing a counterweight to the U.S. The EU, independently of whether one considers it too neoliberal or too socialist, has become the epitome of Europe's decline.

The British historian Mark Mazower

once wrote, "If the West turns out to have been an idea that shielded Europeans from the consciousness of their own decline, the disappearance of the West may not be a bad thing." Analogously, the European integration process has blinded Europeans' consciousness of their own decline. This is now changing.

The "no" vote, deep down, is a quest for political enlightenment against decades of political indoctrination that deeper EU integration is synonymous with progress. Politicians and commentators, misguidedly, have been quick to catchily frame, and consequently belittle, this deep-seated need for reflection as a "social-versus-neoliberal" debate. The real power of the referendums is not their respective outcomes, but the awakening of Europe's electorate to critically reflect upon their very destiny.

A real opportunity has arisen to reconcile Europe's politically alienated electorate with the governments they elect. For this to happen, however, any debate about the future of Europe has to be detached from the erroneous premise that there is no economic progress without ever-accelerating enlargement and integration.

As this age comes to an end, the first contours of a new one will slowly emerge. Rather than being inspired by the past in terms of Europe's wars, divisions and an outdated Gaullist obsession with countering the U.S., Europe's future must entail as little political integration as needed, put to an end the senile ambition to serve as a "humanizing" political counterweight on the global stage, dismiss the lowest common EU-denominator as an acceptable benchmark, and commit itself uncompromisingly to the creation—not merely the protection—of employment in light of fierce competition with Asia, the world's future epicenter and ultimate economic benchmark.

This is not about "closing time in the gardens of the West," to paraphrase Cyril Connolly's memorable phrase of 1949. Europe must fundamentally rethink progress, neither as a matter of political grandeur nor as a matter of protecting outdated institutions of social welfare, but as economic competitiveness simply measured by job creation. Silently, this spring, the electorate has emerged as a political force in shaping Europe's future destiny. And this is more powerful than any "yes" or "no."

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