

De Gaulle's complicated legacy

Charles de Gaulle's European vision continues to shape both French and European Union policymaking, writes Helen Drake

Seventy years ago this week in London, on 18 June 1940, Charles de Gaulle defied the course of history. In a short broadcast on the BBC and with France on the brink of armistice, he appealed for resistance to "the mechanised force" of Germany. France's war was about to change and in France's future there now gaped a de Gaulle-shaped hole.

For more than a quarter of a century after the end of the Second World War, and from in and out of office, de Gaulle rewrote French political culture. Strong leadership, audacious friendships and the art of saying 'No' became firmly entrenched in the French republican toolkit and, amongst other things, set the tone for France's relations with the European Union.

Here, de Gaulle's 11-year presidency of France (1958-69) left a tricky legacy for each of his successors, Nicolas Sarkozy included. The current French president's visit to London on 18 June 2010 will commemorate not only a wartime hero, but a figure who scoped out the possible and the say-able in France's European policy for the foreseeable future.

De Gaulle's own inheritance was complicated. By the time he came to power, France had taken the momentous decision to pool sovereignty with Germany, in the form of the new European Communities. That decision was itself an accident of history that went against the grain of French history and France's federalists have never since been so influential.

When he returned to power in 1958, de Gaulle was faced with a substantial problem: how to tally French membership of European Community institutions run by men whom he derided and according to principles that he ridiculed, with his vision of an



CHARLES DE GAULLE 18 June is the 70th anniversary of his historic call to resist the Nazi occupation. EP

independent France leading the way in Europe. For de Gaulle, the essence of European 'construction' was that it should be political: a power to be reckoned with in the world; a forum for politicians (not stateless, unelected bureaucrats), and driven by a shared sense of Europe's distinct identity in the world. Its watchwords were to be co-operation, never integration, sovereignty, not supra-nationalism, a 'Union of States'.

There was no place in this vision for what de Gaulle depicted as UK's "deep-seated hostility" to and "lack of interest" in European construction, and he accordingly rejected the UK's belated application to join the Communities not once, but twice (in 1963 and 1967). The smooth journey towards a federal Community, as foreseen by the European Commission, the treaties and Germany, was abruptly halted by de Gaulle's 'empty chair' protests of 1965 and the

Luxembourg 'compromise' that followed. Ultimately, de Gaulle failed to scupper the Jean Monnet method, of European integration through small steps, or to impose an alternative; the support simply did not materialise, either in Paris or in Europe.

Where does this leave Sarkozy, who conducts himself as a man in de Gaulle's image, prepared to go against the flow? He certainly treats the EU as a forum where governments do politics, a case in point being this week's European Council in Brussels (17 June), where national heads will meet to pool ideas and power in the face of weighty issues of common concern (economic governance, climate, jobs, immigration). And in such circumstances, Sarkozy has to squeeze every ounce of goodwill from his relationship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel – no small task, yet one facilitated by a comfort zone forged between the two countries by de Gaulle

in his time as French president. And Sarkozy certainly believes in making Europe's voice distinct and audible on an inter-national level, in good Gaullist fashion.

Yet Sarkozy is no more immune than his predecessor from the forces that undermined de Gaulle's own European vision in his own day, amongst which are the discordant voices at home in France and the difficulty of reaching agreement with both Germany and the UK. On that day in June in 1940, nothing was certain, but a myth was in the making. Contemporary France is profoundly European and de Gaulle will forever be associated with the many bold and troubled decisions that made it so.

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The risks of losing a special role in the Caucasus

Leaders in the South Caucasus need to think regionally – and, to encourage that, the EU should keep a special representative there, writes Thomas de Waal

A ripple of alarm has gone through the community of those dealing with the south Caucasus as reports that the EU's new External Action Service is considering getting rid of the office of EU special representative (EUSR) for the south Caucasus.

Why is the post currently occupied by the Swedish diplomat Peter Semneby still needed in the EU's new, post-Lisbon treaty era? First of all because, in the old-fashioned vertical hierarchies of these countries, personalities matter. The two or three leaders who take the key decisions in each place like regular interlocutors

with whom they can do business. In the form of an EUSR, the leaders of the south Caucasus have had an answer to Henry Kissinger's question, "What is the telephone number of Europe?"

On a couple of occasions, the envoy's diplomacy has been critical. Semneby's predecessor, Finland's Heiki Talvitie, helped mediate a peaceful solution to the crisis over Georgia's autonomous province of Ajaria in 2004. In June 2008, Semneby, in late-night talks, persuaded Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili not to declare the Russian peacekeeping force in Abkhazia illegal, thereby sparing Abkhazia a potential conflagration. Sadly, he and others could not pull off the same trick when the crisis in South Ossetia escalated into war two months later.

Secondly, international policy towards the south Caucasus would be shackled if it turned into three bilateral policies towards Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. If this region is to have a promising future, it has to work, eventually, as a region. That entails resolving its conflicts, rebuilding its broken railway network, tearing down customs barriers and unlocking borders

so as to make it into an attractive and open thoroughfare between Russia, Turkey and Iran. Currently, far too many feudal lords in the Caucasus are comfortable with the status quo of closed borders, which enables them to maintain cartels and monopolies and control their local fiefdoms. Inevitably, one-country agendas pursued by the West encourage the governments in Baku, Tbilisi and Yerevan to look inward and forget about regional co-operation. They reinforce divisions, rather than break them down. Only an outsider who works with the whole region can lobby effectively for regional integration.

That also means working in the three shadowy conflict regions of the south Caucasus. South Ossetia has been closed to the outside world since the 2008 war, but Semneby has been successful in keeping up vital links with the de facto republic of Abkhazia – something that a diplomat based in Tbilisi is no longer able to do. (In parallel to Semneby, the EU delegation to the Geneva talks on Georgia's conflicts is led by Pierre Morel, who is also the EUSR on Central Asia. This thankless task must eventually be

reviewed, as the Geneva talks are completely deadlocked.)

The third unresolved conflict in the region, between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the province of Nagorno-Karabakh is the biggest, the most hidden and the most dangerous. The EU currently has no proper role in the peace process, although France is one of the three mediators in the political negotiations of the Minsk process. Sooner or later, if this emaciated peace process is to acquire some flesh, the EU will be required to play a role it performed in the post-Dayton Balkans, as the guarantor of reconstruction, policing and political reform. But, again, it would need a supra-regional envoy to argue for this role and assert the EU's right to be an agent of peaceful change.

The south Caucasus is the EU's most fragile neighbourhood and potentially the one most conducive to its transforming capacities. It needs the agile personal leadership of a single envoy to help make that mission achievable.

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