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POWERFUL CONSERVATIVE TRENDS

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The disruption of the European Constitution's ratification process unveiled a wider political crisis in the European Union. This crisis stems from factors as diverse as the declining of the transatlantic link, despite its enduring strategic value in EU eyes, and European ambiguities in responding to pressures coming from globalisation; more in general, a dwindling sense of the role the EU plays with respect to both daily life and destiny. How would the failure in endorsing the Constitution affect EU foreign policy, in particular policies towards the Middle East and North Africa?

First of all, the whole of EU foreign policy would be broadly affected because the Constitution is largely intended to improve EU Common Foreign and Security Policy's institutions and instruments. In fact, it is expected to provide two fundamental institutional inputs: (a) a manageable decision-making institutional mechanism in a now-crowded membership; (b) a significant upgrading of institutions and instruments dealing precisely with foreign policy. Its rebuff would be a serious blow to EU foreign policy capabilities, in particular at a time bold decisions and interventions are required, especially in neighbouring areas, as the Balkans, the Black Sea, North Africa and the Levant as well as in the more or less greater Middle East. No doubt, EU policies towards Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, regional economic and political reforms, the Mediterranean, Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council would be bound to fade. The inclusion of Turkey in the Union – indirectly linked to the Arab-Muslim world - would also be affected.

Second, the European Constitution is being rejected by European people because either it fails to provide convincing responses to the major factors of crisis mentioned above or because it provides responses not in tune with deep trends in European public opinion. When it comes to the MENA, political aspects are probably even more significant than institutional ones. In fact, among the complex reasons that brings people to reject the Constitution, relations with Islam and immigration plays a crucial role. There is no doubt that the liberal perspective underlying the Constitution, with its refusal to include the notion of EU "Christian roots" and its broad trend to further liberalization and inclusiveness with respect to people and countries, sounds frightening or unconvincing to many Europeans.

In this perspective, what the Constitution's rejection would entail for EU policy-makers concerns less external policies towards the MENA than internal ones. European people are asking for more security with respect to legal and illegal immigration, mostly Arab and Muslim presence in Europe. The rationalist approach towards inter-civilizational issues adopted by the Constitution fails to convince many Europeans. The attitude of the newly-elected Catholic pope, very much engaged against – so his argument is running - the egalitarian simplifications brought about by laic rationalist approaches, shows how powerful are conservative trends in today's Europe. The mainstream message coming from European conservatism stresses the necessity of limiting Muslim influence, if not presence. Certainly, it is squarely against multiculturalism. More than that, it says that Muslims have to integrate European customs much more than Europeans have to recognize their customs (this recognition is

what the pope is blaming as mistaken egalitarian simplifications stemming from laic rationalist approaches). Apart from most extreme xenophobic groups, the large majority of Europeans ask for a more regulatory approach towards immigration – be it integrationist (the left) or exclusivist (the right).

If a more regulatory policy is to be established, an integrationist policy would be definitely more desirable and far-sighted than an exclusivist one. Several factors, though, suggest that the balance tilts towards exclusivist policies. First, there is strong disagreement among EU members about immigration - as well as related issues, as citizenship, asylum, and so forth. The Constitution is liberal in its overall approach, yet it is not providing a clear response to what immigration policy has to be done. A Constitution adopting a liberal background without specifying policies because of inter-governmental disagreement requires a reassurance. In this sense, it may easily foster a conservative EU response to immigration and civilizational dialogue with the MENA. The London 7 July terrorist attack is certainly going to reinforce conservative tendency in the EU and make the EU focus its policies towards the Arab and Islamic world on what the EU calls optimistically “Justice, Freedom and Security Space” and the Americans, more prosaically, “Homeland Security”, namely immigration and terrorism with strong linkages between the two. The London attack, seemingly carried out by Muslim British citizens of Pakistani origin, in connection with people in Arab-Muslim areas, will easily confirm European people that threat is primarily inside and has first of all to be tackled domestically, with foreign policies playing a complementary role with respect to domestic ones.

A particular casualty of the conservative trend unveiled by the European Constitution’s rejection might be the inclusion of Turkey in the EU. Despite the fact that Turkey made remarkable steps forward in democratizing its regime, in tune with EU requests, Turkey was abundantly targeted in the French and Dutch referendum campaigns. Turkey’s EU membership was also underlying the debate about the “Christian roots” in preparing the text of the Constitution. In Europe it is seemingly prevailing a strongly conservative trend which will complicate problems without solving them. At the end of the day, what is probably lacking in Europe is a leadership able to assert “laic rationalist approaches”, so as to guide European people out of their fear and blindness.

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