

FEATURE

Twenty years of progress towards a united Europe have come to an end with the French and Dutch votes against the constitution, with future expansion of the EU likely to be the biggest casualty, argues **Charles Grant**

STARING INTO THE ABYSS

'Believers in the European dream must face a stark truth: there will be no more treaty-based integration in the foreseeable future'

The year 2005 will be seen as a watershed in the history of the EU, no less significant than 1985.

That was the year when the combination of Jacques Delors taking over the presidency of the European Commission, the Single European Act and the launching of the programme to achieve a single market by 1992 sparked off a revival in the EU's fortunes. For the next 20 years the EU both 'deepened', integrating its members' policies, and 'widened', taking in new members.

The French and Dutch referenda have halted both deepening and widening. Small parts of the constitutional treaty may be salvageable, either through the governments agreeing to apply certain clauses on an informal basis (such as the Council of Ministers taking decisions in public, or the establishment of the external action service), or through a 'mini' Intergovernmental Conference which would add just a few articles to the current treaties. There are also bound to be many panels, enquiries and commissions into the 'disconnect' that makes EU institutions seem so alien to most Europeans.

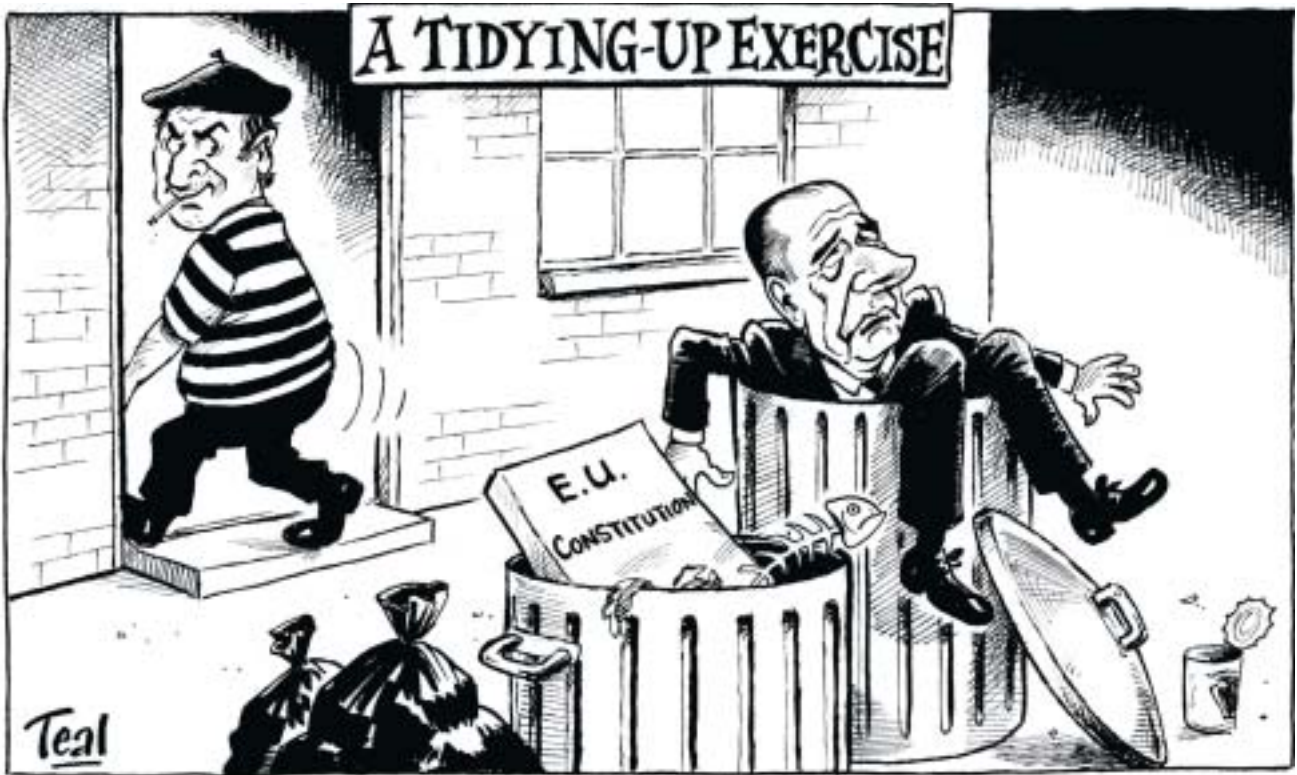
But whatever articles may be saved from the dead treaty, and whatever ideas may emerge for overcoming the

democratic deficit, believers in the European dream must face a stark truth: there will be no more treaty-based integration in the foreseeable future.

The virtual impossibility of getting every member state to ratify a new treaty – with many of them, including Britain and France, certain to insist on referenda – means that there will not be major new treaties on the lines of Maastricht and Nice. Twenty years of progress towards a more united Europe have come to an end.

The end of deepening is highly likely to kill off widening, too, because the two ideas have always been intimately linked. The political elites in core countries such as France were reluctant to accept a wider Europe, fearing that the result would be a Thatcherite dream of a free-trade area with only weak political institutions. But in the end, they accepted enlargement, because a succession of treaties – negotiated in 1985, 1991, 1997, 2000 and 2004 – held out the promise of a stronger 'political union'.

Now that deepening has stopped, the leadership of several EU countries is likely to veto further enlargement. Even before the recent referenda, France had changed its constitution so that the conclusion of accession talks with any



potential member must be approved by a referendum (although this will not apply to Romania and Bulgaria, which recently signed accession treaties with the EU). And Austria had promised a referendum on Turkish membership.

The views of political leaders are no longer the ones that matter most for enlargement. Those who voted No in the French and Dutch referenda were, among other things, opposing both the idea of Turkish membership and the recent east European accessions. Voters in many other member states are no more enthusiastic about enlargement. Before long, an EU government may announce a referendum on whether to agree to the opening of talks with a candidate.

Bulgaria and Romania will probably join as planned in 2007 or 2008, though their accession treaties still need to be ratified by 25 parliaments. But the mood among several governments is shifting against any enlargement beyond those two.

French President Jacques Chirac has supported Turkey's aspirations, but his new Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin said in June that the death of the constitution made further enlargement impossible.

Until now, the Commission has been one of the driving forces behind enlargement, but several of the current Commissioners, including external relations chief Benita Ferrero-Waldner, oppose taking in new members. This will make it hard for the Commission as a whole to remain an advocate for the cause.

Turkey may be lucky enough to start talks on schedule in October, even if Angela Merkel, who opposes Turkish membership, becomes German chancellor in September. However, these talks will move at the pace of the most reluctant EU member and they are unlikely to make much progress for many years, if ever.

The Turks will have to face the fact that several governments – such as those of Austria, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Germany and perhaps France – are likely to argue strongly for Turkey to be offered a 'privileged partnership' which falls short of membership. That kind of treatment will in turn strengthen the elements in Turkey's army and Islamic movement which fear European integration and oppose the reforms requested by the EU.

The EU's new aversion to enlargement may have a disastrous impact on the

Balkans. Croatia must be ruing its failure to cooperate fully with the Hague war crimes tribunal, as a result of which the EU postponed the accession talks that had been due to start in March 2005. In few member states does public opinion welcome the thought of Bosnia, Serbia, Albania or Macedonia in the EU.

But if Brussels withdraws the carrot of eventual membership from such countries, it loses the ability to cajole them into making difficult political and economic reforms.

The best hope for Kosovo's future is probably some sort of conditional independence, but Serbia is unlikely to accept an independent Kosovo without the prospect of EU membership for itself.

To the EU's east, countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and Georgia may dream of membership, but they now have no serious chance of attaining that goal.

The end of EU enlargement would be a tragedy, for the Union's greatest success has been the spread of stability, security, prosperity and democracy across most of the continent. Of course, there has to be a geographical limit at some point – North African countries are not

in Europe and so cannot join. And enlargement should not be an elite project which is imposed on unwilling electorates. The problem has been the failure of political leaders to explain the point of it.

Despite all the difficulties, Europe's leaders should try to keep alive the membership hopes of the Balkan states, Turkey, Ukraine and Moldova. If the Union says 'never', it will not only weaken the modernising, reformist forces within these countries, but also risk being affected by the political instability, economic crises and flows of emigrants that will become more likely.

Unless the EU takes responsibility for places such as Kosovo and Transdnestra, they will remain at the centre of networks that traffic weapons, girls and drugs across Europe.

The EU should extend over the whole continent not only for the beneficial impact on the countries that join, but also for the economic, demographic and geopolitical gains for the Union as a whole.

Enlargement offers more opportunities for trade and investment, and the prospect of more young people in the Union, to balance its ageing population. A broader Union will be better able to influence the troubled regions that lie around Europe's perimeter – North Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Russia. Moreover, taking in Muslim

countries such as Bosnia, Albania and Turkey will help to soften the divide between the West and Islam.

Given popular hostility towards further enlargement, how can the prospect of a wider Union be sustained? The most obvious requirement is for politicians in the member states to lead, and explain the benefits. They might be more willing to do so if the Union embraced more 'variable geometry' – the idea that not every country need take part in every policy. Already, some countries stay out of the euro and the Schengen passport union.

The EU's leaders could extend variable geometry in two ways. First, they could use the current treaties' hitherto untested provisions for 'enhanced cooperation', which allow groups of countries to integrate further in certain policy areas.

Those in the euro, for example, could choose to coordinate their economic policies more closely. Perhaps some of the countries which support the notorious 'Bolkestein directive' on the liberalisation of services, such as Britain, Ireland and the central Europeans, could set up a common market in services as an enhanced cooperation, leaving behind foot-draggers such as France and Germany.

Second, some candidates might be persuaded to stay out of some policies – for example, Turkey with farm policy or Serbia with abolition of border controls. And some candidates might be offered

certain benefits of membership only when their own economies had reached a certain stage of development. For example, Turkish citizens might gain the right to work anywhere in the EU when Turkey's per capita GDP had grown to 70% of the EU average.

Europe's core countries need to realise that in a wide and diverse Europe of, say, around 30 member states, the idea that everyone should take part in every – or nearly every – policy area becomes increasingly hard to sustain. And the core countries need to understand that they can, if they wish, integrate with smaller groups of like-minded states.

More variable geometry could make enlargement less threatening to the EU's political leaders and electorates. However, there is unlikely to be much progress towards variable geometry for several years. The countries which have generally been most interested in enhanced cooperation are France and Germany, but both have lame-duck leaders who are too weak to take major initiatives. Italy and Britain, like France and Germany, are likely to have new leaders within the next couple of years.

The EU probably needs to wait for a fresh generation of leaders in the big member states before it can think constructively about the creation of *avant-garde* groups or reviving some sort of movement towards further enlargement.



Cartoon: Martyn Turner/Irish Times