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**Mathieu Segers. "De Gaulle's Race to the Bottom: The Netherlands, France and the Interwoven Problems of British EEC Membership and European Political Union, 1958-1963."**

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In the early 1960s, French president Charles de Gaulle endeavoured to launch a project of political union among the six members of the newly created European Economic Community (EEC). This initiative was part of his broader objective to build a *European Europe* with a distinctly European voice, and to re-organize the NATO alliance of the United States and Western Europe on a more equal footing. Initially, the Netherlands were the only EEC member to oppose the French project of political union, which ultimately failed after intense negotiations.

In his article, Mathieu Segers traces back the Dutch and the French roles in the fight over the *Fouchet Plans* for a political union by focusing on the rhetorical battle between the opposing sides. Segers links these questions to de Gaulle's *veto* of January 1963 against British entry into the EEC. The main merits of Segers' contribution are to add new perspectives on the Dutch stance and to highlight the rather hesitant support at home for the apparently determined Dutch opposition to de Gaulle's project. On the other hand, the negative connotation Segers attributes to de Gaulle's actions is debatable.

In the analysis of the Dutch position, Segers emphasizes The Hague's fundamental discontent with the EEC *per se*. Instead of the continental community created by the Rome Treaties of 1957, the Netherlands had hoped for a larger free trade zone led by Britain. Segers argues that the Dutch perceived the European free trade area – the British counter-project to the EEC – “as the lifeline out of Little Europe” until 1959 (118). The successful launch of the EEC may have taken the Dutch by surprise. In response to subsequent French efforts to develop the Community of the Six without Britain, “the essence of the Dutch European policy was to be found in the maritime (neutralist) desire to escape from continental constrictions” (117). When in September 1960 de Gaulle publicly introduced the idea of a political union among the Six, The Hague's policy was to buy time and await

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Atlantic intervention. Segers also reveals that the leaking of a confidential memorandum written by de Gaulle's advisor Alain Peyrefitte increased Dutch suspicions about the sincerity of French objectives.

At a conference of the Six in February 1961, Dutch foreign minister Joseph Luns was the only one to reject the French proposal of political union. Since unanimity was required, the Six created a commission headed by French diplomat Christian Fouchet to save the project. Segers shows that the position Luns defended at the summit of February 1961 did not have the full backing of the Dutch cabinet, which remained deeply divided and undecided on the issue. Segers' analysis suggests that the rejection of the European political union at this point was essentially due to the persona of Joseph Luns. The Dutch Prime Minister Jan de Quay seems to have "relied totally" on Luns in this matter (123). As the Fouchet Commission prepared a draft treaty for a political union, the French and the Dutch engaged in war of words over their respective European images. According to Segers, winning this rhetorical battle against the Dutch was of supreme importance for de Gaulle, since his positive European image was the precondition for the intended remodelling of the EEC in a Gaullist sense.

Meanwhile, the catholic and the protestant parties in the Dutch cabinet remained deeply divided and unable to provide their representatives in the Fouchet Commission with clear instructions. Segers argues that in the spring and summer of 1961, the Dutch opposition to de Gaulle's project only persisted because of a coincidence: Paul-Henri Spaak, formerly NATO's secretary general, returned to Belgium as foreign minister. Spaak promoted the EEC's close cooperation with NATO and Britain, and therefore sided with Luns on the question of the European political union. Still divided, the Dutch government opted to "hide behind Spaak" from now on (126).

Subsequently, other elements contributed to the failure of the Fouchet proposals (*Fouchet I* in October 1961, *Fouchet II* in April 1962). Washington had become increasingly sceptical of de Gaulle's policy and decided to intervene more actively in European affairs. Pressured by the U.S., British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in the summer of 1961 announced his intention to apply for full British membership in the EEC. Hence the French objective of advancing the political union without Britain became less plausible. De Gaulle himself compromised the success of the project by altering *Fouchet I* in a way the other EEC partners could not accept, notably by deleting the reference to NATO. Even after de Gaulle withdrew his alterations, the plan was doomed. Not only the Dutch and the Belgians, but eventually the Italians also distanced themselves from the project. However, the consultation procedures elaborated by the Fouchet Commission served as the basis for the Franco-German Elysée Treaty signed on 22 January 1963, as de Gaulle and West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had agreed to put the project into practice on a bilateral level. According to Segers' reading, de Gaulle's *veto* against British EEC membership was a result of the failed European political union, because the French president wanted "to make room" for the new development on a Franco-German basis (131).

The article reviewed refers to an impressive amount of scholarly articles and books, unpublished Ph.D. theses, memoirs and published document collections, written in English,

Dutch, French and German. The many documents quoted from the Dutch National Archives and the Archive of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs witness extensive research in Dutch archives. Segers also refers to some documents from the National Archives in Kew (London). However, the text and the footnotes do not show any evidence of research conducted in French archives.

Segers challenges the “widely held myth” that the Dutch opposition to the Fouchet Plans was “united” and “steadfast” (114). He notably contradicts the argument by Jeffrey W. Vanke, who claimed that “Foreign Minister Joseph Luns led a broad Dutch consensus against this political union” and that the “irreconcilable positions” of the French and Dutch governments “doomed de Gaulle’s project from the start”.<sup>1</sup> In this respect Segers indeed builds up a strong argument and paints a lively picture of indecision in the Dutch cabinet, while Vanke seems to have relied too heavily on documents depicting Luns’ perspective.

This contribution by Segers is relevant for the history of European integration in general, as the Dutch opposition was instrumental in blocking a Gaullist-inspired European political union at an early stage. The revelation that this failure was initially inspired by foreign minister Luns only leaves the reader wondering about developments had the French initiative succeeded. The consequences would have been far-reaching for the emerging structures of European cooperation.

In terms of evaluating the result of Dutch actions, my conclusions differ from those of Segers. I do not share his assessment that “the demolition of Fouchet” was “The Hague’s finest hour” (130). In light of the Europeans’ painful and unsuccessful attempts to create a political union during the following decades, I see the failure of the Fouchet Plans more as an opportunity lost, however flawed they may have been. From another perspective, the Fouchet negotiations failed not only because of the Dutch. Sorbonne professor Georges-Henri Soutou argues – convincingly in my opinion – that de Gaulle’s unilateral alterations introduced into *Fouchet I* revealed to the EEC partners that the Six did not share the same vision of Europe’s future.<sup>2</sup> This view shares some reasoning with the French administration’s subsequent conclusion that a basic foreign policy consensus among the EEC members was imperative for the successful creation of a European political union.<sup>3</sup>

Segers’ analysis of French policy in the context of the Fouchet negotiations includes many elements also evinced by French scholars, notably by Soutou. Yet in Segers’ account the policy followed by de Gaulle takes on a distinctly more negative connotation (even though Soutou’s analysis is not uncritical of de Gaulle). For example, while Soutou understands the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey W. Vanke, “An Impossible Union: Dutch Objections to the Fouchet Plan, 1959-62,” *Cold War History* 2:1 (October 2001), 95-112 (quote 95-96).

<sup>2</sup> Georges-Henri Soutou, « Le général de Gaulle et le plan Fouchet d’union politique européenne: un projet stratégique », *Revue d’Allemagne et des Pays de langue allemande* 29:2 (1997), 219.

<sup>3</sup> Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères (Paris), Europe 1961-1970, Questions internationales et européennes, Dossier 1956, Note 29.9.1964.

secret Peyrefitte memorandum of August 1960 as a “cautious strategy” to stress the common ground of the Six and to avoid the differences, Segers reads it as a “rhetorical strategy that would outmanoeuvre the Dutch opposition” (120).<sup>4</sup> To some extent the description of French policy thereby becomes a description of the Dutch perception of French policy.

Segers’ choice of words further emphasizes that he sides with the Dutch and against de Gaulle. From his perspective, de Gaulle’s press conferences were “infamous” (122), the failure of a Dutch minister to impose a hard-line policy against de Gaulle was “unfortunate” (125), the French *veto* of 14 January 1963 and the Franco-German Elysée Treaty were “nakedly hostile moves” (131). Notably, the positive significance of Franco-German reconciliation, or the political substance of the *veto* from a French point of view, are not discussed.

The author correctly points out that the Netherlands were “a mere accessory to the interplay between Gaullist tactics and Anglo-US actions” (116). Yet, by limiting his analysis to (A), the Franco-Dutch antagonism, and (B), the rhetorical level, the article inevitably ignores substantial policy issues and presents an incomplete view on the origins of the 1963 French *veto*. At the same time, the article is an intriguing study of the fight by the “little” Dutch against the “big” Charles de Gaulle, based upon new and relevant material from Dutch archives.

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<sup>4</sup> Georges-Henri Soutou, *L'Alliance incertaine: les rapports politico-stratégiques franco-allemands, 1954-1996* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 153.