

# Rejection of constitution clouds future of Europe

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PARIS - Already beset by economic doldrums, the European Union's ambitious dream of forging 25 nations into a united global powerhouse on the scale of the United States or China has come to a grinding halt - at least for now.

By rejecting the proposed European Constitution in Sunday's referendum, France has set back plans for deeper European integration by at least a year, perhaps longer. And it's giving leaders from Poland to Portugal pause to consider what their people want from this union.

"Underneath all of this there is a more profound question, which is about the future of Europe and, in particular, the European economy," British Prime Minister Tony Blair said, adding it was too early to decide whether a popular vote scheduled for spring 2006 could go ahead in his country.

Blair's call for "time for reflection" on that question fulfilled the fears of former French Finance Minister Dominique Strauss Kahn, who backed the constitution. "This is clearly a stamp on the brakes," he said Sunday night as opponents of the charter won by 55 percent to 45 percent. "Europe is entering a period of hibernation, and I don't know how long it will last."

The French vote has not killed the European Union, which constitutes the world's largest economy and the most ambitious experiment in transnational governance.

It has not even necessarily killed the EU's 300-page constitution, which took three years to negotiate. EU leaders are calling for the continentwide process of country-by-country ratification to continue as planned.

Analysts note that Chirac made a tactical mistake by choosing to ratify the constitution by popular vote instead of a parliamentary vote. The parliaments of eight nations have ratified the vote without a hitch. Opinion polls suggest that Dutch voters will turn against the constitution at their referendum Wednesday; it will be hard to resuscitate the charter, most analysts say.

"People will have to go away and think again," says Denis MacShane, Britain's Europe minister until earlier this year. "Europe will have to carry on under existing treaties, but there will be a period of stasis in European affairs that won't be cleared up until the political question of leadership in Germany, France and Italy is cleared up at elections."

That stasis would clearly undermine French-led efforts to build the EU into a rival to the United States.

Less welcome to Washington, however, would be other effects, such as the brake that EU leaders might well put on membership negotiations with Turkey, an important U.S. ally.

Those negotiations are due to start next October, despite widespread misgivings among ordinary Europeans, especially in France, about the wisdom of admitting a large, poor Muslim country into their club.

At the same time, U.S. policymakers seeking European assistance in dealing with issues from Iraq to international terrorism would not enjoy the convenience of one of the constitution's provisions: a permanent foreign minister to streamline a more coherent European policy on international affairs.

<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/news/articles/0531france-eu31.html#>

**The New York Times and Republic staff contributed to this article.**