

Giscard puts blame on Chirac

By Elaine Sciolino The New York Times
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As the architect of the European Union constitution, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, seemed at the top of his game, praised as "the Mozart of politics" and poised to go down in history as the founding father of a new Europe.

Only two months ago, Giscard, the former French president, called the constitution "as perfect as, perhaps less elegant than, the Constitution of the United States of America."

Ratification by member countries was supposed to have been easy, and Giscard, now 79, might even have been asked to become the first president of the entire the 25-country bloc.

But now that his own countrymen have rejected the constitution, triggering declarations that it is doomed, he assigns blame not to himself or his document but largely to the man who inhabits Élysée Palace: President Jacques Chirac.

"This was not a vote on the constitution," Giscard said in his first interview since the French said no in a referendum last month. "That is the key point that has been missed by the political leaders, because political leaders don't normally like to say that the vote could have been against them."

Speaking in English in the library of his Paris home, he added, "The French message was, 'We want change in our political leadership.'"

Giscard, who has been harshly critical of Chirac in the past, accused the president of not responding early enough to dissatisfaction with his government and of confusing voters by insisting they vote on the constitution in its entirety, including all previously ratified European Union treaties.

Neither Chirac nor other European leaders have had a strategy for ratifying the constitution, he said. "The present generation of leaders, whatever their strengths, never put Europe at the top of their agenda," Giscard said.

Chirac in particular "didn't encourage people to be supportive of the system of Europe, but to be critical."

Giscard's own presidential career ended in an overwhelming defeat in the 1981 elections, so he understands well the vulnerability of political leaders.

When asked whether Chirac should have resigned following the outcome of the vote, he did not say no. "I will not comment on that," he said. "I want to keep my distance from the leader of the French political scene."

He noted, however, the decision of President Charles de Gaulle to resign in 1969 the day after the French people, in a referendum, rejected a measure to revise the Senate, create regions and seek support after the student uprisings of May 1968.

"De Gaulle did, De Gaulle did," Giscard said. "The vote was on Sunday and on Monday all the packing was done and he went to Colombey," his longtime residence.

A turning point for the fate of the constitution in France came last March, Giscard said, when he phoned Chirac to warn him not to send the entire three-part, 448-article document to every French voter. The third and longest part consisted only of complicated treaties that already have been in force for years.

He said that Chirac refused, citing legal reasons.

"I said, 'Don't do it, don't do it,'" Giscard said. "It is not possible for anyone to understand the full text."

There is no indication that the French would have voted any differently if they had to decide only on the new document.

In retrospect, Giscard said the Parliament should have ratified the constitution, even though he said he previously endorsed Chirac's decision to put it to a popular referendum.

Since Chirac's governing center-right party enjoys a majority in Parliament, and since most of the opposition Socialist Party leadership supported the constitution, it certainly would have passed.

Still, Giscard admitted that until the end, he believed the French people would vote yes, predicting in a speech in Germany just two days before the vote that 53 percent of the French would vote in favor of the constitution. Instead, 55 percent voted against it.

He singled out French voters for criticism, saying, "I thought at the end the French people would be rational people."

The blame spreads even farther.

He also said that had the European Union leaders had not left open the possibility of Turkey's full membership into their bloc, the constitution probably would have passed in France.

Giscard is a passionate opponent of Turkey's full membership, arguing that the country is not part of Europe and deserves only a lesser partnership status.

In a Louis Harris poll published two days after the referendum, however, only 22 percent of the "no" voters said that among their reasons was opposition to Turkey's entry into the European Union.

The issue of Turkey was more important in the decision of Dutch voters to reject the constitution in their own referendum three days after the French vote.

Despite declarations throughout Europe that the constitution is dead, Giscard is convinced that eventually it will succeed.

Asked whether ratification should continue, he replied, "Of course."

He dreams about a sequence in which most members pass what he referred to at one point as "my document," and that some "additions" to the document can be written and a formula found for it to be implemented.

He admits distress that his constitution has been rejected. "I wasn't hurt, I wasn't humiliated," he said of the French vote. "I was surprised, I will say in a sense disappointed." He added, "I was deprived of a cause for happiness."

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