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Frankreich Ein Jahr Sarkozy

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France's Gallop Toward Reform The first Sarkozy year – hurdles and change

Two centuries after its unveiling, the gleaming marble and erotic charm of Antonio Canova's «Reclining Venus» remains enchanting. Back then, a shudder of scandal rippled through domain of the French Emperor, then at the zenith of his power. For his zestful and love-hungry sister Paoletta Buonaparte, once the widow of General Leclerc and now a Borghese princess, had shed nearly all her garments to pose for the *Venere Vincitrice*. According to one anecdote, when asked by an observer, who had been startled by the statue's beguiling nakedness and faithfulness to its model, whether it wasn't somewhat embarrassing for the princess, she replied with a lively laugh: «No, why? The studio was well-heated.»

When Carla Bruni Tedeschi, now married to French President Nicolas Sarkozy, recently paid a visit to the United Kingdom in the company of her husband and at the Queen's invitation, London's tabloid press provided a poisonous variation on France's age-old complaints about «perfidious Albion»: an old photograph (soon to be auctioned in New York) of the former model, nude yet exuding an elf-like innocence with no trace of suggestive sensuality, appeared in all the papers. But the French president's third wife enchanted the British public with her smooth navigation of Court protocol, her elegance and charm, so that it wasn't she but rather the scandal-mongers of Fleet Street who were stripped bare. But Carla Bruni nevertheless aroused a fleeting memory of Pauline Borghese until, just in time for the first anniversary of Sarkozy's presidency, an old master of French publicity came up with the observation that among this leader's successes was his having given France «its most beautiful First Lady.»

«Style makes the man», goes an old saying. Sarkozy's turbulent private life provided an excess of headlines and ultimately became a political issue, not so much because it gave the opposition opportunities for countless attacks, but rather because of spreading consternation – among his conservative core constituency as well as others – about the personal spectacle of his divorce and rapid remarriage. Initially there were many who drew parallels with the Kennedy glamor of old, but that idea turned out to be totally mistaken because, unlike the former Jacqueline Bouvier, Sarkozy's second spouse paid little attention to the demands of protocol but rather turned out to be a

liability and now, in retrospect, appears to have shared responsibility for many things that did damage to Sarkozy's reputation at the time.

But most of those escapades were fit only for the gossip columns. Things were quite different with Sarkozy's decision to climb down from his predecessor's lofty throne and convert the powerful need for popularity into genuine contact with the citizenry, as exemplified by his opening direct talks with striking railway workers and furious fishermen. Which prompted a horrified public to lament, «What has become of the President of the Republic's dignity?»

Once upon a time the *soldats de l'an II* were mobilized and sent forth to rescue the French Revolution from its external enemies. Today, the *Sarkozy de l'an II* has changed his style in many respects and is trying to pay greater attention to the need of the great majority of French citizens for a dignified figure of respect to occupy the fixed-term office of France's «elected monarchy» – a need he had formerly underestimated. The «presidentialization» of the country's government system, which has been used as a political accusation against him, was virtually forced upon him by the public.

Shortly before the end of his first year in France's highest office, President Sarkozy, speaking of the reforms he had initiated, observed that «There has not been such an effort at reform since de Gaulle.» The elan and dynamism with which, from his first day in the Elysée Palace, the Fifth Republic's sixth president has undertaken to break through an enormous reform logjam and to modernize his country, is indeed unparalleled. Yet, at the end of the first year of Sarkozy's designated five-year first term, what dominates is not the optimistic and enthusiastic mood of a new beginning. On the contrary, there is a sense of disappointment and moroseness almost everywhere. On May 6 of last year, Sarkozy was elected to the presidency by an unusually large margin of 53%. But after some months of high spirits, his plummet in the polls after little more than half a year in office seemed all the more sudden.

Looking back at the first year of his presidency with unbroken verve, Sarkozy declared that bitterly needed reforms in France had been postponed, shelved or simply ignored for at least a quarter of a century. Even before his election he had said that he wanted to undertake not one reform after the other, but all of them at once, in an unparalleled gallop toward modernization. By and large he has kept that pledge – and in that very fact lies a major cause of the widespread dissatisfaction in France today. Of all the promises he made for his government program, that of increased purchasing power probably impressed itself most forcefully on the minds of voters hoping for a marked economic upswing. «Work more to earn more» was the modern adaptation of the legendary slogan «Enrichissez-vous!» But even Sarkozy did not dare to directly annul the 35-hour work week introduced by the Socialists.

In the judgment of the average French voter, practically only one thing counted at the end of Sarkozy's first year in office: the man in the street did not have more money in his wallet. On the contrary, soaring prices for energy and raw materials generated a return of an inflationary spiral that had been thought a thing of the past. The crisis on the American mortgage market with its worldwide consequences, and the extreme weakness of the dollar coupled with a concomitantly inflated exchange rate of the euro, further exacerbated the nasty economic picture, in which any attempts at reform bid fair to turn out to be merely a bold adventure. But in his first six months in office, reformer Sarkozy at least succeeded in doing something which neither left- nor right-wing governments before him had really tried, much less accomplished: a phased elimination of the privileged pensions for government railway workers and a series of other public-sector categories.

Going completely beyond a narrow schematization of left and right, Sarkozy's tactic of a «political opening to the left» surprised both his supporters and opponents. What had initially been seen in part as a mere maneuver to confuse the Socialists prior to the parliamentary elections, soon turned out to be an integral part of his broad reform strategy, which he has since expanded further. Hardly to the delight of his core constituency, and also causing considerable grumbling in the government camp, a number of rather prominent Socialists were given key posts in the new Fillon cabinet, chief among them the «French doctor» Bernard Kouchner, who became foreign minister.

In his election campaign, Sarkozy as a «Bonapartist people's tribune» set out to garner votes from the far right to the left. A Corsican outsider once lent his name to the style, substance and methods of a particular manner of governing, which has since been known as «Bonapartism.» But it is by no means just the small stature and tremendous energy of the current resident in the Elysée which prompt parallels. Of the «three Rights» referred to in French political science to distinguish the legitimatist, Orléanist and Bonapartist camps within the right wing, most aspects and goals of Sarkozy's first year in office would seem to place him in the latter camp.

Sarkozy's project for constitutional reform is not just a retouch job, but rather the most important revision since the 1962 referendum about the election of the French head of state. The limiting of a president's term in office to two five-year mandates is part of it, as are some new rights for a parliament which has been relegated to a castrated existence for the past fifty years. The end of Napoleon III at Sedan (1870) was followed by establishment of the Third Republic. Since then, no French head of state has been permitted to appear before the houses of Parliament. He could address them only by written communication, the reading of which had to be listened to by deputies and senators alike in a standing position. But since in the Fifth Republic the French president is far more than just a figurehead, but a genuine head of state, Sarkozy wants to annul the old tradition and himself be able to address the National Assembly or

Senate, or both houses convened together as the Congress.

Charles de Gaulle as head of state would hardly have wished to descend into the parliamentary arena. But neither this constitutional reform nor Sarkozy's other planned reforms should automatically be seen as a break with Gaullist tradition. In justifying France's planned return to NATO's integrated command, Premier Fillon remarked that the true lesson to be derived from de Gaulle's legacy is the rejection of any and all doctrinaire rigidity. Still, Sarkozy's intention of a total return to NATO does constitute a clear departure from Gaullist dogma and is meeting with countless objections and reservations both within the government camp and among the opposition. In fact the general rapprochement with Washington appears to be taken as an insult to the fundamental anti-Americanism of France's political elite and to call into question emotional attitudes held for decades.

What prompted Sarkozy to undertake a full return to NATO was, among other things, the realization that no progress will be made on a common European defense as long as France continues to burden relations with Washington by its anti-American obstructionism and to raise suspicions that it is pursuing an antagonistic and competitive policy. The idea that it is now time, in conjunction with the Americans and despite France's previous reservations, to build up a European defense worthy of the name, also served to support the domestic-policy retreat from the kind of Gaullist dogma that has been upheld by both the left and right for more than four decades. But it should not therefore be assumed that Paris in future will play a more cooperative or flexible role within NATO's integrated command structure.

On the other hand, France is not being stingy with its assistance in the battle against Islamist terrorism and against Iran's nuclear ambitions. At times the French estimation of the danger of Iran's reach for nuclear weaponry has seemed even more alarming and also more realistic than American prognoses. Increased French participation in Afghanistan is part of the same chapter and also has given Paris an opportunity not only to regain American favor but also, with relatively little effort, to engineer a quite spectacular return onto the world stage. With its vehement objections to the war in Iraq, it had temporarily exited from the global arena, and especially from that of the Middle East. But with its impulsive-seeming decision to erect a permanent military base in Abu Dhabi, on the opposite shore of the Persian Gulf from Iran, and thus to establish a naval facility outside its former colonial sphere of influence for the first time, France under Sarkozy took a step into new foreign-policy territory. Its intensive sale of civilian nuclear plants to states of the Arab-Islamic world, from Algeria and Libya to the Emirates, aroused some reservations among its allies, especially in Berlin. Are those sales a component of France's controversial but quietly-pursued «Arab policy,» the Gaullist pro-Arab aspect of which has been somewhat moderated by Sarkozy's declarations of friendship for Israel? The new attention to Libya on the part of the

Elysée's current tenant, however, is due not to such ambitions but rather primarily to Sarkozy's inclination to spectacular diplomatic moves.

In the French president's policy toward Africa, too, there has been a strong element of almost inevitable *realpolitik*, in contrast to the earlier announcements of a break with the often corrupt and conspiratorial practices of «*Françafrique*» in recent decades. But Sarkozy's proposed reduction of French troops on the Dark Continent will probably take place, if for no other reason than the need to make further cuts in France's military budget. The latter appears in any case poised to suffer somewhat from neglect under the present president. The size of the French army is especially threatened with shrinkage in view of France's return to a classic Gaullist nuclear doctrine, in which national efforts at deterrence clearly take precedence over offers to cooperate with France's European allies.

The dream of making use of its EU partners in order to enhance French power has by no means been abandoned. On a small scale this was seen in the hasty sending of protective troops to eastern Chad in conjunction with the Darfur drama. But neither Britain nor Germany are participating in that action, which is also a product of the mentality of diplomatic coups. Yet in Sarkozy's image of Europe, those two powers belong to the leadership group, along with Spain, Italy and Poland. That informal «community of six» constitutes, in Sarkozy's pragmatic view, the core which will determine the future of the EU.

In essence Sarkozy does not seem a passionate supporter of the European idea, and certainly not a fighter for further integration. The swift execution of a compromise on the EU's Lisbon Treaty was aimed mainly at overcoming France's isolation after the fiasco of the referendum on the EU Constitution. The renewed approach to the new EU partners of East-Central Europe, who had been snubbed by Chirac, and the subsequent go-it-alone idea of a Mediterranean Union, was due to the wish for a stronger French position at the heart of the EU, and at the same time aimed at putting the brakes on the growing weight of a reunited Germany.

Despite all the hymns to friendship, Sarkozy's relationship with Berlin always also involves a test of strength. When it came to his Mediterranean Union he was compelled by German objections to execute a considerable retreat. The routine business between Paris and Berlin may outwardly appear to be going on almost as usual, but we may hardly expect a new spark to ignite the Franco-German «*entente élémentaire*.» Sarkozy is operating as part of the concert of EU powers, not in the former spirit of bilateral relations. Those relations are a thing of the past, as is France's old withdrawal from the NATO military command in order to increase its own «nuisance value» in the American-Soviet superpower confrontation during the cold war era. In today's very different constellation, France can better maintain its international political rank vis-a-vis

Germany through a rapprochement with Washington and by closing ranks against Iran than it could with a bold integration policy or by obstinately clinging to outdated dogmas.

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