

'Optimism in Venice' from Le Monde (1June 1956)

Caption: On 1 June 1956, the French daily newspaper Le Monde considers the scope of the decisions adopted by the Foreign Ministers of the six Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) who met in Venice on 29 and 30 May to study the Spaak Report and the proposals concerning the Common Market and Euratom.

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Optimism in Venice

The Foreign Ministers of the six signatory countries of the Messina Resolution — with the exception of Mr von Brentano, here replaced by Mr Hallstein — have, to their own surprise, managed, in just 24 hours, to get through with ease everything on the agenda of the conference which they attended in Venice. A further meeting is planned in Brussels for 26 June 1956 under the chairmanship of Mr Spaak. There, they will begin negotiations ‘devoted to the drawing up of a treaty establishing a general common market and a treaty establishing a European atomic energy organisation.’ The delegates have confirmed that their governments are willing to adopt the proposals set out in the Spaak Report as a basis for these negotiations. They have agreed to meet regularly to hear the reports of the heads of delegation.

Beyond these procedural decisions inaugurating a new stage in the process of European integration, the six Foreign Ministers also discussed several of the major problems arising from the establishment of the two new European ‘communities’. Should the overseas countries and territories be included in the common market or not? May the members of Euratom use nuclear energy for military purposes? How might third countries be involved in the envisaged European communities?

These various problems may not have been resolved, but some promising potential ways forward have emerged. The idea, for example, of linking Africa with Europe through the inclusion in the common market of the overseas countries and territories seemed to win over several of Mr Pineau’s colleagues, most notably Mr Spaak. Similarly, there was an agreement that these planned European organisations should, as far as possible, be opened up to other members of the OEEC.

Even if it had led only to the approval of the Spaak Report and to the planned conference given the task of drawing up a charter for Euratom and the common market, the meeting in Venice would have been considered a success. All the same, it is necessary to qualify this by putting it in context: there are persistent differences between France and its partners, who are above all concerned with achieving a common market in Europe. Mr Pineau has agreed to begin negotiations immediately on the drawing up of the two treaties, and this acceptance was a great source of satisfaction for his colleagues. However, he also made the point that the two sets of talks could not proceed at the same speed, as too many issues remain to be resolved regarding the common market, and as a European customs union would have such serious repercussions for national economies. He even stated that France was able to accept only an ‘elastic’ first stage, which would entail the harmonisation of the Six’s social security contributions. This prevents any premature action.

The situation in Venice is, therefore, much the same as it was in Brussels last February, with, however, one important difference, a hard to define psychological difference, which probably represents the true success of the conference. For the first time, France’s partners no longer have the impression that the France’s only objective was to delay the advent of a common market that had seemed so threatening to us. The Five have regained hope and, without being under any illusions about the necessary stages, they now believe that success is possible for this European revival. For their part, the French have met with greater understanding from their neighbours and with a more objective view of their difficulties.

We shall soon see, when other, far more difficult, specific problems are tackled, whether the climate in Brussels will make the promises that blossomed in Venice bear fruit.