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EU's Future: The Vision and the Slog

After the German-French Moment, Gray Routine Resumes Its Dominance

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PARIS — A little less than two months ago, the countries of the European Union began to discuss the community's future in terms that did not, for once, blur the issue into acronyms, ministerial delegations, and

NEWS language with all the ap-
ANALYSIS peal of aluminum siding.
Starting with the call by the German foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, for the creation of a functioning European government on a federalist model within the next decade, Europe renewed contact with perspectives of a universally elected Parliament and a president chosen by direct vote.

This was all verbal; but by EU standards, and in contrast to the community's concern over its common currency's 18-month decline, or the weight

of its planned expansion to a membership of 30 countries, it seemed almost ebullient, visionary stuff, unmistakable fresh air.

On a daily level, however, this is also where things that reach for the horizon stop for now. Stolid concepts like "reinforced cooperation," and meetings under the heading of "the intergovernmental conference on EU reform," are returning to dominate the community's agenda.

What remains from the few weeks of ostensibly far-seeing talk are outlines, or shards, of notions of how the EU nations could move toward an end-concept for shared sovereignty and real unification. Mr. Fischer has come back to the issue, emphasizing in Strasbourg this week that he believes in the inevitability of a federal system with a "strong," universally elected president. Still, the signs from key govern-

ments are clear that for the time being more familiar politics are closing out the big-picture interval.

•Germany is comfortable with having laid out a proposal for an extensively supranational future with a European government, president, and legislature. The idea fits the country's postwar history of federalism and distance from nationalist-oriented concepts. In the short term, whatever Mr. Fischer's inclinations, the pragmatic instincts of Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder suggest there is nothing further to be gained by maintaining a focus on Europe's finality, and diminishing the energy needed for the intermediate slog.

•France, through President Jacques Chirac's references to an eventual European constitution, has succeeded in coming to the forefront of the debate

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without offering anything specific on the line of Germany's version of a partial parceling out of sovereignty to new authorities. Mr. Chirac has won important domestic political points in casting himself rather than his probable presidential election rival in 2002, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, as the French voice on Europe's future. With France responsible for managing the difficult reform agenda of its current, six-month EU presidency, in the French view there would be danger in pushing practicalities and politically troublesome visions at the same time.

• Britain, Sweden, Denmark and Spain all have governments that are pleased to let discussions of a supranational future peter out. They see only woe in talk that fuels Euroskeptic resistance in their electorates or concern about multispeed Europes from which they might be excluded. In a country like Luxembourg, the French-German domination of the debate on the future coincides with fears it has raised about the two countries' forming a directorate, and their return to the power concepts of the 19th century.

These realities underscore one of the awkward truisms of the European construction process: That its daily tasks are so leaden and so tied to the continuous defense of national interests that there is no permanent constituency pressing for a definition much sooner than later of Europe's grandest, most meaningful goals.

In Germany, with Mr. Schroeder in

power rather than Helmut Kohl, the country's leader is no longer a man whose European credentials — the old chancellor's sacrifice of the Deutsche mark to create the euro, for example — create undisputed confidence throughout the EU of a German commitment to the greatest good for all.

No doubt, Mr. Schroeder has not taken a single concrete step that would create alarm about German intentions. Still, he campaigned for a period two years ago on a platform of considerable Euroskepticism, tried briefly to reduce the size of Germany's payments to the EU, and has very visibly let Mr. Fischer carry forward the substance of the discussion of the community's future.

The fact is, stalled tax and pension reform, not Germany's theoretical role in a made-over Europe, dog Mr. Schroeder as problems that might pinch at home. The middle-term European issue that would most concern the chancellor has nothing to do with electing a president of Europe, but how to ensure that the prospect of cheap labor from new members to Germany's east does not destabilize his electorate.

Indeed, all of Mr. Fischer's calculations for a basic debate on the EU's final form specifically point beyond 2002, also the date of Germany's next scheduled national elections.

In France, the Socialist government has signaled that its energy will go into the here-and-now reform agenda of the French EU presidency rather than vaster perspectives. If a politician had been trying to elegantly stow the issue of Europe's future, he could not have done

it with more obvious intent than Francois Hollande, the chairman of the Socialist Party.

He said, "If it's about saying a constitution is necessary, a lot of people can agree on that: Those who want to limit Europe's powers, as much as those who, beyond clarifying various areas of the competence, want to give it real, federally inspired powers. We're proposing to think over the contents. That will take years."

Clearly, Mr. Jospin can see little interest in coming to grips too soon with the question of the transfer of aspects of French sovereignty to a European body. For all his adeptness in associating himself over the past month with the big issues of Europe's future, Mr. Chirac's situation is like the prime minister's because in a presidential election each man would have to run on the contention he is the best defender of France's specificity.

In reality, the French president's response in Berlin to Mr. Fischer's initiative did not say yes or no to the idea of a European president elected by popular vote, or to a European government — which left the debate whole.

No impetus to renew it, of course, was going to come from the countries who believe they would see very little of themselves reflected in a more supranational Europe, as opposed to those nations who might consider they have chances of dominating it.

For now, after nearly two months in the sun, Europe's discussion of its ultimate future seems ready to give way to the gray presence of EU routine.