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France's Participation in Abolishing Nuclear Weapons:

# Why hold a referendum, and why this particular referendum?

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**Nuclear disarmament is an absolute imperative. A referendum is one of many paths to that objective. But what referendum - a referendum on multilateral disarmament or on unilateral disarmament?**

**During the summer gathering of Europe Ecologie - Les Verts (EELV), held in Marseille on 22-24 August 2013, a workshop on 23 August led by Gérard Lévy (coordinator of EELV's commission on peace and disarmament) was devoted to this question.**

**To advance the debate, two men were invited to present their viewpoints:**

**Jean-Marie Matagne, representing ACDN (Action des Citoyens pour le Désarmement);**

**and Pierre Dufour, representing the Movement for a Nonviolent Alternative (MAN) ;**

**Below is the viewpoint expressed by the President of ACDN. We would gladly reproduce that of Pierre Dufour, if he and MAN accept also to publish both viewpoints on the MAN website.**

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Dear Friends,

To begin, let us recall the Resolution adopted by EELV's Federal Council on 24 June 2012:

*"The Federal Council, meeting on 23-24 June 2012, asks all its representatives in parliament and government to do all they can to ensure at an early date that a bill or legal proposal is studied with a view to organizing a wide debate and a referendum on the following question:*

*« Are you in favour of France participating with the other states concerned in the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, under a system of mutual and international monitoring that is strict and effective ? » "*

The resolution continued, after an amendment by the committee of the Federal Council: "The Federal Council pays homage to the action of Jean-Marie Matagne, **assumes his struggle and undertakes to support it**. It wishes Jean-Marie Matagne and Luc Dazy to end their hunger strike, and very much hopes **that the Presidential Staff** who will receive them tomorrow **will heed their demands, with which it stands in solidarity.**" (*My emphasis.*)

The amendment was adopted unanimously and the resolution with its annex was adopted unanimously with one abstention. **That is therefore EELV's current position.**

Now, Friends, do you desire the abolition of nuclear weapons? I presume you do. No need, then, for me to demonstrate that ridding the world totally of these barbarous weapons is an absolute imperative. I argued this in a 650-page thesis completed in 1991, but it would be enough for you to read a précis of a few pages, if you are not already convinced. So, assuming you share this objective, why should you call for a referendum on the subject? That question is legitimate and should be examined even before the later question of Why this particular referendum with this particular wording?

### 1. Why hold a referendum ?

The call for a referendum proceeds from several requirements that can scarcely be disputed.

Firstly, there is a moral requirement. Nuclear weapons 1°) strike whole populations, men, women, children, old folk, without discriminating between civilians and combatants; 2°) their destructive effects bear no relation to any clear military objective; 3°) the suffering they cause is disproportionate; 4°) their radioactivity has very long-lasting effects on the environment and on future generations, including the human genome. Therefore those who accept without protest the financing of these weapons through our taxes become accomplices in the preparing and the possible committing of crimes against humanity. To require the abolition of these arms is an indisputable moral right and duty.

It is also a political right and duty. To cooperate or fight, to make war or peace, those have been fundamental questions for most if not all human societies, ever since the world was the world. In particular, they represent the major stake and the priority object of democratic institutions. When the artisans of ancient Athens contested the landed aristocrats' right to decide on wars (in which they would have to fight as infantry), that was when they succeeded in imposing democracy in Athens. Today nuclear weapons, which a handful of men decided to develop, concentrate military power to an unprecedented extent in the hands of a single man. This power to suddenly annihilate thousands or millions of people, by the decision of one individual, is the absolute negation of democracy. The abolition of this monstrous power is therefore an indisputable democratic imperative. Since, as has been said, war is far too serious a matter to be entrusted to the military chiefs, war cannot be entrusted to one man, or a clique of strategists, or a lobby - a nuclear lobby in this case. The people, who are all potential victims of nuclear weapons, must take the matter in hand - must insist on deciding the matter themselves.

It happens that the Constitution of France's Fifth Republic, a presidentialist one, offers (as one of the paradoxes of Gaullism) the possibility of consulting the people by referendum on major questions. Nuclear war is a major question. In fact, President de Gaulle seriously considered having a referendum on the subject of the nuclear strike force. It is therefore a political imperative for all French democrats to grasp this opportunity, this means of ending nuclear dictatorship.

For these moral and political reasons, ACDN has demanded such a referendum ever since its establishment in 1996, at a time when French opinion on this subject was unknown. Since then, other historical motives have added to the need and urgency of such a referendum.

The international upheavals that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, such as the breaking of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, ought to have led France to change her strategic doctrine and posture. No such change occurred. All the measures that France has presented (in propaganda for foreigners) as unilateral disarmament gestures are without exception measures driven by financial, technological or political contingencies: the abandoning of the short-range Pluton and Hadès missiles, which could not go further than Germany, the closure of the Albion Plateau site (which was obsolete from the start), the closure of the Pacific Testing Centre in Polynesia (which had become useless), the reduction of warheads to 300 (still too many, since they can potentially kill nearly a billion), the end of production of military fissile materials (similarly superfluous) etc... Meanwhile, France has never once declared herself ready to negotiate with other nuclear states with a view to eliminating her arsenal. On the contrary, France has continuously modernized her arsenal and repeated how indispensable it remains to her security. This, naturally, can only encourage nuclear proliferation.

Nevertheless, the other nuclear-armed states have made feelers. In January 2007 the UK's then prime minister, Gordon Brown, proposed to move towards a world without nuclear arms and to lead the movement. In September 2008 Barack Obama did the same, even before being elected, as did Putin at the same time. In 2009 Obama and Medvedev took action, together signing the new bilateral START treaty. The Chinese too have made favourable

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declarations several times, notably last April at the Preparatory Committee for the Non-Proliferation Treaty. But in France, Sarkozy clung to his obstinate view that nuclear deterrence is our "life-insurance". The election of François Hollande in 2012 changed nothing there, if anything moving in the other direction (see his article in *Nouvel Observateur* on 22 December 2012, his 60th campaign objective; his attendance at the NATO summit in Chicago on 21 May 2012; his visit to the submarine *Le Terrible* on 4 July; his 2013 defense budget; his interview on France 2 on 28 March 2013 ; and the military programming law for 2014-2019...).

At the same time, national and international opinion has become increasingly favourable to the abolition of nuclear weapons - more than 80% of French voters, according to two convergent polls, one by the IFOP in 2012. So, short of waiting for presidential elections in 2017, 2022, or 2027, and a miraculous conversion for François Hollande or one of his successors, the only way to force our leaders to respect France's international obligations, and accept a national debate and change of policy, is by a referendum.

It remains to be seen what question will be put to the citizens of France. On this point we must not be deceived: the result of a referendum can vary greatly according to the precise question asked. The EELV's Federal Council chose to support one. Was it correct? I think it was. But others, like the activists of MAN, think otherwise and question this choice. I propose that we should listen to their arguments, expounded by our friend Pierre Dufour, before debating this point.

*(Exposé here by Pierre Dufour)*

### 2. Why this particular referendum ?

I thank Pierre for his exposé. I will now defend (not for the first time) EELV's official position, i.e. the following wording: « *Are you in favour of France participating with the other states concerned in the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, under a system of mutual and international monitoring that is strict and effective ?* »

This question asks the people whether they approve of France being involved in a multilateral disarmament process under appropriate controls.

Some will say: why bother to ask them, since in any case France is obliged to participate, by the terms of the article VI of the NPT which she has signed! That is true. But despite being obliged, she has not done anything, for over 20 years. When refusing, France invokes all sorts of pretext: the unequal size of arsenals between the two Great Powers and the other nuclear-armed states; the alleged "strict sufficiency" of her own arsenal, her so-called unilateral disarmament measures, the threat of proliferation in Iran etc... Since international law has no effect on the leaders of France, the only power that can force their hand is *vox populi*, the voice of the people, which overrules them because it is the source of their own legitimacy.

Another possible objection is that the French people do not wish to change policy, since they elected Hollande and the integral continuation of the nuclear strike force, with both airborne and submarine components, was part of his electoral programme. True, but it was part of Sarkozy's too. So French voters, in the second round of the election, could only choose between plague and cholera. They could not form an opinion on a question that had been carefully sealed up and excluded from public debate by the leading candidates, as had happened in all previous presidential elections. Therefore they need the chance to express their views on this specific question, a crucial point of national policy. That is an unavoidable democratic requirement.

Finally, it is mistaken to assert, as Hollande's cabinet chief, M. Pierre Besnard, said in reply to ACDN on 14 March 2013, that our proposal « falls outside the framework of Article 11 of the Constitution which specifies the domains of operation of referenda ». That was an attempt to hide behind the Constitution in order not to admit to a personal and

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political refusal. One certainly can present to the Constitutional Council convincing arguments of fact and law proving that the Constitution does permit such a referendum.

But let's tackle the objection from MAN: why not ask of France to disarm unilaterally without awaiting the goodwill of the other nuclear-armed states, who do not have that willingness? France's disarmament depends only on France, and therefore can occur immediately. She would thereby set an example and others will follow... perhaps.

First remark: the chief obstacle to multilateral disarmament is not the other states, it is France. All the well-informed observers say so. And what the active abolitionists in other countries want is not French unilateral disarmament but multilateral disarmament, the abolition of all nuclear weapons, including France's of course. They want France to cooperate in the process instead of blocking it, they expect that of us and that is why numerous foreign activists of Abolition 2000 co-signed ACDN's letter to the President of the French Republic.

Second remark: before setting an example, France would do well to honour her obligations and not prevent other nations from disarming if they want to. Yet François Hollande did just that at the Chicago summit when he opposed the withdrawal of US nuclear arms stationed in Europe, at a time when at least three of the governments concerned (Germany, Belgium, Netherlands) were requesting it. Why did he do so, less than a week after gaining access to the nuclear button? Because he feared a contamination effect: if one admits today that the US nukes are more harmful than useful to the security of Europe, one will say the same tomorrow of the French ones! What a disaster that would be!

Given such a mentality, we cannot imagine François Hollande, alias France, wanting to « set an example »! If he doesn't even want collective multilateral disarmament because that would imply sooner or later French disarmament, how could he want immediate unilateral disarmament? So we can't count on him to set an example, or on other countries to follow France in the very improbable scenario that she did. Setting an example can be useful in some cases, but is never guaranteed among nation-states "the coldest of cold monsters", and certainly not in a domain so ruled by prestige, domination and balance of force. South Africa once gave up five or six nuclear weapons. That did not convince India, Pakistan or North Korea to stop making them, as they proceeded to do.

Ah, one may say, too bad if others do not follow us, at least we the French will have done our duty, and will be able to look at ourselves in the mirror. Really? I'm not so sure. We would have eliminated 1,5 % of the total nuclear strength that is threatening to destroy the planet. So? What about the other 98,5 % ? Would that be a matter for joy or pride if the Indians and Pakistanis exchanged missiles or if the Israelis used theirs in the Middle East? The only sensible objective for those who condemn nuclear arms is **abolition**, and abolition requires the effective application of international law, a requirement that 130 UN member states and over 5600 cities around the world have adopted and are promoting vigorously. Today more than ever is no time to abandon the objective of abolition or the current methods.

By other means, we would not only fail to obtain worldwide abolition, we would not even obtain French unilateral disarmament. For if one admits the need for a referendum to cause François Hollande to disarm, that would also require France's citizens to want that too. Let's be clear about this. The estimated 80 % opinions favourable or very favourable in the aforementioned polls were in favour of multilateral disarmament, and the results which those polls encourage us to hope for (with no guarantees of course) would be different from the results on a question on unilateral disarmament.

You can read proof of this in the fine 10-page letter, based on moral and religious arguments, which Jean-Marie Muller wrote to all the bishops in France and which received virtually no reply. Yet if there is an institution that should be sensitive to such arguments, it is the Church. Under these circumstances, it's hard to see a majority of French citizens being swayed by such a discourse. I note in passing that during the hunger-strike by myself and Luc Dazy, 3

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bishops wrote to the President of the Republic supporting our call for a referendum on multilateral disarmament. Previously, 3 candidates for the presidency in 2012 (Eva Joly, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Philippe Poutou) undertook, if elected, to organize that very referendum. Together they won 15 % of votes on the first round. That is a good starting point for a popular movement. It is in our power to force destiny, provided EELV acts on its resolutions.

### Conclusion

To refuse the path of a referendum would mean postponing nuclear disarmament indefinitely, it would mean in practice accepting the status quo. To call for a referendum asking for unilateral disarmament by France would lead to defeat and would bury any kind of nuclear disarmament, unilateral or multilateral. The only exit from the nuclear order, or rather disorder, is to impose it by democratic means, by the people's voice - as the voters Scotland will perhaps do in September 2014 by booting the British submarines out of Faslane - it is to impose respect for human rights and citizens' rights: the abolition of all these weapons of crimes against humanity, and the active participation of our nation in this historic, universal, liberating process. If the other nuclear states end up refusing, that would be time for France to disarm alone. And the French people, better informed after a wide debate and first referendum, would be more likely than before to accept this inferior option.

I invite all the activists and representatives of EELV (as well as other people from everywhere, of course) who have not yet signed the [Open Letter to the President of the Republic](#), the so-called "Appeal by the 113", to join the **RAHAN** collective and the campaign for a **Referendum** and the **Historic Abolition of Nuclear Arms** - and also if convenient [to sign up for the international rolling fast](#) which reminds us every day of this demand which is rooted deep in our bodies and minds.

**Jean-Marie Matagne, Marseille, 23 August 2013**

[Lettre ouverte au Président de la République [Open Letter to the president of the French Republic](#)]