France’s European policy toward the EEC has often been studied from a political point of view during the period 1957-1974, when the EEC was still limited to six member states. In those days, France, particularly under de Gaulle (1958-1969) dreamt of leading the “Small Europe”. Therefore, in historical studies, the emphasis is traditionally placed on the “Grandeur” policy and its reactions towards the institutional development of the EEC (Fouchet Plan, Empty Chair Crisis). From this perspective, the Treaty of Rome is seen less as an economic Treaty than as a political association, whose main interest was to shift the balance of power in Europe, from Great-Britain to France, and from the Great Europe of the OEEC to the Six core-Europe, where France was the main political and military power.

This perception is in itself a Gaullist interpretation of the EEC, which is treated as a mere proxy for interstate bargaining and national interests. On the contrary, my paper will argue that French European policy was not confined to this restricted view of the Treaty of Rome. The main economic objective of French leaders in their EEC policy was to modernize France’s economy, in order to strengthen its political weight.

This is not to deny all political motives behind the signing of the Rome Treaties. But in the mind of the three most important French leaders during the period 1956-1974, the EEC was less a political aim in itself than the first economic step in a larger political achievement. Moreover it is possible to study a nation's European policy without concentrating solely on its leading figures, and, in the case of France, without focusing solely on Charles de Gaulle's vision and legacy. In the view of several leaders who defined French European Policy, the EEC Treaty was neither a mere commercial treaty nor a purely political agreement, but rather a strategic incentive to modernize France’s economy.

The idea was to shift from an economic model defined both in the late 19th century and in the 1930s to a new model. The former was based on protectionism, protected colonial markets and agricultural incentives. The latter emphasized the second and third Industrial Revolution sectors, free trade and the richer markets of the Atlantic world. The main goal was to catch up with America and Germany in terms of productivity, industrial production and exportation.

I/ The Economic Balance of the Treaty of Rome
II/ A Political Aim: to Get a Financial Support
III/ The Framework: A regulated Liberalization
IV/ The Structural Goal: to strengthen the Industrial Structure
V/ Conclusion : contradictions and continuities