

**Sarkozy dangles 'empty chair' threat over Europe**  
**Reuters**  
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PARIS, April 8 — French President Nicolas Sarkozy told a Sunday newspaper he is serious about pushing for more trade protectionism in Europe and tighter external border controls, hinting he could take a stand as tough as Charles de Gaulle's 1965 "empty chair" policy.

The conservative leader told the weekly Journal du Dimanche in an interview that he meant business with an election campaign pledge last month to push for a "Buy European Act" and a threat to pull France out of Europe's open-border Schengen zone unless external controls are tightened.

Sarkozy has shifted right, attacking low-cost competition and uncontrolled immigration, in the run-up to the two-round presidential election starting on April 22 as he battles to catch up with Socialist Francois Hollande, who leads opinion polls for a May 6 run-off by around 6 points.

Sarkozy's lag is due in part to a slip in support for far-right leader Marine Le Pen, whose voters he needs to back him in the second round if he is to beat his Socialist rival.

He told the Journal du Dimanche that while it was the job of the European Commission to handle trade negotiations, it was down to EU leaders to demand reciprocity from countries who only award public tenders to national companies.

"All the public markets on our continent have been open since 1994. In Japan the only open market is water. In China no public market is open," he said.

"All I am saying is, show reciprocity. Otherwise, French public contracts will only be awarded to companies that produce in Europe. When General de Gaulle instigated his empty chair policy in 1965 he obtained the Common Agricultural Policy and pushed Europe forward."

Former president de Gaulle triggered a crisis in the nascent European Economic Community in 1965 when he withdrew France's representative during a disagreement over agricultural funding, leaving the organisation crippled for several months until the so-called Luxembourg compromise agreed to give more weight to national sovereignty in voting conflicts.

European officials have said privately that they hope Sarkozy's stand is just election rhetoric.

But he reiterated his vow to pull France out of the 25-nation Schengen zone, which guarantees the free movement of people, unless the bloc's external frontiers are strengthened.

"There are 120 km between Greece and Turkey which are not guarded. I am in my right to demand what the sanctions should be," he said.

"I give one year for this practice to change, otherwise we suspend our membership of the

Schengen Agreement. As it's France which has the most generous welfare benefits, we are the ones most affected by putting these measures into place properly."

Sarkozy is being punished for his failure to bring down rampant unemployment as the global crisis hit France and by a widespread dislike of his personal manner, yet analysts still see him with a slim chance of catching up between voting rounds.

Sarkozy told the newspaper he would be happy to have two televised debates with his opponent between the rounds, rather than the traditional one debate. — Reuters

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