

### **The French EU Presidency: A Dizzying Ride Through Rocky Times<sup>1</sup>**

*“France is back in Europe,” president Nicolas Sarkozy rejoiced after the French parliament had adopted a law enabling him to ratify the Lisbon Treaty. Now politics had to be put back into Europe, he added, and presented an ambitious agenda for the French EU presidency. Shortly afterwards all hell broke loose: The Irish voted against the Lisbon Treaty, Georgia and Russia got involved in a military conflict over South Ossetia and a financial crisis shook up the whole world. Nicolas Sarkozy took all challenges in his stride and brought Europe back on the global stage. His energy was much admired, often appreciated, just as often resented. After having offended predecessor Germany in the run-up to the French presidency on several occasions, the Spanish by not inviting them to his G4 meeting and Commission president Barroso by outmanoeuvring him whenever it seemed appropriate, Sarkozy managed to enrage his successors, the Czechs and the Swedes, by an attempt to “siphon” (Václav Klaus) their presidencies. He also angered many other member states by suggesting that countries belonging to the euro zone plus the UK should form an “emergency economic government” with himself at its head for the next twelve months. In the meantime, he convoked and participated in a dizzying number of summits and meetings and got things done. In short, in six months of French presidency, there was never a dull moment. Yet, once the dust has settled, what are the sustainable results, how many bruises will show, what exactly does the parting package handed over to the Czechs contain and will they be able to handle it?*

The French presidency was expected with hope and scepticism alike. Scepticism because of the legacy of the French negative referendum on the European Constitution in 2005 and also because of the rather dubious French presidency which in the second half of 2000 had done a far from brilliant job. Then, of course, because of the Irish ‘No’ to the Lisbon Treaty in mid-June which forced President Sarkozy to reformulate the goals of his presidency to quite an extent. But the French presidency was also expected with hope, not only because of Sarkozy’s energy but also because of the experience and competence of the French officials.

Sarkozy displayed the energy expected from him. So many summits have been convened, including all sorts of informal ones, that one could almost speak of „summititis“ or „summitry“, and it is not over yet: even for 29 December an extraordinary meeting is scheduled. Apart from his relentless hyperactivity, it has to be said that President Sarkozy has displayed a remarkable adaptability to all sorts of unexpected events and crises as well as a good deal of pragmatism. What also helped was

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<sup>1</sup> Guest speakers were **Maxime Lefèvre**, Councillor External Relations, Permanent Representation of France to the EU and **Antonion Missiroli**, Director of Studies, European Policy Centre. The debate took place under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation

that France - unlike Germany in 2007 with the Constitution or the UK in 2005 with the future financing of the EU - did not have any specific national interest during this presidency.

### **Georgia**

It was good not only for the EU but for the whole situation that France was at the helm of the European Union, when the conflict between Georgia and Russia broke out in August. Sarkozy decided (against US objections) to take up a mediating role in Georgia, making use of France's good relations with both Moscow and Tbilisi as well as its virtual "double hat" as EU chair and permanent member of the UN Security Council. Sarkozy managed to broker a ceasefire and create a framework for diplomatic negotiations. He also prevented the EU member states from splitting over relations with Russia and – at the same time - was very strict with Russia.

In the beginning of the Georgia crisis, Sarkozy sidelined all EU institutions, including Solana. But with the second trip to Moscow things had changed: it was the first time in history that the Commission had to sign an agreement to a ceasefire. It has to be said that from their side the Russians did not accept the EU institutions. Even now with the Czechs as successors of the French presidency, the Russians have said that they do not want to deal with the EU institutions in the Geneva negotiations - they want the French in charge. That has been one of the prices to pay.

### **The financial crisis**

Whereas the Georgia conflict was handled with flair, Sarkozy's attempt to manage the financial crisis which erupted in September-October had its ups and downs. The G4 meeting on 4 October failed miserably. Other meetings like the euro-15 plus UK on 12 October and the G20 in Washington on 14 November were handled with more success.

In the same vein, the Presidency's determination to react quickly and decisively to the impending economic recession has prompted other Member States to do the same, although this has not translated into a centrally coordinated anti-cyclical package. Still, the European Central Bank has acted in unison with both sister institutions worldwide and the demands of EU governments, showing a flexibility it was not credited with beforehand.

In all this Sarkozy has managed to be at the same time liberal, protectionist, Keynesian, Colbertiste, nationally-minded and multilateralist – a mix that may not be sustainable in the longer run, but that served him (and the EU) well during the semester. This also helps explain how, in France, he has succeeded in occupying all political and ideological spaces.

### **Diplomacy**

Sarkozy often scored low in tact and diplomacy. Just like the previous French EU presidency in 2000, this year's Presidency has put Franco-German relations under enormous strain. The chemistry between Sarkozy and Merkel was extremely poor which

showed already in the run-up to the French presidency (Mediterranean Union, European Central Bank). Also, France and Germany have very different economic approaches; where France is more flexible in using budgetary means, Germany has a budgetary rigour orthodoxy. But as both leaders are likely to remain on the EU stage for at least a while longer, they may have to find a way of dealing with each other.

Sarkozy's proposal to somehow institutionalise euro-zone summits at the heads of state and government level was ill received not only by Germany but also by the ECB, the Commission, the Eurogroup's chairman Jean-Claude Juncker (traditionally an ally of France), and the Czech government.

Certain negotiations were led too „forceful“: the CAP assessment, some aspects of defence policy, the Union for the Mediterranean, or the pact on immigration and asylum reawakened old fears about France using the presidency chair to pursue national interests, but generated stronger resistance than in the past, thus leading to modest results. In a way, whenever and insofar as France has tried to impose a national agenda onto its partners, it has mostly failed – but whenever and inasmuch as France has managed to combine the two, it has mostly succeeded.

Occasional problems with some member states have often been balanced with concessions and derogations to appease them (e.g. on the energy/climate package) in order to conclude a comprehensive deal at the Summit and declare victory.

Through his activism in the financial crisis President Sarkozy established an unlikely friendship with UK prime minister Gordon Brown. This seems to have been triggered by the British Prime Minister's policy U-turn since the credit crunch hit the UK and their common interest in developing a strong response to the crisis. But there have also been important developments in Franco-British cooperation in the EU security and defence arena, although they have been downplayed by both sides (strangely so, given the recent 10th anniversary of the famous St. Malo Declaration with which Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac launched it in the first place). However, the impression at this stage is that the relation between Paris and London is more practical than deep.

The relations between France and the USA have already notably improved under Sarkozy, it has to be seen how things will work out between him and Obama.

President Sarkozy has also managed (at least in part) to reconcile France with the new EU Member States: he has listened to their demands and mostly delivered on them, even though the Baltic states may still be slightly unhappy with the way he dealt with Moscow, and the Czechs may still harbour some suspicions that he intends to basically extend France's EU Presidency well into their presidency period.

## **Ukraine**

There has been an evolution in the French position: the idea of considering the integration of Ukraine in the foreseeable future is no longer inconceivable for France, though Sarkozy never made any promises in this direction. In his mind Ukraine is more entitled to be in the EU than Turkey. A Ukraine EU membership will always remain a very questionable point for Germany for basically budgetary reasons and for the BENELUX countries for a mixture of different reasons. A majority in the Council was not ready to go very far concerning Ukraine. Spain, Italy, Germany, BENELUX countries and also others the debate showed that the countries who wanted to go further in terms of a membership of Ukraine were in a minority. But especially after the Georgia conflict, there is the awareness that opening the door to the EU does more for stabilising the country than does opening the door to NATO. From the French point of view the EU could be a much better stabiliser than NATO in the Eastern neighbourhood.

There is a pressure group within the EU for an integration of Ukraine. For Turkey it means that there is another populous and big and poor country that could become a member in the future and there could be a certain competition between Ukraine and Turkey in the future and, of course, Ukraine would raise much fewer objections within the EU than Turkey does today.

## **NATO**

The relationship NATO-EU also depends very much on the new US administration. Obama administration is probably not willing to further antagonise Russia with a domestic economic crisis at hand. The relation between Georgia and Ukraine with NATO will be somewhat frozen. The paradoxical outcome of the Bucharest summit that both countries will be accepted as future members, but they are not accepted to the Membership Action Plan (MAP) is probably the best solution to go for in the future: the two countries remain membership candidates, but no formal. One of the foreign policy goals of the Obama administration will be Iran. If that is so, antagonising Russia would not be a good idea at this moment in time. There is no particular need to show sympathy for Russia, but no need to antagonise it.

Russia was the most divisive subject in EU and NATO – on this issue France and Germany have worked hand in hand. Poland has been crucial in this debate. Lithuania did not have the strength to block the decision to re-open the negotiations with Russia..

As far as NATO is concerned, France is important as it is expected to fully rejoin the military commandment. The negotiations on the exact terms of that re-entry are still ongoing. Expected are difficult negotiations on command posts The first visit of president Obama to Europe will occur to that occasion, the celebration of the return of France to the NATO family with a degree of pomp. One should not forget that during its presidency France started to send a serious contingent to Afghanistan which has been seen by many as an act of goodwill. And French blood has been poured for the first time in Afghanistan.

## Conclusions

In retrospect, the French presidency has been overall successful and energetic. Sarkozy showed a remarkable capability to deal with the unexpected. He succeeded in turning the crises that have hit the EU since July (the conflict in Georgia, the financial crisis and the ensuing economic recession) into opportunities for the EU to take action. President Sarkozy has shown the importance of a strong and stable leadership for the Union. He was clever in - as a response to the Irish 'no' - presenting French leadership at the beginning of his presidency as some sort of foreplay to the Lisbon Treaty. Having an effective presidency with some sort of continuity and strength is the best evidence that we need for the Lisbon Treaty. Showing leadership has probably been Sarkozy's most important contribution to the Lisbon ratification process, even though at times it came at the cost of sidelining existing EU bodies and institutions.

During the French presidency "Europe" has been seen worldwide as a dynamic player, constructive partner, and effective crisis manager. That Sarkozy could succeed in bringing Europe back as a global player was possible due to the fact that Bush in the last months of his term in office was not much more than a „lame duck“..

Opinion poles show that the French presidency has had a positive influence on the European citizens' perception of the EU. People feel reassured. The handling of the crisis between Russia and Georgia was positively perceived. Also, the relation between the EU and France has changed during the presidency. Sarkozy and the French public used to be very critical on Europe (too bureaucratic). But during his presidency Sarkozy has succeeded in reconciling the French public with Europe, in part by showing that the EU is an appropriate format for addressing global crises and in part by conveying the idea that Europe could once again be an appropriate forum on which French interests and values can be represented effectively.



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