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“THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY: A TRANSFORMING MOMENT FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION?”

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Editorial

The role of the presidency of the Council of the European Union – what to learn from the French presidency

Is the EU in trouble with a Czech presidency in difficulty? Beyond the media reporting on the “disastrous” presidency carried out by the Czech government, it is the task of academic research to evaluate more in detail the real performance and the role of presidencies in general for the functioning of the European Union. To look back on the French presidency provides useful evidence for comparison of two highly different presidencies – not the least in style and narrative.

Presidencies are short moments (six months) in the Union's life-time. They are embedded in a multitude of constraints stemming from the community agenda and the Commission's work plan. The formal role of presidencies is limited, during six months they are supposed to chair the meetings of the European Council and the Council of Ministers and to steer the work of the Council working groups on a day-to day basis.

Nevertheless, presidencies use to set themselves an ambitious set of objectives. The French presidency's priority list was long: immigration, energy and environment, security policy, improving the relationship with the Mediterranean countries, and agriculture. What has been achieved on these dossiers is now followed up by the Czech presidency that tries to shift the focus of Community attention to its own three E's priority programme: economy, energy and Europe's role in the world, especially in the Eastern neighbourhood.

The French presidency took place in a crisis environment both internally and externally for the European Union. The ratification crisis of the treaty of Lisbon still persists and the European Union has now to cope with the economic consequences of the failure of global financial markets. What for the Czech presidency were the gas “battle” with Russia and the Gaza crisis, was for the French presidency the Russian-Georgian war.

What is very different, are the premises of the Czech presidency currently in place and the French one. While France is a big member state that could build on a long experience in EU affairs, the Czech Republic is a new member of the European Union that has taken up its first presidency. And what seems to be most important in the current situation: unlike the French government, the Czech presidency does not have a domestic power basis it can build upon. The Czech government – challenged not only from national opposition but also by the Czech president – will be substituted in the middle of the presidency. In an enlarged EU with 27 domestic scenes, the influence of national politics on EU decision-making is more and more important.

To compare these two very different cases can be telling on presidencies in general. It can give a hint, if successful leadership does make a real difference for the European Union or if at the end of the day a presidency is only a humble servant of 26 other national governments and a neutral broker. It also gives further evidence to the question, if a permanent president of the European Council – as foreseen by the Treaty of Lisbon – might make a difference to the Union’s working or not.

Looking back, can we observe something like “a moment of transformation” not particularly for the policies of the Union but for its institutional structure and politics, taking a turn towards more intergovernmental power structures and decision-making? This might not only be caused by the presidency itself but by the crisis events occurring during the presidency.

There is one last element that comes always into play when we talk about presidencies: the “narrative” of a presidency. The French government was praised to have held a successful presidency by mass media and political discourses, even by European institutions. Irrespective of their real performance, presidencies are judged on the “story” that is told about them. Most often presidencies try to influence and steer the image they create inside and outside the Union. The story on the French presidency was a positive one, not the least because the French government and president were able to communicate their ambitions and presidency style successfully. Negative “stories” and sets of expectations from the outset – as is the case with the Czech presidency - might instead sometimes turn out to be difficult to fight against and might end up to be “self-fulfilling prophecies”.

Academic insight on these multiple sides of presidencies and their role in the institutional architecture necessitates an interdisciplinary and cross-country approach. This is why the CERI and the Jean Monnet Chair for Political Science of the University of Cologne decided to organise a conference entitled “The French presidency – a transforming moment?” assessing the French presidency with some distance and with a cross-country perspective. The researchers did not only come from France and Germany, but from all over Europe, bringing in different visions of Europe and European leadership. The results can now provide a background for the informed assessment of the current Czech presidency and for the look forward to the Swedish presidency due in the second half of 2009.

The results of the conference are available under the following link:

<http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/themes/ue/index.php>