

## **Germany and the EU Presidency 2007 – Much Ado about Nothing?**

On 5 November 2006, in the state-owned Villa Borsig outside Berlin, the German cabinet adopted a “declaration on the German EU Presidency”, in which it outlined the main priorities of its six-month reign over the EU Council of Ministers. Those that were hoping that the German EU Presidency would be able to give the stagnating European integration process a new push and create some stimulating dynamics, however, must find this declaration rather discouraging and may be well-advised not to place too high their hopes in the energetic chancelliere and her grand coalition. Why is that so?

Undoubtedly, the document lists most of the issues the EU needs to confront if it wants to become more effective both on the domestic and the international level. Yet, it lacks substance and does not elaborate on any of the priority areas. Although some may argue that this is not necessarily surprising given that the government did not want to put the current Finnish Presidency in its shadow, and thus turn it into a lame duck already before it had ended, the more informed observer would have expected Angela Merkel to use this opportunity to attract some positive media attention and try to regain some of the ground she has lost so dramatically at the domestic front in recent months.

To be fair though, it needs to be pointed out that as far as the revitalisation of the odd Constitution is concerned, any EU Presidency in the first half of 2007 would be confronted with one major structural constraint, i.e. the French Presidential elections. Of course, Ms. Merkel and her Foreign Minister, Mr. Steinmeier, did not have much of a choice and were literally forced by the European Council of June 2006 to put the item on the agenda. Yet, they need to be aware that as the first round of the French Presidential elections is likely to take place at the end of April 2007 with a probable second round scheduled for early May, it is literally impossible to put forward any wide-reaching initiative and, more importantly, to hammer out consensus among the then 27 EU member states.

With respect to the second major item on the German EU Presidency agenda, i.e. the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the governmental declaration of 5 November 2006 speaks of a “developed” neighbourhood policy that should be based on “the EU’s neighbours’ participation in security and welfare and that should be guided by common values”. While the latter is mainly a reiteration of what has been uttered by past Presidencies as well as the European Commission, the objective to develop the ENP further must be supported in the light of its somewhat “one-size-fits-all” approach”, its incapacity to identify and support democratic reform actors and thus to promote democracy and good governance. A recent statement by a Foreign Ministry senior official indicates however that Germany will make the post-Soviet states a priority and address human rights as well as energy issues. Whereas such a focus can be justified by Germany’s proximity and its well-established relations with Eastern European countries, it is undoubtedly a blow to the EU’s Southern Mediterranean neighbours needs and the local reform movements’ aspirations.

As Ms. Merkel plans to present the German agenda to the European Parliament on 17 January 2007, one can only hope that she will use the remaining two months to give more substance to an agenda that not very long ago was hoped to turn into a reality her vision of a “re-found Europe”.

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