

The preparatory work of the Council under the Luxembourg Presidency (2005)

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[Maurice Molitor] Europe, a permanent building site, and for Luxembourg five months down and one to go as site foreman. Everyone knows about it, and even if they don't they can't miss it. The eu2005.lu logo is everywhere, at the Council in Brussels, around the European institution buildings where Luxembourgers are currently at the helm. This is where the major decisions are made and where the groundwork for the decision-making process takes place, and these preparatory meetings are also under Luxembourgish leadership.

[Danièle Bisdorff] During our Presidency we will have held 2 200 meetings here in Brussels and that works out to about 90 meetings a week, which have to be managed in cooperation with the General Secretariat of the Council and with someone currently at the Permanent Representation, and of course with Luxembourg, and with the quantity of phone calls and paperwork, the task of coordination is considerable.

[Maurice Molitor] However time-consuming they may be, coordinating and organising are only a small part of the work that takes place here at the Maison du Luxembourg barely 500 metres from the Council. These are the offices of the Permanent Representation and this is where all the detailed work is carried out on the content of the various dossiers that the Presidency has to dispatch.

Here, for example, Patrick Hemmer is currently chairing a working group for development cooperation, one of dozens of working parties in which civil servants prepare the ground for political decisions. Throughout these six months he and his colleagues will be expected to exercise their negotiating skills.

[Patrick Hemmer] The 25 Member States are represented here. Obviously the Luxembourg Presidency has to take over leadership of the working groups. The Commission has what is known as the right of initiative. The Commission puts forward various proposals to the Member States; for example, in the area of development cooperation there was a proposal to increase public aid for development within the EU. The role of the Presidency is to progress the work at the level of the working group, in other words to negotiate between the 25 Member States to prepare for a political decision. These negotiations involve weeks or months of work on a text, in preparation for a political decision, which is then submitted to ministers so that a political decision can be made.

[Maurice Molitor] So when the Ministers meet at the Council in Brussels, as they did last Tuesday, ideally there will only be two or three key questions left to resolve and the rest of the agreement will already be prepared.

In this case the preparatory work was clearly a success, otherwise Jean-Louis Schiltz would not have been able to announce, after the Council meeting, that the EU had been able to agree on a new and ambitious financial package for development aid.

[Jean-Louis Schiltz] 0.56 by the year 2010, which means an additional 20 billion euros a year in development aid as from that date in 2010.

[Maurice Molitor] Between the working group and the Council of Ministers there is an interim stage, Coreper 2, the Committee of Permanent Representatives. Once, if not twice, a week the Ambassadors of the individual Member States meet for a full day, from morning till evening, to go through all the individual points which are there, ready to go to the Council. And this Committee is also currently chaired by Luxembourg, in the form of our Permanent Representative to the EU, Martine Schommer.

[Maurice Molitor] Madame Schommer, even if those who sit down together in Coreper 2 are ambassadors, senior civil servants, but civil servants nevertheless, it is still rather a political working group, at least its work is political work.

[Martine Schommer] Yes, we are senior civil servants, but we are the last staging post before matters reach ministers, that is to say before projects or directives or regulations are put before ministers. So we are really

just on the border, between civil servants and a political function.

[Maurice Molitor] Yes, this final decision always rests with ministers, that's quite clear, but for less controversial subjects you could say that a decision can essentially be made by Coreper 2 and that for the more controversial subjects important groundwork has been covered.

[Martine Schommer] Yes, that's what we've been doing this morning, we try to tidy up dossiers and prepare the ground as far as possible, so that dossiers are passed on to ministers with only the key political questions remaining. If we can resolve these ourselves, then so much the better, and then they are formally adopted by the ministers without any discussion.

[Maurice Molitor] Let's take a closer look at your role as Chairwoman of the Committee with an example from finance. Do you take the same approach as with political issues, sounding out opinions, holding bilateral interviews to try and establish positions and points of view? Is that how it works or do you have a different approach?

[Martine Schommer] No, that's exactly the role of the Permanent Representation here, my role in other words, to look and see from bilateral contacts where the limits of the various Member States are and then to try to bring those limits closer together and produce a package acceptable to all of them.

[Maurice Molitor] So you are an important intermediary for information between the Luxembourg Government and its administration on the one hand and, on the other, the European institutions and essentially all the governments of all the other Member States.

[Martine Schommer] The representatives of the governments of the other Member States who are here in Brussels defending their interests.

[Maurice Molitor] Coreper 2, that reminds us that there is also a Coreper 1 which is headed up by your deputy and deals more with technical questions.

[Martine Schommer] Yes, in Coreper 2 we deal with foreign affairs, preparing them for the Foreign Ministers, we deal with issues of justice, we cover home affairs, we deal with economic and financial questions, and then we could say that the dossiers on the internal market and how the internal market functions are dealt with by the deputies in Coreper 1.

[Maurice Molitor] But it's not just you and your deputy who are involved, it's the whole of the Permanent Representation, which is quite some outfit — in the past under a certain presidency it did increase a little in size.

[Martine Schommer] Yes, there are now twice as many of us, making over 100, 110 people, here at the Permanent Representation, some from the Foreign Ministries, but also from all the other Ministries: Agriculture, Education, Transport, I've probably missed some out, in other words there are large numbers of people here direct from the Ministries because they need to chair the working groups.

[Maurice Molitor] Yes, and there is also a vast array of meetings, and we've just seen this for ourselves in the report, the notice board showing details of all the various meetings makes quite an impression. One more month ...

[Martine Schommer] There are over 2 000 meetings, almost 2 500 ...

[Maurice Molitor] Just here in Brussels?

[Martine Schommer] Yes.

[Maurice Molitor] Plus those in Luxembourg as well. Anyway, in one month it will all be over. Then you'll

be able to breathe again.

[Martine Schommer] Yes, but I hope that by then we'll also have reached an agreement as far as the financial side is concerned.

[Maurice Molitor] Yes, but I'm sure that many people in Luxembourg and many people across Europe hope so too. Madame Schommer, thank you very much for explaining things to us. And that brings this edition of eu2005.lu to a close. We'll be back in one week's time.