

Interview with Norbert Schwaiger: the role of the Presidency in the organisation of the Council's work (Brussels, 22 November 2006)

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[Raquel Valls] In the organisation of the Council's work, what is the role played by the Presidency and the function of the Secretariat?

[Norbert Schwaiger] Yes, of course: this question follows on naturally from what we have been discussing. The Presidency changes every six months at the level of the Council, but also at that of the intermediate committees, the Permanent Representatives Committee, the Special Committee on Agriculture, the Political Committee, or the committee responsible for JHA affairs, but also at working party level — so the Presidency is consistent vertically in all domains.

So what is the role played by the Presidency? First of all, technically speaking, the Presidency organises and directs activities. Evidently this necessitates planning beforehand and every Presidency makes, at the start of its six months — or even beforehand, usually in December or June before handing over to the successor — a presentation of its work programme, putting forward the salient points of what it proposes to do in various fields. This is now not only presented to the delegations, but transparency demands that it is presented to the press as well. This is all very well because in this way the press can do [its own] planning: what is important? what is going to happen and when? It has been realised that, because some projects cannot be finished within the six months, then multi-presidential planning is called for, and that is very important. The outgoing and future Presidencies, together with the Commission, and sometimes with the Presidency that will be next — this means that the work is done at least six months in advance, for instance, Portugal is already associated with the preparatory work done by Germany now — this is most important for large-scale projects, so that things become more rational. It is also a good thing because it provides a framework, to some extent, for the ambitions of each Presidency. It can see what remains to be done, and what comes from its predecessor automatically. It also reveals the horizon against which the work takes place, so to overcome the wrong-headed ambition to finish everything before June or December, the attempt has been made to ease the pressure on these last months of the Presidency voluntarily because they were very congested. They still are — it is inevitable, but where possible, one tries to establish greater continuity and normality... On the other hand, one should not diminish the keenness of each Presidency to do its best to obtain the maximum number of decisions before it quits and passes on its authority to its successor.

There. So the Presidency obviously has an important role to play. It has to consider how best to carry out its plans. In order to do this, it regularly consults the Commission. It also consults the other delegations and above all the Secretariat, because the Secretariat is the permanent element. It is the memory of the institution. It is also people who are specialists in their fields and who therefore know the dossiers well. They also know what positions the delegations are likely to take. They can often anticipate what a delegation will say since they are acquainted with the line that it usually takes. All this is most useful. All this is, of course, in addition to the normal work of organising meetings.