

## 'The battle for transparency' from La Voix du Luxembourg (21 March 2001)

**Caption:** On 21 March 2001, the Luxembourg daily newspaper La Voix du Luxembourg outlines the importance of transparency for the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Sweden supports the idea that free access for citizens and the media to the documents of the Community institutions strengthens democratic scrutiny of the work of the Union.

**Source:** Le Monde. 29.11.2005. Paris. "Le difficile combat pour la transparence", p. 1.

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**Last updated:** 10/08/2016

## The battle for transparency

**Stockholm** (AFP). — Sweden, which has made ‘transparency’ the main theme of its Presidency, is in a race against time to ensure that the public has a right of access to documents produced by the Community institutions — the Council, Commission and Parliament — which, it feels, will bring the European Union (EU) closer to its citizens.

Under the Amsterdam Treaty, new rules on access to and consultation of the EU’s administrative documents are supposed to come into force on 1 May, but a number of observers think that ‘things have got off to a bad start’.

‘Some Member States, like France and Germany, think that we’re making too much of it,’ says Olle Abrahamsson, Director of Legal Affairs at Sweden’s Justice Ministry. ‘But others, like Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland, support our approach.’

Sweden, which is almost as Eurosceptic as the United Kingdom, is, like the UK, not a member of the Monetary Union and is therefore aware of its limited influence among the Fifteen, but it sees transparency as one of the issues ‘that people feel concerned about’ and one which its modest and pragmatic national character makes it want to promote.

For Sweden, free access to documents produced by the Community institutions should allow individuals and the media to discuss official decisions before they are taken and make the European administration more efficient, since officials will know that they are under public scrutiny. It is all about strengthening democratic control over the work of the EU which, Sweden feels, would give its decisions greater legitimacy.

However, the current negotiations between the Swedish Presidency, the Council, the Commission and Parliament, which are set to resume in Brussels on 26 March, have faltered ‘over the handling of “sensitive” documents, such as those concerning NATO and defence’ in particular, Mr Abrahamsson explains. ‘And also over the exceptions to which the new rules would not apply.’

‘It’s going to be a complete flop,’ says Alf Lindberg, who is following the negotiations on behalf of the European Federation of Journalists.

‘The Swedish Presidency is pulling out all the stops to get an agreement, even if some of the Council’s proposals don’t actually go as far as the existing rules.’

In his view, Stockholm would be well advised to persuade the other capitals and the Council that ‘the discussions are heading in the wrong direction’. Because of this, Sweden could be forced to ‘ask Belgium to take the issue on’, says Agneta Lindblom Hultén, President of the Swedish journalists’ trade union.

Having learned from the experience of the French Presidency that promising too much can lead to disappointment in the end, the Swedish Presidency has had posted on its website since 1 January a detailed schedule of the 1 600 or so technical meetings that it is organising on the margins of the ministerial meetings proper.

Sweden has also undertaken to disseminate an ‘unprecedented’ volume of information on the Council’s forthcoming activities at the European Summit in Stockholm, and it is the first country in the EU to have published the cost of organising its Presidency (SEK 835 million, or around EUR 94 million).

Even in December, at the Nice Summit, it had widely promoted transparency, distributing the mobile telephone numbers of senior European officials to the press. This raised eyebrows among the Eurocrats.

In Sweden, the basic law states that all documents and information held by the Civil Service must be accessible to the public, including the Prime Minister’s correspondence.