

Interview with José Medeiros Ferreira: the Portuguese Presidencies of the Council of the EU (Lisbon, 25 October 2007)

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[Miriam Mateus] Since it acceded in 1986, Portugal has held the Presidency of the EU Council three times, as we were saying a short while ago, in 1992, then in 2000 and, currently, in 2007. In your opinion, what importance does Portugal attach to holding the Presidency of the Council?

[José Medeiros Ferreira] Well, I think that, if Portugal did attach fundamental importance to it, it wouldn't have recently signed the Treaty of Lisbon, because that Treaty abolishes the half-yearly Presidencies as they are seen from the point of view of the Summits in particular. From the Treaty of Lisbon on, and once that Treaty has been ratified, that will now be the role of the President [of the Council] of the European Union, who will be elected for two and a half years and whose function will be precisely to organise what the half-yearly Presidencies used to do. I know very well that the sectoral presidencies, the Councils of Ministers, will continue for at least some time to come.

But I think that I can say that, while those half-yearly Presidencies existed, Portugal attached the utmost importance to each of them. We took advantage of our first Presidency in 1992 to build the Belém Cultural Centre. It came in for a great deal of criticism at the time because of the costs involved, but it's one of the few secular monuments that Portugal possesses in Lisbon. Most of the others are religious monuments, so, to some extent, it's become an icon of the Tagus riverside area. And it was the first Presidency held in accordance with a mindset that I don't share but one which was the prevailing mindset at the time. Portugal liked to present itself as the European Community's 'good pupil'.

I can excuse that mindset only because, despite everything, there was a good teacher at the time, and that was Jacques Delors, so being a good pupil of a good teacher is acceptable. The problem is that Portugal can't always put itself in that position of the good pupil because, sometimes, the teachers are not very good, and then it's better to be self-taught. But, anyway, that first Presidency was a great test of our political, diplomatic and even organisational capacity. And, to some extent, it was a test of our respectability as an EU Member State.

We had several significant problems, some of which were resolved at the time — perhaps without the EU countries noticing — in a way that was also very closely connected to the acquiescence of the Portuguese Presidency. An example about which everyone talks is the recognition of the former Yugoslav states. Those states could have been recognised either with their status in the United Nations or they could have been recognised regionally. And what happened was that it was the EU that recognised those federal republics during the Portuguese Presidency. Croatia, Slovenia ... and the others were dragged along.

The Portuguese Presidency agreed to play that international role, something that isn't stressed much, but I think that, in some way, it created ... an option, because it might be considered that such recognition should have been given by the United Nations itself, and it wasn't. I don't know if I can analyse international policy here, but I also think that, because of the influence that Germany and the Vatican exerted, those states that I've just named were recognised more quickly during the Portuguese Presidency because of the general climate of understanding of what would be best for European peace and for the welfare of those nations. Well, I won't talk about the consequences, everybody knows what they were, it was just to highlight the international aspect of that Presidency.

We also always attached the utmost importance to relations with other continents. Portugal, particularly now in this final Presidency, will attach great importance to relations with Brazil and with Africa, and that should also be stressed. The 1999 Presidency, or rather the 2000 Presidency — it was 2000, wasn't it? — was marked very much by what's known as the 'knowledge-based society' and by issues connected with vocational training and the practical skills required in a new society and to meet new technical and technological demands. That's the 'Lisbon Agenda'. So the second Presidency was also marked by the Lisbon Agenda in this area. And the success of this final one is already guaranteed. In some ways, there are still things to be done during the Presidency, but the Portuguese Presidency is marked by the Treaty of Lisbon, which will be signed on 13 December, so, in that respect, I can say that the Portuguese Presidencies

have always been successful for the European Union itself, within its own parameters. But, if a country agrees to the abolition of the Presidencies, it's because it attaches only relative importance to them.