

## An Evaluation of the French EU Presidency (ARI)

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**Theme**<sup>1</sup>: The French Presidency has been generally recognised to have been successful and has helped to restore –at least for a while– the relationship between France and the rest of Europe.

**Summary**: The French Presidency of the EU has been very much characterised by Nicolas Sarkozy's personal style and engagement. He tried to demonstrate the EU's ability to protect its citizens and interests and to show leadership on the international stage. The planned priorities have been implemented with successful results, including the deal on the Energy and Climate Change Package, the adoption of the Pact on Immigration and Asylum, the review of the Common Agriculture Policy, the reinforcement of the European Defence and Security Policy and the launching of the Union for Mediterranean. As regards crisis management, the French Presidency showed its capacity to address the challenges of the Irish 'No' to the Lisbon Treaty, the war in Georgia in August and the financial crisis in the autumn. Although the style and the method of the French President were sometimes criticised, as were the difficulties in the Franco-German relationship and the poor attention to social issues, this Presidency has been generally recognised to have successful and has helped to restore –at least for a while– the relationship between France and the rest of Europe.

**Analysis**: There are two ways of evaluating an EU Presidency: by looking at the fulfilment of its programmed objectives and by assessing its reaction to unforeseen events. From these two points of view, the French EU Presidency of the second semester of 2008 is generally recognised to have been a success.

### *The French Touch: Leadership and Pragmatism*

The French Presidency cannot be seen in isolation from the personal engagement of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

When he was elected in May 2007, he was well aware of the French people's dissatisfaction with Europe, as made evident by the negative result of the referendum on the EU Constitution two years before. During his election campaign, Sarkozy proposed a way out of the problem, with a 'simplified treaty' replacing the Constitution while saving its contents, and he agreed to this solution with his European partners shortly after he was elected.

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this paper are the author's alone.

Although no new referendum is planned in France on the new Treaty, much was at stake during the French Presidency from the government's point of view: nothing less than bringing 'France back in Europe' and 'Europe back into France'. The French leaders affirmed the necessity of showing Europe's ability to protect its citizens, to take into account their fears, and to confront globalisation. This was the incarnation of the old French dream of European *puissance*.

Sarkozy put all his energy and his leadership in the EU Presidency in an attempt to demonstrate Europe's ability to actively face and manage global challenges. His means were voluntarism and pragmatism, which also characterise his style in French domestic politics, and contrary to Angela Merkel who, during her EU Presidency of the first semester of 2007, was in favour of patient consensus building. Nicolas Sarkozy behaved like a 'Bonapartist', eager to achieve his political aims. One of the most significant demonstrations of his style was the number of meetings of heads of state and government he held during his term. Normally limited to two for each Presidency, he raised the number to five during the French Presidency, with one additional meeting for the launching of the Union for the Mediterranean in July and two extraordinary European Council meetings on the crisis in Georgia (1 September) and on the financial crisis (7 November), which were convened in addition to the normal EC meetings of October and December.

On the whole, Nicolas Sarkozy's method was sometimes criticised as too authoritarian, although it proved to be very efficient, probably because he and his teams showed their ability to genuinely and relevantly define and implement European general interests, and to prepare with care the necessary compromises ahead of the European Council meetings along with the Commission and Member States, in particular during the Coreper meetings. The very close and efficient relationship between the Elysée and the Permanent Representation in Brussels, led by Ambassador Pierre Sellal, was in this respect a key factor in the success of the French EU Presidency, while the number of European Council meetings was not detrimental to their efficiency, as the French Presidency aimed for short and concise conclusions.

#### *France's Priorities for the EU*

The French authorities had already defined their priorities one year before the Presidency. These priorities –energy, the environment, immigration, security and defence– were in line with the EU and the French domestic agendas.

Energy policy is a growing priority for the EU largely due to its rising external dependence, the rising prices of oil and gas and to the Russian-Ukrainian gas crisis in 2006 which threatened its supplies. Energy policy is closely linked to the EU's Environmental and Climate policy, whose general objectives were set out during the German Presidency of 2007 (cutting EU energy consumption by 20% by 2020 and raising the share of renewable energies to 20% of global energy consumption). The French Presidency's aim, in unison with the European Commission, was to put these policy objectives into practical and regulatory terms through a more eco-friendly economy (including the production of vehicles) and through improved energy efficiency. The 'Energy and Climate Change Package' was agreed during the December European Council meeting, after the negotiation of complicated compromises accommodating various strong national interests, and despite the less favourable context caused by the economic and financial crisis. The package was endorsed shortly after by the European Parliament.

However, France did not push the liberalisation of the energy internal market, because its own national interests on the issue could clash with its obligations as EU President. As regards energy security, the practical results of French ambitions were also modest. There was some progress in doctrinal terms in the formulation of EU policy, but in practical terms concrete progress was left to future Presidencies (eg, regarding the Transcaspian energy corridor and the Nabucco project, which aim to give the EU direct access to Central Asian energy resources through Turkey and the Caucasus).

Immigration is another rising priority on the EU agenda, due to the freedom of movement inside the Schengen area and to growing external EU competences in the fields of justice and home affairs. The French government made this issue a priority for domestic reasons also, in order to obtain the EU's blessing for its double-track policy of controlling legal immigration and fighting illegal entries. The Pact on Immigration and Asylum bundled several regulatory texts proposed by the Commission and negotiated by the Council and the Parliament (such as the 'blue card' directive for qualified immigrants), and was adopted at the European Council meeting of October 2008. Although some critics indicated that there were not so many new elements compared with the Tampere (1999) and The Hague (2004) five-year programmes on JHA affairs, the Pact was indeed a political document stating an overall common EU policy doctrine on migrations, which is a significant political step forward.

Security and Defence issues have been at the top of the EU agenda for 10 years at least, and France has always been a key actor pushing for a growing EU role. The issue was all the more relevant for the French EU Presidency in the context of the French President's announced intention of bringing France fully back to the NATO military structure: the French government had to show that significant progress had been made in the field of European security and defence policy in order to make the French public accept the decision on NATO reintegration, which turned the clock back on 40 years of Gaullist distancing from the Atlantic Alliance.

France pushed for a review of the European Security Strategy (ESS). However, due to the complications of redrafting the text negotiated in 2003 –ie, before the Eastern enlargement– the review process was limited and materialised in a simple report on the implementation of the Strategy by the Secretary General/High Representative for CFSP. The report did not change a single word of the ESS, but highlighted the changing context of its implementation, made up of major permanent threats to EU Security (proliferation, terrorism) but also of 'new threats' such as cybercrime, energy security, climate change, piracy, failed states, etc. It called for a sustained EU engagement with peace and multilateralism. The report was completed by a Council statement on the strengthening of international security, that endorsed its main results (December 2008).

EU security under the French Presidency was closely linked to further progress in ESDP capacities. France did not try to focus on the 'ideological' question of a European headquarters, which is the basis for an autonomous planning capacity for European ESDP operations but which is perceived by 'pro-atlanticist' countries (notably the UK) as a useless duplication of the permanent NATO military planning structure. France insisted on a more consensual objective which consisted of strengthening ESDP capacities and making ESDP and NATO complementary. A declaration adopted by the Council in December reiterated and made explicit the so called '2010 headline goal'. Accordingly, the EU should be able to deploy simultaneously nearly 20 ESDP operations, 12 of which can be of a civilian nature (police, rule of law, civil protection, etc) but can be

complemented by a number of military operations (two important stabilisation and reconstruction operations –of up to 10,000 troops each–, two rapid response operations involving EU ‘battle groups’, an evacuation operation for European citizens, an air or sea monitoring operation and a military-civilian operation of humanitarian assistance). It was decided to unify the EU’s military and civilian strategic planning capacities and to reinforce the military air, sea and space cooperation of the EU’s armies, on the field as well as in the production of armaments.

As evidence of the growing capacities of the European Security and Defence policy, the EU was able –under the French Presidency– to launch three new ESDP operations (EULEX in Kosovo, EUMM in Georgia and Atalanta –an ESDP naval operation against piracy near Somalia–). President Sarkozy, in his speech to the European Parliament at the end of the French Presidency, did not insist too much on the achievements in the field of defence. However, he reconfirmed the new French paradigm that NATO and ESDP are complementary, and recalled later that France would make its comeback to the NATO military structure by the next NATO summit in Strasbourg.

Agriculture was added to the French Presidency’s priorities before it took over. In fact, there was not much to expect given the fact that the financing of the Common Agricultural Policy is secured until 2013, and that its future will be decided in the context of the 2014-20 financial perspectives, which will probably have to be negotiated in 2011-13. However, the French Agriculture Minister Michel Barnier insisted on having agriculture –a traditional priority in France’s EU policy– towards the top of the French Presidency’s agenda. The practical results were not overly significant: a limited reform was adopted during the French Presidency (including the planned suppression of milk quotas) and a CAP Health check was carried out. But the ambition of preserving an ambitious CAP beyond 2013 failed to be supported by all the member states.

A last priority for the French Presidency was the Union for the Mediterranean, a project launched by Sarkozy during his election campaign in 2007. It took nearly a year before the original idea and political realities could be reconciled. Sarkozy, encouraged by some of his advisors wanted to re-launch Mediterranean cooperation on the basis of an equal partnership between Northern and Southern Mediterranean countries, which could even have been inspired by the European Coal and Steel Community. The project would have pushed aside the Northern European Countries, who are involved in the EU Mediterranean policy since at least the launching of the so-called Barcelona Process in 1995. It could have jeopardised the European integration process itself, giving the impression that the new Mediterranean union would have competed with the EU. This was not financially sustainable, because the exclusion of part of the EU’s member states meant that the Mediterranean Union would not have been able to resort to the significant financial means available to EU policies.

The German Chancellor Angela Merkel took the lead in resisting the French initiative. In the end, Paris recognised that it was more sensible and more responsible to involve the entire EU in the Mediterranean Union. A ‘co-presidency’ was established, which was the only reminder of the original project. The European Council approved the re-foundation of the Barcelona Process in March 2008, while the Paris Summit of EU and Mediterranean partners in July could launch the new Union for the Mediterranean. This was the first major success of the French Presidency.

On the whole, France did achieve all of the goals it set for its EU Presidency. It did not achieve this without adaptations and compromises, but that is typical of EU policy. France was able to put its priorities in the long-term framework of the EU agenda, and was at the same time able to give it a more national slant, for instance on agriculture, immigration, defence and Mediterranean cooperation.

France also ensured the normal functioning of the Presidency, allowing the EU's legislative work to go forward (as in the adoption of the Erika III maritime safety package, and the progress made on the revision of the regulatory framework for the telecom sector) and leading the EU's external representation in meetings with third countries (eight Summits and nearly 50 ministerial meetings). In the latter field, France did not escape a crisis with China (which cancelled the Summit with the EU after Sarkozy met the Dalai Lama) but it did use its Presidency to improve its own image in the world. Balancing its traditional interest in the Mediterranean, it demonstrated a strong interest in the East, promoting an ambitious association agreement with the Ukraine (with a summit in September), prepared the ground for the launching of the Eastern partnership under the Czech Presidency and engaged actively in the Georgian crisis.

### *Three Major Crises*

Although France developed an ambitious agenda for its Presidency, public opinion was much more impressed by the Nicolas Sarkozy's crisis management capacity.

The first crisis was the 'No' in the Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, two weeks before the beginning of the French Presidency. Sarkozy, who considered himself the father of the new Treaty, made a trip to Dublin in July and claimed –not without raising some criticism– that the Irish people should vote again. A way out was found only at the end of the French Presidency, when the Irish authorities accepted a new referendum, gaining at the same time some guarantees on Irish neutrality, abortion legislation and tax system, and also that the Commission would still be made up of a representative of each member state (while the Lisbon Treaty in its present shape provides for a reduced size of the Commission). The Lisbon Treaty is not yet in force, because of the new Irish referendum and the pending ratification of the Czech Republic and Poland, but the French Presidency managed to find an acceptable possible solution.

The second crisis was the invasion of Georgia by the Russian Federation in August, following an attempt by the Georgian government to re-conquer by force the breakaway region of South Ossetia. When he flew to Moscow on 12 August to mediate in a peace agreement, Russian troops had already defeated the Georgian army and were on their way to Tbilisi. Many, including the former US President, advised against travelling to Moscow. But through his two mediations –alone on 12 August and accompanied by President Barroso and High Representative Solana on 8 September– the French President secured major results: the cessation of hostilities, recognition of Georgian sovereignty by Russia, withdrawal of Russian troops from the zones adjacent to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the return of Georgian refugees and talks in Geneva on political and humanitarian issues after the conflict. This was achieved through the rapid deployment of more than 200 EU observers on the ground.

Although it could not prevent Russia from consolidating its hold on the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and to consequently recognise their independence, the French Presidency received the support of the whole EU. The Presidency and the Commission tried to limit the consequences of this crisis for long-term EU-Russia

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relations: they let the talks on a strategic partnership with Russia resume at the end of the year, while sending a clear signal that Russia should behave in accordance with its commitments.

The financial crisis, which worsened dramatically after the bankruptcy of the US bank Lehman Brothers in September 2008, was the third unexpected challenge to the French Presidency. Sarkozy actively mobilised his partners by convening several summit meetings of the G4, of the Euro zone and of the EU. Europe was able to define a common response to rescue its financial system and a common position in advance of the Washington G-20 Summit of 15 November, which agreed on common principles regarding the regulation of financial markets and the recovery of the world economy. In a second step the EU started, despite some diverging views between member states, to develop a common plan for economic recovery (1.5% of the EU GDP, agreed in the December European Council meeting) to get out of the crisis.

Especially in the Georgian and in the financial crisis, but also on the climate issue, Sarkozy's leadership stood in contrast with outgoing US President George W. Bush's incapacity to deal with these challenges. Probably never in its history has the EU been able to take such a firm and united stand on events that the US itself seemed unable to face and even to understand. This is probably due to the historical failure of the outgoing US President and his neo-conservative advisors, who proved unable to deliver on their pro-Georgian stance and who appeared totally out of their depth to confront the worse crisis of the capitalist system since 1929. The consequence of this failure was the election of Barack Obama, which was too late to jeopardise the end of the French Presidency's leadership. In that respect, the French Presidency appeared to be a unique moment in History, in which the US lost for a while its leadership in world affairs.

#### *Two Critical Opinions*

Successful as it was, the French Presidency did not escape some more critical judgements on a couple of aspects.

The style of the French President was sometimes criticised, although it is not easy to show leadership without authority. Some have accused Sarkozy of being responsible for a weakening of the European Commission and for a move by the EU's institutions towards greater intergovernmentalism. It is a fact that the President of the European Commission, Durão Barroso, –anxious about his re-election in 2009– appeared to follow Sarkozy's lead during the French Presidency manoeuvres in the Georgian crisis (which was, by the way, more relevant to Mr Solana), the financial crisis, the solution to the Lisbon Treaty and the climate deal.

It should be noted, however, that the weakening of the European Commission is not specifically a consequence of the French Presidency, and had already been noted by some observers before that time. This is probably linked to other explanations such as the diminishing enthusiasm about European integration among the European peoples (as in the negative response to the referendums in France and the Netherlands), the enlargement of the EU and of the Commission, etc.

The French Presidency was exceptionally dense in events and crisis. President Sarkozy has made use to the utmost of the Presidency's prerogatives, and has not always shown respect for other institutions. But it is a tradition in EU policy that the European Council provides the impulse and that whenever it strikes a major political deal it should be

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accepted by all the institutions, including the Parliament and the Commission. This occurred, for instance, in the agreement on the financial perspectives in 2005 under the UK Presidency, and in the deal for climate change under the German Presidency in 2007.

To a certain extent, there are elements of the political deals achieved by the French Presidency –the climate package, EU-Russian relations, Economic Recovery plan and the solution to the Lisbon Treaty– that can always be criticised. But it is fair to recognise that a compromise can never make everybody happy about everything.

Criticism of the French-German relationship should also be seen with a sense of proportion. It is clear that the personal relationship between the two leaders is not easy, and that there were and still are certain basic differences, for example on the Mediterranean Union or in the reaction to the economic and financial crisis. This requires political compromises between the two countries. But it should not be forgotten either that there is a significant convergence in regard to the Lisbon Treaty, the Georgian crisis and in the objectives of the climate-change policy. Just as the German Presidency in 2007 was the Presidency of all EU member states and did not specially focus on its French partner, the French Presidency of 2008 could not focus primarily on the French-German relationship. The main question, however, is to know if the two countries and their leaders will now feel the need and prove able to revive their special relationship in order to produce a positive leadership for the EU, which is all the more necessary because the running of the EU system is increasingly difficult and complicated.

A last series of criticisms is of a more political nature. Despite some attempts by the French government, social policy was not a priority of the French Presidency. President Sarkozy, although keen to call for a social Europe, did not insist on this aspect in his Presidency programme of July 2008 when he spoke to the European Parliament. The fact is that in December the directive on work time was rejected by the European Parliament, and some French socialists rejoiced at this failure of the French Presidency. The fact is also that the financial and economic crisis forced the government to promote, domestically and on the European and world stage, more state intervention, if not more social policy.

**Conclusion:** These criticisms do not really cast a shadow over the achievements of the French EU Presidency, the success of which was broadly recognised in France as well as inside and outside the EU. France has recovered much confidence and credibility in Europe after the negative result of the referendum in 2005 on the European Constitution. The French people are again proud to be European. France's turn as President will not return for more than 20 years, and what is at stake now is for the French authorities to find other ways of preserving these achievements in the hard times to come.

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