

EURO-FOCUS

After The French Presidency: The EU is on a Path To Greater Influence

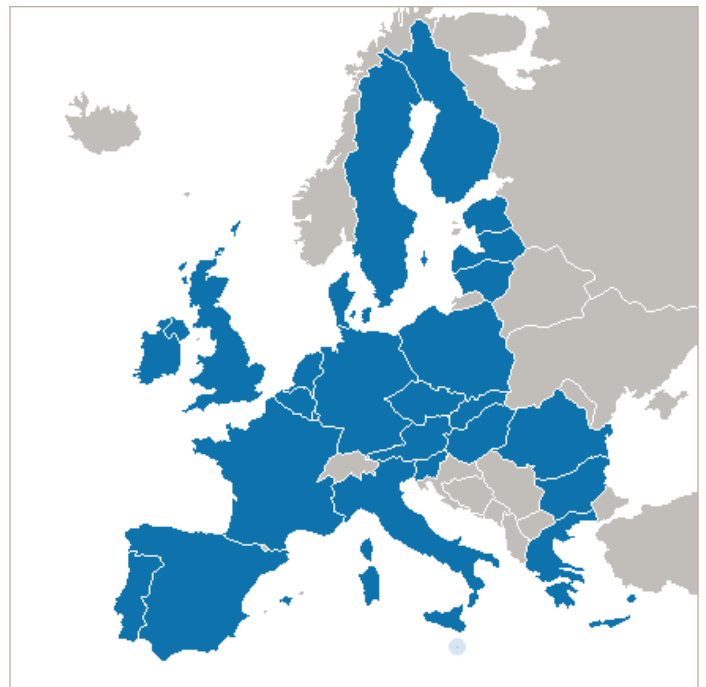
Manuel Lafont Rapnouil

Building a more unified Europe has often been compared to riding a bicycle: if you don't keep pedaling forward, it falls over. The metaphor is particularly apt now, given that cycling is the favorite sport of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has just completed an energetic six months as President of the European Union. Under the French presidency, not only did the bike not fall over, its European riders even managed to complete an unexpectedly long and intense mountain climb. Making it through one part

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of the race, of course, is not the same as finishing the Tour de France, let alone winning it. The process of European construction is a long and multi-faceted race made up of time trials, long flat stages and steep slogs uphill, which require individual prowess as well as stamina and teamwork.

Nevertheless, the French presidency, which ended January 1, is widely considered to have made a significant contribution to the longer term objective. The question now is whether the Europeans can keep on pedaling as effectively as they have for the last six months. In other words, was this presidency a short interlude, a brief "multipolar moment" in which the European Union enjoyed unusual but temporary ascendancy? Or did Paris forge a new and sustainable pattern of growing European influence that can be maintained and strengthened over the longer term?

**A SURPRISE SUCCESS**

The achievements of the French presidency came as a surprise. Even with the hyperactive Sarkozy at its head, the European Union's six months under French tutelage were originally expected to be rather mundane and uneventful for a number of reasons. First, in the second half of 2008 the European Union was meant to focus on pushing through the Lisbon Treaty. Second, many thought dramatic EU initiatives would be unlikely as Europe marked time, awaiting the outcome of the U.S. elections and the formation of a new American administration. Third, many believed that the attention of the member states would be focused on the EU-wide elections to the European Parliament due in June 2009 and the installation of a new European Commission a few months later.

France had also chosen a rather uninspiring slogan, designed to reassure the euro-skeptic fringe of its domestic constituency: “A more protective Europe.” While ambitious, France’s four priorities – climate and energy, immigration, agriculture and defense – were devised in a rather technical and procedural manner. Moreover, by early 2008, the intra-European debate over Sarkozy’s pet idea of a Union for the Mediterranean had begun to go sour. Other member states, and especially Germany, suspected Paris was trying to re-establish its own zone of influence in the Mediterranean and opposed French plans to include only EU countries with Mediterranean shorelines. As a result, many in Europe assumed that France’s turn at the helm would be just another disappointing big power presidency.¹

When France took over the presidential chair, however, Paris was forced to grapple with a series of complex crises, each of which could have dealt severe blows to EU unity. The Irish “no” to the Lisbon Treaty in a June, 2008 referendum could easily have paralyzed the Union and generated new concerns about the gap between the EU institutions and public opinion. Similarly, Russia’s intervention in Georgia in August could have exposed deep policy differences among EU members toward Moscow and highlighted the Union’s incapacity to influence military developments in a manner reminiscent of its split over Iraq. And when the global financial crisis erupted in September, past experience provided good reasons to worry that the Europeans would fail to adopt a rational, coordinated approach, even if one didn’t really believe Milton Friedman’s famous prediction that the euro would implode when hit by the first major economic downturn.

As it was, things didn’t turn out so badly, and the Union actually appears to have been reinvigorated by these unexpected threats. When France handed over

¹ “Nicolas Sarkozy’s European apotheosis”, *The Economist*, June 26th, 2008.

the presidency to the Czech Republic at the end of the year, a number of problems remained unsolved and Paris could not claim exclusive responsibility for all the progress that had been made. But the French presidency was instrumental in helping the European Union gain greater self-confidence and a recovered sense of its potential effectiveness. To be sure, not all decisions were as bold as some would have hoped. But the Union showed that it could unite swiftly to confront European and international challenges, acting as a credible and even decisive player, taking initiatives, setting the agenda, re-shaping international institutions, and playing a part in global leadership.

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SOME ARE LESS POSITIVE

Not everyone shares such a positive view of the French-led term and what it means more broadly for the future of the European Union². Whether

with regard to the actual outcomes of the presidency, Sarkozy’s personal style, or the insufficiency of European policy coordination, some commentators are playing down expectations of what the Union can achieve on the basis of the French presidency³. They also argue that, if the French presidency took advantage of a leadership vacuum created by the U.S. elections, that period is now over. In the long run, they contend, Washington’s interest in Europe will only diminish, all the more so because of the current economic crisis.

This skepticism is consistent with a common view of the European Union in the United States. Among recent examples was a report on “how key global trends might develop over the next 15 years,” released

² John Vinocur, “Sarkozy and the political pot-shot”, *International Herald Tribune*, November 17, 2008. See also “Mr. Sarkozy’s model”, *The Washington Post*, January 3, 2009.

³ John Vinocur, “Tomorrow’s Europe: Not necessarily influential”, *International Herald Tribune*, December 1, 2008.

by the National Intelligence Council in November, 2008. The title of the chapter on Europe says it all: “Losing Clout in 2025.” The report argues that, by 2025, Europe “will have made slow progress toward achieving the vision of current leaders and elites... The European Union would need to resolve a perceived democracy gap dividing Brussels from European voters and move past the protracted debate about its institutional structures.” In general, the NIC warns that “continued failure to convince skeptical publics of the benefits of deeper economic, political and social integration and to grasp the nettle of a shrinking and aging population by enacting painful reforms could leave the EU a hobbled giant distracted by internal bickering and competing national agendas, and less able to translate its economic clout into global influence.”⁴

Those who disagree with this pessimistic approach might point out that, in fact, the Union’s ability to “transform its economic clout into global influence” has actually strengthened over the last decade, despite institutional and political stalemate. Moreover, Europeans are increasingly aware of the links between their own affairs and world politics, including in the field of security, which should make them more rather than less inclined to seek “global influence.” Of course, doubts about the future of the European Union also exist in Europe, as well as considerable opposition to further political integration. But the debate in Europe about the Union’s future tends to be more balanced than in America.

Sweeping forecasts of declining Europe influence over the medium term miss the point. The real success of the French presidency is that the European Union has escaped from its downward spiral. Nobody would claim that the European Union is now bound to be tomorrow’s premier global power. Even Sarkozy contended only that Europe could play a role and still had something to bring to the global table⁵.

⁴National Intelligence Council, op. cit., p. 32.

⁵ See for instance Nicolas Sarkozy, *Conférence de presse*, Brussels, December 12, 2008. See also Nicolas Sarkozy, “Europe. L’engagement français”, *Politique internationale*, n°120, Summer 2008.

Whether or not the Union is “losing clout” is a matter of perspective. Globalization dilutes the influence of states; and the emergence of new powers inevitably causes Europe – just like the United States – to lose relative power. And yet, under the French presidency, the Union was instrumental in giving birth to the first summit meeting of G-20 major economies, whereas enlargement of the G-8, though widely discussed among experts, had always been postponed. Did the European Union accelerate its loss of influence by encouraging debate in a wider forum in which Europe carries less weight? Or did the Union fulfill its global responsibilities and advance a consistent world vision⁶? The G-20 initiative, promoted by France and Britain, was clearly concerned less with maintaining Europe’s relative influence than with putting it to good use.

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The European Union’s future relies as much on improving its internal structure and daily, unrewarding work, as it does on crisis management, perhaps more so. Any comprehensive assessment should accordingly consider whether the European Union is doing its homework properly. And here the Union got good grades during the French presidency in two important areas:

- The European Council called for concrete implementation of a useful Pact for Migration and Asylum, covering restrictions on immigration and border protection as well as European labor market needs and policies to integrate new arrivals. (It should not be forgotten that the Union is the world’s top destination for immigrants, ahead of the United States.)
- An energy and climate package agreed in the last days of the presidency confirmed the goals established under the German presidency

⁶ The EU is often criticized for refusing to pool its institutional power in world organizations. Yet it is France and the UK that are the most vocal of the permanent five members in favor of a UN Security Council reform. The EU also agreed to bear most of the burden of recent reforms in the Bretton Woods institutions. And G-8 enlargement – a long-standing French proposal – has been suggested by various European countries, including those that are members of the Group.

in 2007 (the so-called “triple-20”⁷), in spite of the dire economic backdrop. The Union thus confirmed its traditional leadership in international discussions to tackle climate change⁸, maintaining its proposal to increase its reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from 20 percent to 30 percent if other developed countries agree on comparable pledges.

As Sarkozy put it, “What we wanted to show is that the European Union’s problem was that it had too little ambition. ... If you don’t have a big ambition and big goals, how do you expect people to agree to sacrifice their narrow interests?”⁹ Still, with greater ambitions come bigger challenges, and the question arises whether the Union will be able to surmount them. If the answer depends entirely on Sarkozy’s achievements in the presidential chair, it is legitimate to harbor doubts, without necessarily being unfair to his successors.

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7 By 2020, the EU will reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 20 percent from 1990 levels, increase renewable energies to 20 percent of its total energy mix, and cut energy consumption by 20 percent.

8 John Kerry, new Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said of the EU decision: “It represents an enormous act of leadership [...], it will have an impact on Copenhagen” (AFP, “Kerry says EU climate pact very exciting”, Poznan, December 12, 2008).

9 Nicolas Sarkozy, *Conférence de presse*, Brussels, December 12, 2008.

FOUR FIELDS OF PROGRESS

Nevertheless, since the pessimists’ argument is precisely that Sarkozy’s leadership did not permanently transform the Union’s capacity for tackling real structural challenge, it is worth taking a look at four long-term issues the Union addressed during the French presidency. In all four areas, even though further difficulties undoubtedly lie ahead over the coming months and years, one could argue that the European Union is set on a rather positive trajectory.

- 1) **Neighborhood policy:** For the coming decade, the admission of new EU members will be limited to the Balkans. Even those who favor membership for Ukraine and/or Turkey do not expect that they will join before 2020.¹⁰ In assessing possible timetables, account must be taken both of the ability of the European Union to absorb new members and of the readiness of the candidates for entry. At the same time, both Europeans and major candidates like Turkey are still in the midst of debates about their future identities. All this means that enlargement beyond the Balkans can only be a long-term perspective, which makes it even more important to renew the Union’s “neighborhood policy.” Despite French reservations over specific candidates, notably Turkey, the French presidency actually moved the overall enlargement agenda forward and maintained momentum.

The creation of the Union for the Mediterranean, even though in a watered-down version of the original concept, finally resuscitated the long-criticized “Barcelona Process,” through which the European Union had been dealing with its Southern and Eastern Mediterranean neighbors since 1995. The July 2008 summit meeting in Paris that launched the new Union was a diplomatic success. France managed to overcome

10 See for instance Alain Juppé and Louis Schweitzer (ed.), *La France et l’Europe dans le monde. Livre blanc sur la politique étrangère et européenne de la France. 2008-2020*, La documentation française, Paris 2008, p. 28.

European, Arab and Turkish reservations and to secure attendance by Israel's Prime Minister and most Arab leaders¹¹. It is true that this initial success could fall victim to tensions over regional issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, to a lesser extent, the Western Sahara dispute, as well as Turkey's EU membership bid. Yet, the new impetus is obvious. And the Union for the Mediterranean contains several features that are improvements over the previous Barcelona process, such as its focus on project-based activities, its preference for a region-wide approach and its provisions for shared leadership¹².

In addition, the Mediterranean venture led to the adoption of a similar Swedish and Polish plan for an "Eastern partnership" with the European Union's neighbors to the East. This will probably be launched under the Czech presidency at the March, 2009 European Council, followed by a summit meeting in May with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The "Eastern partnership" aims to upgrade relations with all these countries while also developing a regional approach to complement existing bilateral relations.

- 2) **The economic crisis:** The global economic and financial crisis has presented the European Union with a major challenge, to which it has not responded in a unified fashion but which has strengthened the case for tighter integration. Not only did Milton Friedman's gloomy prediction about monetary union prove wrong, but the single currency – which now incorporates 16 member states and more than 300 million European citizens – was a decisive factor in the euro zone economies'

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resilience. Of course, interest rates have risen in some of these countries as a result of high national public deficits. It is highly unlikely, however, that this burden will drive them out of the euro. Leaving the monetary union would only result in higher interest rates – apart from other undesirable economic and political consequences. It is European nations outside the euro zone that have suffered the greatest difficulties, and public opinion has accordingly grown more favorable to adopting the euro in some of these countries.

It is true that the European response has not been perfectly coordinated, let alone integrated into common action. But there are some good reasons for this. Different strategies and timing are justified when situations differ, for example those of Britain and Germany, and a variety of national responses is a way to keep member states accountable for their fiscal policies. Countries that have benefited from the euro without adjusting their national budgetary policies will have to pay a price: in addition to higher interest rates, they will have less scope to stimulate their economies. The crisis thus both underlines advantages of the euro and strengthens the constraints it carries. That could reinforce the monetary union's influence as a catalyst for reform, a role that waned after the euro was introduced in 1999.

Nevertheless, the lack of collective action has its drawbacks. Earlier policy coordination would probably have spared the lax members from some of the hard times ahead, thereby easing recovery for the whole area. The varying responses also allow for some free rider behavior. At another level, the crisis has

¹¹ Only Libya's Qaddafi was absent, whereas the only non-EU leaders to attend the 10th anniversary meeting of the Barcelona process, in 2005, were the President of the Palestinian Authority and the Turkish Prime Minister.

¹² France and Egypt became co-presidents. The Secretary-General and five deputies have been determined on a parity basis and include an Israeli and a Palestinian.

exposed a failure to take sufficient account of the interests of EU countries that are not euro members, to an extent that some see a risk of a “new European divide”¹³. The French presidency made numerous efforts to promote and enhance economic coordination, and managed at least to prevent serious difficulties arising from initially scattered and contradictory, if not competing, policies and behavior – for example Ireland’s early decision to guarantee only its own bank deposits. The euro zone now has to learn to cope with times of crisis as well as periods of prosperity.

If EU governments are to find the new path they say they are seeking to sustainable economic growth, more coordination will certainly be needed, whether in the fields of structural reform, public spending controls, education, research and innovation, social and environmental norms or other competitiveness issues. In the words of Jean Pisani-Ferry, head of the European economic think tank Bruegel, the European Union now defines itself less by the intensity of its economic and political integration and more by its role as a participant in globalization. But this ambition presents a challenge. If it turned out to be only rhetorical, it could result as much in a breakdown of trust in the Union’s management as in a new legitimacy¹⁴. The European Union has to achieve further internal integration, for example in the regulation of banking, a typically transnational business, if it is to be a true global player in the future. This is one of the most important tasks facing the Union.

- 3) The EU Budget:** The nature of the EU budget is another reason why the European response to the crisis has relied so much on national authorities. Not only is the budget small, which makes it unfit for counter-cyclical policy, but it

is mostly not devoted to long-term investments. The budget’s main critics want its priorities to be reshuffled in favor of growth-oriented areas – research, education and infrastructure – as well as support for less advanced European regions. These new goals could be funded either through a “re-nationalization” of agricultural spending – which currently accounts for about 40 percent of the total – or by an increase in the budget’s size, which has not yet reached the ceiling set by the member states (currently 1.24 percent of the European Union’s gross economic output).

Surprisingly perhaps, this case was best made by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair at the start of the UK presidency in the summer of 2005. Six months later, after difficult and at times acrimonious negotiations, an agreement was eventually found, but any ambitious reorientation of the budget was postponed. The latest French presidency, however, suggested that the situation may be evolving. Paris proved more open to dialogue on the highly sensitive issue of agriculture, substituting a pro-active posture for the fortress strategy of former President Jacques Chirac. Moreover, in December, the European Commission confirmed that in 2009 close to 50 percent of total expenditure will be devoted to research, innovation, employment and regional development, with increases of more than 10 percent for research and 20 percent for innovation. If agriculture still accounts for 40 percent of the total, a bigger share of farm spending will be allocated to environment-related projects.

- 4) Common Defense:** Sarkozy spelled it out before the French presidency: “Europeans today don’t have the military means that match their weight in the world and that guarantee our prosperity in the long run”¹⁵. Although the climate was not conducive to bold initiatives, Paris made defense a priority and experts

13 Zsolt Darvas and Jean Pisani-Ferry, “Avoiding a New European Divide”, *Bruegel Policy Brief*, 2008/10, December 2008.

14 Jean Pisani-Ferry, “Portrait of the Union as a player on the world stage” in Philippe Herzog (ed.), *Looking for the European Interest*, Confrontations Europe and Le Manuscrit Editions, September 2008.

15 Nicolas Sarkozy, *Discours de M. le Président de la République sur la défense et la sécurité nationale*, Paris, June 17, 2008.

mostly took a positive view of the outcome¹⁶. Debate was deferred on the most contentious issues, such as the need for a proper operational headquarters and greater common funding for joint EU forces. Instead France focused on strengthening European capabilities by allowing different combinations of countries to take part in different operations and several practical projects were approved.

In addition, three missions were launched under the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) in the last six months: in Georgia, in the aftermath of the August crisis; in the Balkans, to assist newly independent Kosovo; and in the Gulf of Aden to fight piracy. These missions confirmed the developing assertiveness of the European Union – even though, in the case of Kosovo, not all EU members had recognized Kosovo’s independence. They also demonstrated a growing interest by Central European members in contributing to ESDP. The anti-piracy mission is the European Union’s first joint naval operation and its first military mission under British command. It is also the first time that the EU is pursuing its direct security interests rather than generally contributing to international peace and security.

NATION STATES AND INTEGRATION

Beyond these four specific areas, the French presidency also highlighted some potentially positive trends in the development of the overall European system. Sarkozy’s version of Europe has often been characterized as more intergovernmental, as opposed to the supranational

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visions of Europe’s founding fathers. The French presidency confirmed that the European Commission, the traditional engine of closer integration, is now playing more of a back-seat role – although the Commission could have done more to anticipate the financial crisis and have offered bolder initiatives for confronting it. One of the compromises intended to secure Irish ratification of the

Lisbon Treaty – that each member state will retain its own Commissioner – will probably favor this lower, more technical profile. Equally, the French presidency preferred unanimous decision-making on the energy and climate package, when the qualified majority rule should have applied, even though unanimity could have meant a weaker European commitment to environmental action. This led a few members of the European Parliament to criticize what they called a setback for political integration.

The picture, however, is more complex. The continuing central role of nation states has been widely accepted as an inescapable reality since the end of the 1990s. The question should rather be: does this make further integration impossible? In discussing the answer, it is important not to overlook EU institutions that are gaining increasing authority. The European Central Bank (ECB) – together with the Court of Justice the most federalist body in the Union – played a decisive role in handling the crisis. Despite previous French criticism of the Bank, on this occasion Sarkozy praised its behavior and the dialogue it conducted with member states. Paris also paid a lot of attention to the European Parliament, which is becoming more assertive as it acquires greater decision-making responsibilities.

Above all, the driving forces that proved instrumental during a term of exceptional challenges may not be enough in the longer run. The French presidency should not be interpreted as evidence that the European Union can be effective under its current institutions. Sarkozy himself has always been committed to institutional reform. Both his acts and words favor replacing the current rotating presidency of the European Council

¹⁶ See for instance Nick Whitney, “European Defence – now with added élan?” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 18, 2008.

with a strong and visible president, as envisioned by the Lisbon Treaty. To play that role fully, this president will obviously need a more integrated Union, equipped, for instance, with a Brussels-led diplomatic service. As a whole, the French vision for Europe, including for example a more coordinated economic union or a more ambitious ESDP, leaves room for, or even requires, more than just intergovernmental cooperation.

TOWARD A BIG-POWER DIRECTORATE?

Another interesting evolution is the new equilibrium between member states. The way Paris played the game is all the more interesting since, for years, Sarkozy had been talking about the need for a European *directoire* – a directorate of the larger member states that would act as a kind of political board of governors for the Union. The idea was, and most probably still is, that France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK should lead the European Union – a concept that is consistent with Sarkozy’s view of international politics, in which greater powers have greater responsibilities. Nevertheless, the French presidency did not turn out as one would have expected from this departure point. Instead Sarkozy ultimately took care to include all and sundry in the decision-making process.

It is true that, to prepare for the Washington G-20 summit, Paris arranged a so-called G-4 meeting, comprising the four European members of the G-8 (France, Germany, Italy and the UK). But while this meeting attracted media and diplomatic attention, it was not particularly effective. France then convened with more success the first Eurogroup meeting at the level of Heads of State and Government, to which Sarkozy also invited British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, whose country is not a member of the euro zone. Paris multiplied meetings under various formats. To the usual two European Councils (at Head of State

and Government level), Paris added a third, as well as two informal sessions. Sarkozy and Prime Minister François Fillon also attended bilateral meetings with all EU members before or during the presidency, and similar steps were taken by Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner and his then deputy for European Affairs, Jean-Pierre Jouyet.

Sarkozy’s belittling of U.S. plans to install a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic during a summit with Russia in Nice attracted a lot of attention, with many comparing it to Chirac’s infamous advice to Central and Eastern Europeans to “shut up” during the split with Washington over Iraq. The French position was quickly clarified in a

declaration the very next day¹⁷, in which Sarkozy backtracked somewhat from his statement in Nice. The polemics, however, overshadowed the attention Paris paid to Central and Eastern Europe. In June 2008, Sarkozy went to the Czech Republic, in the first visit of a French President to Prague since April 1997. Amongst other meetings, Paris convened a special summit with the Central and Eastern European countries on energy and climate, both to prepare

for the European Council and as part of a broader strategy to restore French relations with Central and Eastern Europe, despite persistent divergences¹⁸.

In Sarkozy’s vision, the role of nations is also important with regard to public opinion. Current euroskepticism does not derive only from resistance to integration and the pooling of sovereignty; many “no” voters actually

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17 “Each country has the sovereign right to make its own decisions [...] I would even say that such a shield could be useful, with a view to the threat of missiles from other countries such as Iran. In fact, I already agreed to it at the NATO meeting in Bucharest. [...] But, since I had the President of the Russian Federation sitting across from me, I wanted to lower tensions and that’s what I did.” Nicolas Sarkozy, *Conférence de presse*, Washington D.C., November 15, 2008.

18 Jacques Rupnik, “Europe sans barrières et Europe qui protège”, *Notre Europe*, August 2008.

favor European integration, but have doubts about the current path out of fear of globalization and enlargement or because of concerns over national identity. The French presidency implicitly traced a two-stage response: putting Europe back on track with a renewed sense of confidence and effectiveness; and showcasing leadership to reassure the general public that the European venture is not on autopilot, particularly as far as enlargement and deregulation are concerned.

“MORE POLITICS AND LESS DIPLOMACY”

France’s new vision embodies a simpler, results-oriented, “more politics and less diplomacy” version of the Union, based on ambition, action, and hard work. Will this suffice to answer citizens’ concerns? External events could help. At the time of the October, 2008 European Council, a second Irish vote seemed only to be a recipe for a stronger rejection of the Lisbon Treaty. Yet only two months later, in December, another referendum appeared as a possible way out. The change resulted from further reassurances to the Irish about the Treaty’s implications, the increasingly uncomfortable position of Ireland as one of the only two countries not to have ratified the Treaty (along with the Czech Republic) and probably also the effects of the economic crisis.

Nevertheless, the so-called democratic gap – which has more to do with perceptions, as the NIC rightly pointed out, than with a lack of democracy – will not be easy to tackle. The European Parliamentary elections in June 2009 are likely to be too early to allow firm conclusions to be drawn. But it is probably Sarkozy’s bet that Europeans, and not only the French, will not be satisfied with a European Union that relapses into drowsiness. As one of his advisers was quoted as saying, “from now on, some European leaders are used to moving on and we won’t let a downward spiral take over”¹⁹.

¹⁹ Jean Quatremer, “L’avenir de l’Europe selon Nicolas Sarkozy

The same sentiment could equally well apply to France itself, which viewed the presidency as a means of cementing its return to a leadership role in Europe. One of Sarkozy’s first goals on entering the Elysée was to extract France from the back seat to which it had been relegated after rejecting the EU constitution in its 2005 referendum. First he took the initiative of proposing a “mini-treaty” that was to become the Lisbon Treaty. Then, after playing a key role in negotiating it, he secured its ratification by the French Parliament as quickly as possible, reinforcing the perception that France was returning to the fold. But if the presidency helped to complete the comeback, the continuation of the story is less certain. The end of a

presidency is always difficult, as Germany discovered after its successful turn in the chair in 2007, and this time it could be even harder, with the United States resuming its place on the global stage and the continuing tendency in other capitals to see arrogance in any French initiative.

France certainly enjoyed leading the European Union,

so much so that some worried about the prospects for a soft landing after the presidency was over, and others joked that there was actually no intent to land. But just as Sarkozy did not wait for his stint at the helm to take initiatives, there is no reason why he should stop afterward. Holding the presidency does not imply a monopoly on European initiatives; after all, it was Gordon Brown’s stimulus plan that Sarkozy promoted during the Eurogroup meeting. The presidency and leadership are two different things. France will naturally, and rightly, keep on taking initiatives, just like any other country that wants to do so. The right question is whether Paris will respect EU solidarity and coordinate its positions with the presidency and other member states.

”, *Couloisses de Bruxelles*, December 12, 2008 (bruxelles.blog.liberation).

Even so, robust political leadership may not be enough to re-establish France in the strong position to which Paris aspires. France should also try to gain influence in the European Parliament, where French representatives are usually sprinkled among numerous political groups, sometimes inactive and often lacking in national political stature. Paris will also have to pay attention to recovering its full influence in the European Commission, not only through its French Commissioner (and possibly by presenting a candidate for the job of High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy), but also among the Brussels bureaucracy. Last but not least, France will have to find a more constructive way of dealing with European bodies and regulations, from the powerful ECB to the intricate details of fishing quotas.

FRANCE CANNOT LEAD BY ITSELF

Sarkozy believes there is no contradiction between French and European ambitions. He is convinced that “in many areas, our action cannot be effective in a strictly national framework”. Yet he does not complain about this, because he is just as convinced that France can play a leading role in Europe. “In the dawn of the 21st century, as a new big-power concert is taking shape, it is first through Europe that we will be able to play our full part on the international scene, have our ideas and projects endorsed, and defend our interests”²⁰.

Lastly, France will not be back in Europe if it is alone. European leadership needs to be collective. This may be difficult, as Germany’s position after general elections in September, 2009 is still far from clear, and Britain, which must hold elections by early June 2010, could emerge with a much less “pro-European” government. Berlin, in particular, needs to come back to the “European mainstream”²¹, in the view of Ulrike Guérot, head of the Berlin office of the European Council on Foreign Relations. France has to do its part for this collective leadership to happen. It has already drawn lessons from recent

20 Nicolas Sarkozy, “Europe. L’engagement français”, op. cit.

21 Ulrike Guérot, “French-German disputes are tearing the EU apart”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 11, 2008

mistakes and misunderstandings: the government has learned to make compromises (as on immigration and agriculture), corrected course during the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean, and taken into account the need to repair Franco-German relations in choosing Bruno Le Maire as Jean-Pierre Jouyet’s successor. Paris will also have to pursue good relations with the smaller member states, even if it is no longer in the presidential chair, and, in particular, continue to try come to terms with the consequences²² of the Union’s enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe, with which it has never been entirely comfortable. Its conduct of the presidency suggests that it should be able to achieve this.

What does all this mean for transatlantic relations? Although the U.S. electoral calendar limited France’s ability to focus on the transatlantic angle, Paris constantly had one eye on Washington. France paid due attention, when dealing with the Georgian crisis, or when answering President Dmitry Medvedev’s proposal for a new pan-European security architecture, not to fall into the Russian trap intended to divide the transatlantic community. The 27 EU Foreign Ministers also took advantage of an informal meeting to discuss the future of transatlantic cooperation and elaborate a shared strategy. A second informal gathering was organized to agree on a document that Kouchner came to Washington to present to the incoming administration and to the American public²³. This document features a much more pro-active Europe and includes recommendations for strengthening transatlantic ties.

THREE LESSONS FOR WASHINGTON

It is to be hoped that the French presidency served as a useful reminder to Americans of what the European Union can and could be. Just as Europeans expect and welcome changes of tone and style in Washington, many Americans would welcome a

22 Christian Lequesne, *La France dans la nouvelle Europe. Assumer le changement d’échelle*, Presses de Sciences-Po, Paris, October 2008.

23 Bernard Kouchner, “U.S.-Europe Relations. Toolbox for a New Era”, *Address at the Brookings Institution*, Washington D.C., November 12th, 2008.

similar development in Europe. The following are three lessons that the new U.S. administration could learn from the French presidency.

- First, working with the European Union has its benefits. While U.S. bilateral relationships still need to be managed and maintained, particularly with the larger states, the French presidency demonstrated that not only would it be useful to collaborate with the European Union during major crises, but in some cases it may even be preferable. As the Lisbon Treaty takes root, this consideration may gain further relevance.
- Second, the G-20 meeting in London in early April and the NATO summit in France and Germany later that month will be important transatlantic moments, at a time when debate is raging about re-inventing an appropriate framework for a closer transatlantic partnership²⁴. But the next EU-U.S. summit, perhaps also in April, could be an important moment too, and the Czech presidency has already announced it intends to invite all 27 European Heads of State and Government to the gathering, at which the European Union is usually represented only by a “troika” composed of the Presidents of the Council and the Commission and the High Representative for Common Foreign and

The international and cooperative nature of the European Union means that it needs to tackle its internal problems (identity, institutions, borders, economic and social reforms, etc.) to transform its assets into external power.

Security Policy²⁵. More broadly, the Obama administration should devise a strategy of appropriate and direct engagement with Brussels and the European institutions, before or after the June, 2009 European elections.

- Third, the French-led European Union obviously benefited from the interregnum in the United States. Now that Washington is back on stage, however, potential European leadership should not be set aside and wasted. Not only is there room for a complementary division of labor if Washington accepts that it will not always be in the driver’s seat; there also is room for joint leadership. Climate change, Russia and Iran are obvious subjects for such a joint enterprise. One could even argue that it is time for Washington to reassess some well-established foreign policy redlines, such as the one that places the European Union on the sidelines of the Middle-East peace process (though in the forefront as a provider of aid.)

Some experts have recently argued that “Sarkozy’s Europe is good for Obama”²⁶. Pro-European Americans will probably be pleased to see that the European Union is not doomed to be a lethargic U.S. lapdog. But they will also expect, and ask for, more from the Union. The Europeans will have to put their own affairs in order if they are to be effective interlocutors and partners. More than any other global player, the international and cooperative nature of the European Union means that it needs to tackle its internal problems (identity,

24 Dan Hamilton *et al.*, “Alliance Reborn: An Atlantic Compact for the 21st Century”, The Washington NATO Project, January 2009. See also Ronald D. Asmus, “New Plumbing, New Purposes - Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance”, *The American Interest*, November/December 2008. And Daniel Korski, Ulrike Guérot and Mark Leonard, “Re-wiring the U.S.-EU relationship”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 8, 2008.

25 “Czechs to widen EU-U.S. summit to more nations”, *Euractiv*, December 17, 2008.

26 Federiga Bindi, Charles Kupchan and Justin Vaisse, “Sarkozy’s Europe is good for Obama”, *International Herald Tribune*, January 14, 2009.



institutions, borders, economic and social reforms, etc.) to transform its assets into external power, be it soft, hard or smart.

After the success of the French presidency, and now that Washington is coming to terms with European construction and even supporting progress on ESDP, the European Union and the United States would be well advised to quit being pessimistic about each other - and to act according to these reciprocal expectations.

Policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic should assume that the achievements of the French presidency were not a once-only flash in the pan and that Europeans will keep pedaling forward, even if the finish line is still out of sight and may not be clearly defined for a long time to come.

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