



LOOKING BACKWARDS: THE PREVIOUS BELGIAN PRESIDENCIES

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The context of the coming Belgian presidency differs significantly from that of the previous Belgian semesters. The difference is threefold.

First, the new roles established by the Lisbon treaty at the head of the European Council and for chairing the Foreign Affairs Council will reduce the room of manoeuvre of the rotating presidency. The current prime minister Yves Leterme and the minister of foreign affairs Steven Vanackere won't be in sight position like the preceding duos Martens-Tindemans, Dehaene-Claes and Verhofstadt-Michel, even if they won't be thrown out the picture. The internal procedures of the European Council provides for a close coordination between the permanent president, the president of the Commission and the head of the rotating presidency. The Belgian foreign minister for his part will chair the General Affairs Council and even the Foreign Affairs Council when dealing with trade policy. Anyway, a new equilibrium must be found between the two types of leadership: the newly permanent duo and the rotating one.

The second difference comes from the formula of the team presidency. The platform of the Belgian semester is part of a "strategic framework" and of an eighteen months program which have been drafted by Spain, Belgium and Hungary and which has been approved by the Council in December 2009. It is reported that in contrast to the previous trios, the three capitals have not only juxtaposed their respective agendas but have closely collaborated. Their cooperation benefited from their "like minded" approach to the EU affairs.

The third difference is not related to the new EU architecture, but to domestic politics. The Belgian government has resigned in late April and elections will take place on the 13th of June. In the past, various stages for reshaping the Belgian state have crossed the periods when Belgium held the European presidency without the two processes collided. In 1993 and in 2001, the proximity of the Belgian semester pushed the protagonists to reach an agreement on the constitutional revision before Belgium would take the rein of the EU. In 1987, a twist around the linguistic regime of a village of four thousands inhabitants, of limited impact but with a great symbolic meaning for both Flanders and Wallonia, put the government at risk while Belgium was holding the European presidency. But the cabinet finally collapsed only after the Belgium semester had ended. This time, in 2010, domestic politics interfere with the twelfth Belgian presidency and may cause some disarray.

One could hardly envisage that a new government will be formed immediately after the 13th June election. It is the current caretaker cabinet which will begin the presidency semester. A new team could come in late summer or in autumn. It would provoke personnel shifts at the ministerial level. By changing horses in the middle of the river, Belgium now risks to have new ministers coming late or ill-prepared to complete the six months job and craft the final compromises. It's not the first time however that the country holding the presidency suffers from political instability. Not only the Czech Republic in 2009, but also Denmark in 1992 and Italy in 1996, had to replace collapsed cabinets during their presidency. The handicap is of a political kind. Legally, nothing prevents a caretaker government from chairing the Council's meetings. But such a cabinet disposes of less reputation and political weight to bring dynamism and efficiency in the EU decision-making process. As European Voice pointed out a weak Belgian presidency is likely to reinforce the outgoing shift of power from the rotating to the permanent presidency (29th April 2010).

With less political leadership for the prime minister and the foreign minister now that Mr. Van Rompuy and Baroness Ashton are in place; less salience for Belgian priorities within the trio eighteen months program; and weaker authority and prestige due to domestic political instability; the patterns of the coming twelfth presidency differ from the previous ones, namely those of 1993 and 2001, which were hailed for having done a good job. In any case upcoming rotating presidencies will differ from the previous ones. With the Lisbon treaty, we have entered a new era. Given these changes, how not to reminiscence of the good old time of the former editions of the Belgian presidencies. Remembering them is also like travelling through some stages of the European integration itself.

The Belgian Presidency of 1958

Due to the alphabetical order, Belgium held the first presidency of the Council when the Treaty of Rome entered into force on January 1958. As Luxembourg had declined to be the official seat of all the EC institutions, the seats' allocation remained undecided. The Council started to work in Brussels and the Commission came alongside. The location was temporary but the provisional, which lasted until the Amsterdam Treaty confirmed Brussels to be the seat of the Council and the Commission. Their presence around the Schuman roundabout nowadays is a kind of legacy from the first Belgian presidency.

The Belgian Presidency of the sixties

The Following ones, in 1961, 1964 and 1967, with the foreign ministers P. Wigny, P.H. Spaak and P. Harmel as leading figures, took place in the context of the twists between the Benelux and the Gaullist European policy about main issues of the Sixties: Fouchet Plan, the accession of the UK, the financing of CAP and the Luxembourg Compromise.

In the course of the second presidency, a new Belgian government took place in late April 1961. With P.H. Spaak, one of the main authors of the Rome treaty, replacing P. Wigny, this change didn't cause any disarray.



The Belgian Presidency of 1970

In the first semester of 1970, the Belgian presidency had to implement the conclusions of the December 1969 Summit of Den Haag on the completion and the enlargement of the EC. The Council's decision of the 21st April creating the "own resources" system which was to feed the EC budget allowed to reach the first objective. Concerning enlargement, the Belgian semester was the point in time to define the methodology for accession negotiations: only temporary provision could be negotiated but the "acquis communautaire" should be taken over without modification. This remains until today another legacy from the Belgian presidencies. Accession negotiations with UK opened on the 30th of June, the last day of the Belgian semester.

The Belgian Presidency of 1973

The sixth presidency came in the first semester of 1973 when the Six became the Nine. In a speech celebrating the accession of the new members, P. Harmel, who was still the foreign minister, declared that enlargement modified not only the geographical dimension but also the political weight of the EC.

Besides, the Belgian priorities aimed again at implementing the conclusions of another European summit. Namely the one of October 1972 in Paris, where the heads of states and governments scheduled the deepening of the EC with EMU and European Union to be realised by 1980. But with the second dollar devaluation in February and the exit of the "monetary snake" out of the tunnel imposing the new regime of the floating rates, the chance to have EMU on short-term was jeopardized.

The Belgian Presidency of 1977

The second semester 1977 was the first time the Belgian Prime Minister chaired the European Council and thus to become the leading figure of the rotating presidency. As stagflation was reaching its acme, both prime minister W. Martens and foreign minister H. Simonet warned that to rescue the "acquis communautaire" against the rise of the protectionism and nationalism in the EC should be priority. The deadline for achieving EMU by 1980 was definitively postponed for better times. The Belgian presidency registered the decision on the method for calculating the VAT resource and pressed for having the budget fully funded by own resources by 1978, which would finally happen in 1980.

On external relations, the Belgian presidency spoke on behalf of the Nine in the follow-up of Helsinki Act Conference in Belgrade. Foreign minister Simonet initiated the first EC-COMECON contact by receiving in Brussels the East German Minister chairing the COMECON executive Committee. Although COMECON wanted to keep the meeting at the level of interstates bodies, without involvement of the European Commission, H. Simonet immediately introduced the Commissioner for External Relations Haferkamp to his East German counterpart.

The Belgian Presidency of 1982

In 1982, EC was muddling though in the row on UK rebate. The Belgian presidency made two unsuccessful attempts to solve the problem which would persist until the Fontainebleau deal of June 1984. Leo Tindemans, who had become foreign minister, complained that Mrs Thatcher's claim for having her money back was putting the whole own resources system at risk. Signalling the tension between UK and its partners, London vetoed the decision on the CAP



prices as long its rebate wasn't granted. However Belgium had recourse to the qualified majority voting on the CAP policies. Thereby, London unsuccessfully called upon the Luxembourg compromise.

The year of 1982 was also the year of the first conflict between the Council and the Parliament about the budget. It paved the way to an interinstitutional dialogue on the EC budget procedure which was found in June. It can also be highlighted that first trade sanctions based on political motives were taken during that Belgian semester: they were against Russia and Argentina due to the Polish and the Malvinas-Kalklands cases. L. Tindemans commented on them as "concretisation of the convergence between EPC and Community Policies which is fundamental for building the European Union".

The Belgian Presidency of 1987

The Delors Package and initiatives on external relations were central in the 1987 presidency. While there had been a decision on increasing the VAT resource in Fontainebleau in 1984, it deemed very soon that traditional "own resources" will be too short for covering growing EC expenditures. Hence the Delors Package was presented in February which invented the fourth GDP resource. Leo Tindemans, still foreign minister, said that the Commission approach was not at all "shoddy work".

Put immediately high on the agenda of the European Council, the Delors Package's principles were approved at the end of the Belgian semester but it took until the following German presidency before they were formally adopted. It is also worth mentioning that liberalisation of air transport, as part of the internal market program, was also established at that time.

The Belgian semester was very active on external relations. On February, the Twelve declared their support to the international UN peace conference in the Middle East. It was the second important EPC text on that issue after the 1980 Venice Declaration. Belgian presidency pressed also for having an EC decision on the third financial protocol with Mediterranean Countries, that had been a leftover of the former UK presidency. With Central America, L. Tindemans initiated the so-called San José Dialogue, which aimed at easing the tensions and the civil wars in that region. The year 1987 was even the final stage of the euromissiles crisis. While Jacques Delors suggested that an extraordinary European Council should be evoked to respond to this security question, L. Tindemans invoked the EC treaties' orthodoxy to refrain this unusual idea, even though Belgium strongly supported to establish a European Defence policy one day.

The Belgian Presidency of 1993

Prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, foreign minister Willy Claes, and minister of finance Philippe Maystadt were the leading figures of the presidential team in the second semester 1993. The Commission and presidency harvested quickly a first success with the reform of the structural funds. Hand in hand, J. Delors and W. Claes convinced the Member States to establish the list of the regions eligible to the new Objective 1 and to distribute the funds available.

By the end of July, the presidency had to cope with the huge speculative pressures which attacked the European Monetary System. Instead of fixing new parities, the finance ministers decided to broaden the margins of fluctuation up to 15% around the pivotal rates of change. After the monetary storm, doubts were casted on the feasibility of creating the EMU. But the



Belgian presidency insisted that the second stage of EMU, on economic convergences, should start by January 1994.

Late October, a special summit in Brussels, hailed the entrance into force of the Maastricht Treaty. It provided an opportunity to distribute the seats for new agencies and for the ECB. The last success of the Belgian semester was to bring together France, EC and US positions on agriculture and services in the Uruguay Round final deal. While the French Foreign minister, A. Juppé, complimented the Belgian team for its great professionalism, Jacques Delors confessed he had lived a semester with exceptional moments. The '93 Belgian presidency had gained indeed an excellent image.

The Belgian Presidency of 2001

On the 7th of July 2001, Guy Verhofstadt, prime minister since 1999, presented the guidelines of the second semester presidency to the European Parliament. Among these: the implementation of the Tampere Program in the area of Freedom, Security and Justice and the kick-off of the Lisbon strategy in which Belgium wanted to strengthen the social pillar. But none of the seven Belgian priorities referred to what would become the first major challenge of the presidency: the EU response to the 11th September attacks on the Twin Towers. Prime minister Guy Verhofstadt and foreign minister Louis Michel, pressed the Union to react promptly. Two special summits were organized on the 21st of September and in mid-October. They agreed on an Action Plan, followed by a wide roadmap for the fight against terrorism. The Belgian presidency speeded up the adoption of framework-decisions on the penal definition of terrorism, on the European arrest-warrant covering a wide range of offences and on safety measures for air transports.

Issued on the 15th December, the Laeken Declaration was the second success of the Belgian semester. In the Nice Treaty Protocol on the Future Europe, four basic questions had been raised. Guy Verhofstadt elaborated them into a range of sixties queries, one of them questioning whether simplification and reorganization of institutions might or not lead to a constitutional text. The adoption of the Laeken Declaration, which he had drafted personally, was a success for Verhofstadt personally. At the request of Lionel Jospin, he had merely to replace the phrase “deficit démocratique” by “défi démocratique” (democratic challenge). However, his main objectives - the idea of having a Convention to mull over the set of queries and the prospect for a Constitution - were adopted. The unique dismay for Verhofstadt was to have V. Giscard d'Estaing, who wasn't his “favori” for the job, appointed to chair the Convention.

From the Laeken Declaration to the testing of the new Lisbon provisions, for Belgium now comes the opportunity to close the loop.

