

A Europe of projects without a plan?

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The conclusions of the conclusions of the June 15/16 European Council have left unanswered some of the central questions on how to proceed with the EU Constitution: Will ratification proceed? If yes, how, and what will be done in France and the Netherlands? And if not, then what are possible alternatives? Instead, European leaders have clad themselves in a rhetoric of activism, which seems to lack any clear direction. The decision to launch a 'two-track approach' combining the debate on the Future of Europe with 'the delivery of concrete results' is severely qualified by the remark by Chancellor Schüssel of Austria, holder of the outgoing EU presidency, that "there is no absolute consensus on how we should deliver".

The upcoming Finnish presidency thus finds itself with no concrete mandate when it comes to dealing with the 'Future of Europe'. As the decision on the Constitution has been postponed to 2008, all eyes are looking ahead to the German presidency commencing at the beginning of 2007 for new impetus. While German Chancellor Angela Merkel explicitly raised the idea of reviving the draft treaty, arguing that "Europe needs this Constitution" and "the ratification process should proceed", Denmark, Poland, the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic resisted signing a declaration explicitly committing them to continue the ratification process. The Council conclusions therefore merely express the *hope* that this process will be completed and refer to a report on the state of national 'Future of Europe' debates, due to be published in the first half of 2007.

Meanwhile, the Finnish have settled for a low-key approach, focusing on the EU's "functioning within the framework of the existing treaties". Reacting to the apparent unease that the constitutional label has evoked in European electorates, the Finnish presidency has taken up the EU discourse on a 'Europe of projects' in their preliminary presidency agenda. Undoubtedly, there is much to be said for concentrating on concrete policy issues. However the Council conclusions reveal very little in terms of what these projects might be. Rather than renewing commitments to better performance across the board of the EU policy agenda, a Europe of projects would suggest selecting a field of systemic importance on which tangible results can be perceived.

In order to highlight the EU's added value, the upcoming presidency should focus on a small number of concrete policy initiatives. This could be improving the EU's external policy instruments, such as the plan to revive the EU diplomatic service. A well-coordinated action in the field of foreign relations, which is seen as one of the key areas of integration by Europe's citizens, might go far in showing the willingness of the EU to move forward, all the while demonstrating the positive aspects of the Constitutional Treaty. Pushing towards the adoption of the Schengen Information System and the common protection of borders in an effort to define a unified approach to fighting terrorism and making headway in the area of security, will also be crucial.

Nevertheless, such a plan of action should not permit EU leaders to gloss over the fact that the Constitutional future of the EU remains a problem to be solved. They are

deluding themselves if they think that merely showing the EU's capacity to 'perform' on certain policy issues will increase public acceptance of the EU project. After all, despite decades of relying on performance and the successes of the single market and the euro, the EU still finds itself mired in the current democratic impasse. Moreover, public concerns about areas such as employment and social welfare, in which the EU actually has very little competence, make a focus on mere output a risky business for EU leaders. As the timetable for taking a decision on the Constitution has been extended to the end of 2008, the idea of coming to a solution at an IGC under the French presidency has been raised. This proposal, which is in line with arguments for repackaging parts of the Constitution in order to avoid ratification by referenda and giving it a different name to ensure it will pass second time round, seems somewhat ironic. After all, one of the impulses for the constitutional process was the negative reaction to the Nice Treaty, which was widely perceived as opaque and undemocratic.

Eschewing the C-word in order to focus on an inter-institutional solution for reform is therefore not a solution. Instead, reconnecting concrete policy initiatives to the constitutional project will be crucial. Recent Eurobarometer polls show that the *idea* of a Constitution, if not this particular draft, enjoys far-reaching public support. The new presidency should therefore ensure that the idea of a two-track approach does not become another game of words. A 'Europe of projects' needs to be combined with a broader constitutional vision. In order to raise political awareness of the EU's achievements, responsibility will also fall on national leaders to acknowledge the political headway made at EU level and to refrain from 'blaming Brussels' for national setbacks. In this respect, the transparency initiative, which is one of the Finnish presidency's priorities, could be a good start.

Clearly the EU's constitutional impasse will not be solved overnight. However, the vagueness of Council conclusions on future steps to be taken on the Constitution should not lead to inaction on the part of the Finnish presidency. They can still make a contribution by ensuring that an open discussion on the Constitution is continued, putting all possible options on the table. If this is combined with tangible results in selected policy initiatives, a significant step out of the crisis would already be taken. Embedding ideas of how to move forward pragmatically in key policy fields into a broader plan for public participation and institutional reform will therefore be a challenge as well as an opportunity for the Finnish presidency.