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**Perspectives on the French EU Council Presidency, July-December 2008 (FPEU08) : Telling Tales**

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## ***Introduction***

Why do we, as academics, interest ourselves in the presidency of the Council of the European Union (EUCP)? We can identify at least three sets of reasons. The first concerns questions of time and memory, and relates specifically to the six-monthly rotation of member states in the chair of the Councils and their working groups. Studying or reporting on a six-month period in the course of the EU's history is a manageable task. A Presidency appears to have a beginning and an end, clear objectives and, usually, specific outputs (agreements, decisions, declarations and so on); and by training a spotlight onto this chunk of time, we can reasonably hope to take a clear snapshot of what the EU looked like back then, and how the member state in question was presenting itself to the camera (literally and figuratively). For example, France seen through the lens of the EUCP in 2008 looked rosier than the picture taken during the previous French presidency of July-December 2000 (FPEU00), when Paris was, amongst other things, hamstrung by political *cohabitation* between President and Prime Minister.

But of course, 'six months' is an inaccurate description of presidency time to begin with, and the picture of neat beginnings and tidy endings that it suggests is illusory. Member states, and Council and Commission officials, spend many months before a presidency in preparatory mode. Moreover, as has been amply demonstrated elsewhere (eg. Tallberg, 2004), the six-month presidency period is primarily concerned with ongoing or 'inherited' EU business; and this even before the introduction in 2006 of the 'trio' or 'team' presidency regime. Goetz argues that in any case, there is a tension between 'cyclical' and 'linear' time in the EU's institutional clock (or clocks: that is his point: 'temporal plurality' (2009: 206) is inbuilt into the EU system). Linear time, for Goetz, favours 'ongoingness, continuity of action and open-endedness' (*ibid*: 207); whereas '[p]olitical cycles are (...) strongly linked to the idea of discontinuity, institutionalized opportunities for renewal, even ruptures, in institutional practices, personnel and policy (Goetz, *ibid*: 206-7). On balance, he thinks, the rotating EUCP operates more on linear than on cyclical time, even if this sounds counter-intuitive: there is an inherent 'ongoingness' about

the Council's business. For example, the 'powerful, permanent bureaucracies' of the Council and the Commission '[...] both provide *memory* – knowledge about what has happened in the past – and a future time horizon that extends beyond the Commission mandate, a minister's tenure, or a *Council presidency*' (*ibid*, 206: my emphasis).

This is a particularly useful perspective on the recent provisions for 'trio/team' presidencies that formally bind the three member states responsible for consecutive presidencies into an 18-month work programme (the 2008 French Council presidency was the first leg of the second of these trios, passing the baton in January 2009 to the Czech Republic, who handed over to Sweden six months later). The purpose of this team structure is precisely to institutionalise leadership – make it 'ongoing', in Goetz' terms – in an enlarging EU where the Franco-German relationship and, it is argued, the rotating presidency, are losing purchase over the EU's forward motion (see Beach and Mazzucelli, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, although a six-month presidency may initially seem cyclical by nature, from another perspective it can be seen to mobilise behaviours that in themselves emphasise permanence and continuity. Thus, '*[t]he work programme of the rotating half-year Presidency, co-ordinated with the Commission's annual strategic work programme, acts as an important mobilizing device, since the success of the Presidencies is in part measured by their ability to deliver on the deadlines set in the work programme. (...) The formal and informal meetings of the European Council also act as a further major mobilizing force.*' (Goetz, *ibid*: 207-8, my emphasis). What are the actors mobilised towards? Decisions

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<sup>1</sup> 'The three Presidencies will work closely with each other with a view to best achieving the objectives set out in the programme. To this end they will also cooperate with the other institutions of the European Union and in particular with the Commission and the European Parliament on the basis of their respective competences.' (Council of the EU, 2008: 5).

that are unlikely subsequently to be reversed; Goetz's example here is the 'sacrosanctity of the *acquis* (208)'.

So in many respects, it is an illusion to conceive of the EUCP as a fixed point in some sort of cyclical turnover of presidencies, as this underplays and underestimates the forces for continuity just discussed. At the same time, however, we recall, first, that Nicolas Sarkozy was elected as French President in May 2007 on precisely a programme of *rupture* – sharp breaks with the past. With regard to Europe in particular, he announced, on the very night of his election victory, that under his leadership, France would be *de retour* – back in Europe. This implies both that France has a distinct place in Europe to rightfully reclaim (Autret, 2009); and, more philosophically and pertinently here, that time can be stopped and started at will (since retreats, returns and *ruptures* all punctuate time).

Second is the notion of *will* (*volonté*) itself. To turn back time (or move it along, or interfere with it in some other way) implies human agency; and Sarkozy's whole bearing, discourse and political career testify to his belief in the power of the individual over his/her circumstances. More than this, Goetz points out that 'linearity' in the sense discussed above, of irreversible decisions, 'comes at a considerable democratic cost' (208); we shall see below that a *leitmotiv* of Sarkozy's own approach to FPEU08 (and to France's EU policy more broadly) is that the 'automaticity' of the rules governing the EU is open to question by democratically-elected politicians; and he saw the European Council as the forum *par excellence* to test his theory, as we see below.

Despite all this, the rotating presidency does provide a device, however flawed or limited, for laying down the facts and features of another episode – perhaps filled with memorable moments – in the *longue durée* of the history of the EU, of European integration [*la construction européenne*], and of its member states. We are, in our studies of the EUCP in its rotating dimension, with an emphasis on FPEU08, adding to the mythology of the EU; and to the story of French relations with the EU.

The second set of reasons for exploring the EUCP in part explains the first: the media, in particular, focus on the six-month presidency period because it has the potential to provide personalised leadership of the

integration process, and this is something worth reporting and analysing, both for its own sake (in the way that ‘celebrity’ and drama are newsworthy in the hunt for headlines and striking visual representations of politics and especially power); and for what it may reveal about the EU and its member states. Council presidency periods allow member states, via their leading politicians, to be seen and heard for a time and, as a by-product, to make the EU visible. Perhaps such visibility will, over time, enhance the legitimacy of the EU’s institutions and policies with national publics.

Or perhaps its effect is limited to providing short-term boosts for national politicians seen by their publics to have well-represented their country for the duration of the presidency? This was indeed the case for FPEU08. In any case, when we focus on the media-worthy aspects of a Council presidency, we see above all the spectacle and performance of political power that accompanies the more routine – ongoing, we have said – work of officials and institutions. The fly-on-the-wall style documentary of the 2008 French presidency produced by the Franco-German TV channel Arte (2009) is an interesting illustration of both these aspects of the EUCP. And from the perspective of the Czech EU Presidency team, Sarkozy’s high visibility and ‘marketing’ of himself throughout the presidency (in particular through his ‘manipulation’ of the media, and his interventions at the European Parliament), was less significant for the presidency outcomes *per se*, than for any impact it might have on the ‘apathy’ of the EU’s citizens, which undermines the EU as a credible political system.<sup>2</sup>

Inevitably and invariably, accounts to date of FPUE08 have emphasised the performative aspect of the presidency function, and we will return to it below: French President Sarkozy has a habit of personalising all roles he finds himself in, and that of EU Council President in 2008 was certainly no exception to this rule. But images of political and personalised leadership as key characteristics are distorted, given the

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<sup>2</sup> All comments from officials and politicians from the French and Czech presidency teams have been anonymised. Comments were sought by email and telephone in July and August, 2009.

realities of the EU's complex institutional set-up. Indeed, the third and perhaps most important reason for interesting ourselves in EUCP is to investigate a significant portion of the machinery of decision-making in the EU. As Jacques Delors likes to say, we need to look under the bonnet and see how the engine is running.<sup>3</sup> Does it resemble the instruction manual (here, the treaties); or has wear and tear changed its very nature? In the Council, as mentioned above, we find so many of the interests, influences and identities that mesh to keep the EU system running, and this is the emphasis of our paper, with particular regard to what FPEU08 revealed about the workings (*la dynamique institutionnelle*) of EUCP in particular, the EU system more broadly; and about France in its identity as EU member state.

This investigation, we should add, raises a methodological challenge (at least one); namely, that as Elgström points out, 'evaluations of any Presidency may differ depending on who is carrying out the investigation, by comparing the ways in which journalists, Brussels bureaucrats, pro-Europeanists and promoters of national interests may assess the Swedish performance.' (2002: 183). To which we might add, the evaluation will depend on who the investigation is carried out *on*: who we ask which questions – and how we frame those questions.

Bearing all these caveats in mind, in what follows we first (I) review the *déroulement* of FPEU08 with reference to existing evaluations. Second (II) we peer under the bonnet to see whether FPEU08 was business as usual, for France, for its partner member states, for the Council, for the EU overall; or did the international crises that erupted during FPEU08 trigger new institutional routines and if so, of what shelf-life? Third (III), we reflect on the implications of the above for, specifically, the provision of leadership in, by and of the EU; and for the development of France's 'identity' as an EU member state, with particular reference to the French discourse surrounding a 'political Europe'. This discourse saw itself

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<sup>3</sup> In interviews with Delors between 1997 and 1999 ; also : 'On ne saurait parler des institutions en s'en tenant à leur ligne générale. Comme pour une voiture – une comparaison que Delors affectionne – il ne suffit pas d'apprécier l'élégance de sa carrosserie, il faut savoir soulever le capot et, au risque de se salir les mains, ne pas hésiter à mettre le nez dans le moteur' (Notre Europe et Jacques Delors, 2006 : 86).

renewed and reinvigorated during FPEU08, yet is still fraught with ambiguity. Finally, we summarise our findings in a brief conclusion, pointing to possible future lines of thought based on the present study.

### ***I. FPEU08: Tales of an EU Council Presidency***

What tales have been told of the French EU Council Presidency of FPEU08, at its outset, in anticipation; during the period itself; and afterwards? The year that has elapsed since FPEU08 might not be sufficient to fully benefit from hindsight, especially since, to revert to Goetz's language (*op. cit.*), other clocks are still ticking (the remaining three years of Nicolas Sarkozy's mandate as President of the French Fifth Republic (VR); the countdown, at the time of writing, to the second Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty; the 18 months of the trio/team presidency that began when France took up the chair in July 2008, by way of example). It is, however, adequate for analyses based on systematic criteria, whether scholarly or journalistic, or political in nature; and the following narrative is based on our interpretation of the usual sources of information: official documentation; political discourse; press coverage; and *post hoc* evaluations by protagonists and 'neutral' critics alike.

We should begin by reminding ourselves that FPEU08 had a reputation to live down: the last time the French had been in the presidency chair, between July-December 2000, the outcome was the divisive Nice Treaty, and a reputation as an 'arrogant' and 'autistic' negotiator (Costa & Dalloz, 2005: 36-74). The first year of Sarkozy's presidency in France had itself created a degree of confusion regarding the President's own vision of 'Europe'. In fact Sarkozy was acutely aware of not having a vision at all. Instead, he emphasised an approach based on *le réel* and *le concret* [what is real and tangible/concrete]: *l'Europe par les projets*.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately one of these projects – the 'Mediterranean Union' – had backfired shortly before the 2008 French EU presidency began.

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<sup>4</sup> French official, Quai d'Orsay.

President Sarkozy had grandly announced on the very *soir* of his election victory on 6 May 2007 that his EU presidency would launch a ‘Mediterranean Union’ (MU), which he proceeded to do in March 2008. In the face of a Barcelona process (the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) perceived to be ailing, at least in comparison with the EU’s relations with its neighbourhood to the East, and with Turkish membership still a live issue, the MU was initially conceived of as a Schuman Plan Mark II: a new community with its own membership, institutions, and ‘projects’ designed to generate new loyalties and processes on the EU’s Mediterranean borders – spillover at work. Objections rained down on the plan, notably from Germany, but also from within Sarkozy’s own diplomatic team, and within weeks it had been watered down into Barcelona-Plus, and symbolically renamed the Union for the Mediterranean.. Its first summit was held in Paris on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2008, two weeks into FPEU08, jointly chaired by France and Egypt. By the end of 2008, Barcelona had been chosen as the Union’s HQ, and business between the EU and its non-EU Mediterranean neighbours was to all intents and purposes back to normal.<sup>5</sup>

One view from the Czech presidency team was that the MU was all show: ostentatious and lavish, with little proper thought given to the outcome *per se*. Critics have also seen in the MU the not so hidden hand of President Sarkozy’s special advisor at the Elysée, Henri Guaino (Autret, 2009; Dehousse and Menon, 2009). Autret, writing before and during the presidency, and a fierce critic of Sarkozy’s, sees the MU episode as just one of many examples of Guaino’s Eurosceptical influence over a President with little personal convictions of his own regarding European integration; Autret’s own opinion is that Guaino would probably like to see the break-up (‘la rupture du système’) of the EU in its present form (2009: 75). At the same time, the French presidency team was certainly balanced by the key role of the European Affairs Minister Jean-Pierre Jouyet, a former collaborator of Jacques Delors’; and to a point by that of Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner; both men having been brought into the government from outside the

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<sup>5</sup> The previous paragraph is from Drake (2009).

majority party (the UMP – *Union pour un mouvement populaire*). Officials such as Claude Blanchemaison, head of the FPEU08 presidency team (*secrétariat général*), and Pierre Menat, responsible for EU matters at the Quai d’Orsay, were also influential in balancing out pressures on Sarkozy from within the Elysée (see Charillon, 2009). The conflicts of interest and influence surrounding the president were visible throughout the duration of FPEU08, to the point that *le Monde* (01/10/08, ‘Les partenaires de la France oscillent entre espoir et inquiétude’) wrote of the Jekyll (Jouyet) and Hyde (Guaino) duo behind the President.

Nevertheless, the process by which a compromise was rapidly reached over the MU did suggest that pragmatism prevailed at the Elysée; and we recall too that President Sarkozy had played an important role in 2007 in the negotiation of the Lisbon Treaty (claiming more credit than was due – in Autret’s terms, he ‘kidnapped the treaty’ (*le rapt du traité*) from Angela Merkel, amongst others); and he was successful in getting the new text ratified quickly in France, by the parliamentary route (Drake and Lequesne, 2009). Even the Irish ‘no’ of 12 June 2008, just before FPEU08 got underway, did not derail the presidency from its agenda of policy objectives.

In retrospect, we can see FPEU08 as a presidency with the EU’s external identity and capacity at its core, a fact underlined by the crises that erupted in its course when the rules of the international system and regimes were at stake, and when the presidency clearly prioritised the EU’s ability to make its voice heard.<sup>6</sup> The presidency’s core objectives – a more substantial ESDP, climate change, energy security, CAP review and immigration – reflected the risks and concerns posed to the EU by its openness to international forces and flows of all kinds. Indeed, the motto agreed for the presidency before it began was ‘a Europe that protects’ (*une Europe qui protège*). At the time this seemed to be a protectionist

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<sup>6</sup> This section (to ‘internal differences’) is based on extracts from Drake (2009); see that article itself for far more detail on these presidency objectives and outcomes.

French reflex of little added value; in hindsight it seems closer to the mark, given the serious threats to international stability that marked the six-month presidency period.

In terms of these FPEU08 objectives, the French presidency tabled *security and defence* as a core priority of its presidency, couched in terms of ‘Giving renewed impetus to a Europe of Defence and Security’.

Under this heading, some agenda items were emphasised more than others, with a ‘key goal’ being the ‘strengthening [of] military and crisis management capabilities, [and] developing the EU’s instruments.’

At the informal summit of the EU’s defence ministers on 1-2 October 2008 in Deauville, preliminary agreement was reached on a number of these initiatives,<sup>7</sup> and the Conclusions of the European Council summit meeting on 11-12 December<sup>8</sup> included a more detailed declaration of the European Council’s ‘intent, through concrete decisions, to give new impetus to the European Security and Defence Policy in order to meet the new security challenges.’

Alongside ESDP, were a raft of other items that underlined the presidency’s determination to further an ongoing EU agenda that faced outwards towards the Union’s global challenges and commitments. These included the pursuit of the EU’s enlargement and neighbourhood policies; pursuing the EU’s sustainable development agenda; ‘promoting human rights and the rule of law’; ‘promoting trade rules based on openness and reciprocity’; and ‘establishing new partnerships with the various players on the international stage.’ In the pursuit of these objectives, a significant number of international summits were convened under FPEU08 (between the EU and South Africa, Ukraine, India, Canada, Russia and Brazil, and the Asia-Europe (ASEM) meeting held in Beijing in late October; shortly thereafter, China requested the

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<sup>7</sup> See C. Lequesne and O. Rozenburg, ‘The French Presidency of 2008: the Unexpected Agenda’, 2008: 3op, SIEPS (Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies), available at [www.sieps.se](http://www.sieps.se)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/104692.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/104692.pdf) for the Conclusions of the Presidency of the European Council meeting, 11-12 December 2008.

postponement of the EU-China summit planned for early December, in retaliation at the Presidency's overtures to the Dalai Lama).

Further unscripted summits were to follow as a result of the unforeseen and dramatic circumstances that erupted within weeks of the start of the presidency. Barely one month into FPEU08, on 7 August, President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia ordered the invasion of South Ossetia, triggering an all-out and protracted conflict between the former Soviet state and Moscow which intervened to support South Ossetia. The French presidency was influential in steering the EU27 unanimously through the ups and downs of the aftermath of this dangerous crisis and finally into calmer waters by early October. Similarly, when faced with the severe crisis of the world's financial markets in early October 2008, President Sarkozy and his diplomatic team led the EU27 into shows of unity despite the scrambling by national capitals for national solutions to failing banks and plummeting markets.

On the other important issues of climate change and energy security, FPEU08 ended on an agreement that in the words of the presidency conclusions 'will enable the EU to honour the ambitious commitments entered into in this area in 2007 to maintain its leading role in the search for an ambitious and comprehensive global agreement'<sup>9</sup>. More prosaically, a deal was struck that all member states could apparently live with, which will require, by 2020, significant (20%) cuts in carbon dioxide emissions, and similarly sized increases in the proportion of renewable energy use, and which showcased a 'mixture of firmness and judicious concessions' on the part of the presidency, although not all environmentalists were so impressed with the results.<sup>10</sup> In matters of immigration and asylum, Euro-African negotiations at ministerial level had by mid-October 2008 already eased the EU towards agreement on an 'Immigration Pact' at the European Council summit meeting of 15 October 2008. This was a 'solemn' statement of

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<sup>9</sup> Presidency conclusions as above ([http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/104692.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/104692.pdf)),

<sup>10</sup> See the *Financial Times*, 15 December 2008, p. 8.

political commitment to pursue the EU's ongoing agenda in this regard, rather than a detailed legislative programme.<sup>11</sup> As with the ESDP, the achievement was limited to providing a 'new impetus' to policy in this domain, and demonstrates the limitations of the presidency function in matters pertaining to national sovereignty, particularly where national situations and needs vary so widely and a balancing act is the best a presidency can hope for.

These were developments and compromises for which Sarkozy's brinkmanship and energy have to take some credit, however high-risk his innately spontaneous and irreverent approach to world affairs (and leaders) may be. His approach, by nature disruptive of the certainty and predictability that diplomatic protocol and etiquette are designed to achieve, proved to be useful tools in international crisis management, in addition to a French presidency team which included, as seen above, highly experienced and in some cases wise advisors. In contrast to the testy cohabitation between French President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in FPEU2000, the French team was significant in unifying the EU member states in very testing and difficult times; or, more precisely, in forcefully circumnavigating the EU's internal differences.

Indeed, the French government's own evaluation (UE2008.fr) included that despite the 'series of international crises which tested the European Union's capacity to collectively respond to critical problems', 'the Presidency still stayed the course on the priorities it had set itself at the outset. It pursued them methodically working in partnership with the Commission and the European Parliament'. And somewhat more enigmatically, 'Having *successfully experimented with political and institutional practices more in line with the requirements of a new world*, the European Union is well-placed to assume its global responsibilities with clarity and ambition, while defending and promoting the values

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.euractiv.com/docad/pacteEN.doc> for the text of the pact as adopted by the European Council in late September 2008.

that have inspired it since its inception. United, it can better protect the interests of European citizens and make Europe's voice better heard in the world' (*ibid*, my emphasis).

In an upbeat evaluation of FPEU08, Lefebvre (2009) wrote that '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.' To these criteria, we would add the question of the presidency's impact, if any, on the 'political and institutional practices' of the EU system, which the French government claim to have altered in keeping with the 'requirements of a new world'.

## ***II. Balancing Acts: Perspectives on FPEU08 from Brussels and Beyond***

The 'institutional dynamic' of the EU is, rather like the French President himself, in perpetual motion (*Financial Times*, 2008); and it is composed of innumerable relationships: between EU institutions; between the member states and the institutions; between member states; between different parts of different institutions; between individuals within and between institutions and so on. In the case of an EUCP, the key relationships are far from confined to activity within the Council; but a focus on the Council is a useful lens through which to explore the complexity of presidency activity. From this angle, we can observe a number of these relationships in operation, and we can ask to what extent FPEU08 was an experiment in new (but not necessarily unanticipated) practices; and what was business as usual?

Observers and practitioners reported a number of ways in which practices during FPE08 differed from the norm – with Germany's 2007 presidency being held up in comparison by more than one respondent as a model presidency: calm, efficient and effective.

### *Language matters*

Shared command of common languages keeps the wheels of the EU turning, and norms have emerged over time (over and above official rules), particularly as the EU has enlarged its membership. Thus the European Court of Justice has come to use French as its '*langue de référence*' (Autret, 2009: 124-6);

whereas in the Commission and Council, English is increasingly but, not exclusively, the *langue d'usage*: 'Au fil des ans, et des élargissements de l'Union, une pratique s'est imposée qui veut que les textes sur lesquels portent ces négociations soient établis d'abord, et parfois uniquement, en anglais avant d'être, si besoin est pour les groupes de travail, et systématiquement pour les Conseils des ministres, traduits dans les autres langues.' (Autret, 2009: 118).

By all accounts (critical and other), there were strong forces at work within the French presidency team, particularly its Elysée branch, to establish the use of French more firmly at all levels of the Council's operations. From Autret's critical perspective, this was an unrealistic expectation on the part of France, and it took the intervention of the French (then) permanent representative in Brussels, Pierre Sellal, to reduce the impact of this measure on the smooth running of Council business. Autret is not alone in her view that such attempts to push the use of the French language in the EU's institutions is both impractical, and futile from the perspective of the French government's broader foreign policy aims of reinforcing its global influence, in part through improving the uptake of the French language in international and EU institutions<sup>12</sup>; and supporting the ideal of 'cultural diversity' – including linguistic diversity – across the world. Lequesne (2008: 143), amongst others, makes similar observations: language does not equate to influence in the absence of other factors, including credibility.

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<sup>12</sup> For details of this see [http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/actions-france\\_830/francophonie-langue-francaise\\_1040/langue-francaise\\_3094/promouvoir-francais\\_11827/index.html](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/actions-france_830/francophonie-langue-francaise_1040/langue-francaise_3094/promouvoir-francais_11827/index.html) where we can read that : '*La politique de diffusion et de promotion de la langue française mise en œuvre par le ministère des Affaires étrangères se situe à l'exact croisement des deux priorités qui orientent l'action de coopération internationale menée par la France : l'impératif de solidarité et les stratégies d'influence.*'

In operational terms, this policy indeed includes a push to 'maintain' the use of French in the EU's institutions : '*la promotion du plurilinguisme qui implique notamment le maintien de la place du français dans les organisations internationales, en particulier en Europe.*'

Nevertheless, and according to Quai d'Orsay and other sources, there was indeed a doubling, if not a tripling of the documents that came out initially in the French language only for use by the chairs of the Council working groups during FPEU08; and 'encouragement' was given to those who could speak and negotiate in French (especially French-speakers!) to do so systematically. Unsurprisingly, the French government's own evaluation of the presidency (UE2008.fr: 37) singles out its underlying linguistic policy in the following positive terms: it was 'A Presidency that [has] attached particular importance to multilingualism: given its intensive programme of meetings, the French Presidency was the beneficiary of an unparalleled mobilisation of DG Interpretation (formerly the SCIC) which was involved in nearly a hundred ministerial meetings and conferences. The very great diversity of languages used led both to an increase in the use of certain languages, such as Czech, and to some unusual configurations, such as that for the Summit of the Union of the Mediterranean on 13 July (29 active and 29 passive languages).' In addition, the evaluation highlights 'A reactive [interactive?], multilingual website: available in most cases in six languages (German, English, Italian, French, Spanish and Polish) and in 23 languages in some instances (...)' (*ibid*: 37).

One perspective on these linguistic developments, from the incoming Czech presidency team, was that this intent on using the French language resulted on occasions in working documents being sent very late to other member states' representatives; and *only* in French. Such practices, from this perspective, aggravated other behaviours, such as the fact that at the lower Council levels such as the working groups, work was perceived as often being badly organised, and insufficiently focused on the goals and outcomes to be achieved. This in turn was compounded – or explained – by the strong impression that the entire presidency was far more Paris-run than expected (leaving French representatives in Brussels under-informed); and that much activity and decision-making revolved around the ministers themselves, and his or her close *cabinet* advisors, on occasions leaving diplomats in Brussels and junior ministry officials in Paris unable to provide up-to-date information to their counterparts from other member states (including those within the team presidency).

### *Team work?*

Yet in many respects, EU business is all about team-work, both in officially composed teams such as the presidency trio ; and on an informal, daily basis in the institutions. In the case of the trio presidency, certain evidence suggests that long-standing tensions between France on the one hand, and certain of the smaller EU member states on the other, especially those from Central and East European countries, leached into working practices surrounding the presidency. Comments from inside the Czech presidency team, for example, suggest that the French team was less than collegial in respect of both the outgoing (Slovenia) and incoming (Czech Republic) teams, ‘breaching agreements concerning the ‘division of labour’ between the national teams, for example, and a lack of respect for and undiplomatic behaviour towards the smaller EU countries.<sup>13</sup> EurActiv.fr (2008), moreover, reports on how the officials charged with preparing the French presidency put their political counterparts in Paris under strict instructions to keep quiet for the duration of the Slovenian presidency; and saw this echoed in Jouyet’s promises of a ‘modest’ presidency that would play the ‘collective’ card. Silence was not maintained, however, and certainly not at the Elysée.

Other respondents from Prague report how Paris made ‘repeated attempts’ to breach agreements regarding the level at which meetings would occur (by means of attempts to upgrade the meetings from working to political level) in the course of the preparations of the 18 month joint trio programme, especially as the deadline for its submission to the Council Secretariat drew close. The same respondent made the point that these tactics were not unexpected, and therefore had little shock or surprise value: this was business as usual, French style. Indeed, evidence of difficult relations between France and the CEECs is not hard to find, although Rupnik (2008) has expressed the view that after the difficulties of the years leading up to the 2004 enlargement (differences in perspective over relations with USA; Chirac’s

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<sup>13</sup> Comments provided by a senior political member of the Czech EU presidency team.

undiplomatic outbursts), President Sarkozy has made significant efforts to rectify the situation ( ‘*..la volonté est clairement affichée de modifier l’image de la France en Europe Centrale*’); and that, more broadly, Sarkozy has set out to demolish the ‘widening or deepening’ debate that had turned French EU policy into a ‘caricature’ of itself. This may well be one of the many ‘dogmas’ and ‘taboos’ for which Sarkozy has professed little respect; but in practical terms, and at various levels of interaction, tension – as opposed to conflict – may well have become a norm in its own right, and does not automatically spell poor working relations, a point also made by Czech officials. We should add here that the language ‘problem’ mentioned above is at its most acute in dealings between France and countries – such as many CEECs – where the use of English as a working language is commonplace. Other comments from within the Czech team suggest that in any case, any new practices introduced during FPEU08 have not been lasting; that the Czech team followed the plans they had laid during FPEU08, and did not get derailed by the working methods that they encountered during FPEU08.

More positively, in respect of teamwork, there is a recognised ‘impact of presidencies on the Europeanization of administrations (eg. investments in EU knowledge and upgrading of EU planning and coordination mechanisms; socialization of national officials and politicians in European cooperation’ (Schout, 2008: 275). In the case of FPEU08 (which was, we note in passing, an expensive presidency, ‘vastly outstripping his predecessors’ with a budget of nearly €200m (*The Guardian*, 2008) 1/7/08, ‘Sarkozy pledges to restore trust in EU as France takes over presidency’), the French administration certainly got the opportunity to ‘*baigner*’ in Europe, i.e. immerse itself in EU affairs.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the EUCP experience forces a form of *ouverture* (opening up) of the national administration, whereby

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<sup>14</sup> Comment from Quai d’Orsay official.

diplomats and officials mingle (*le brassage*) more systematically with their counterparts from other member states; and FPEU08 was no exception in this regard, it appears.<sup>15</sup>

### *Representation and leadership*

A key dimension of the presidency role is evidently its duty to represent the Council, the member states and the EU to other constituencies, such as national publics, the media, and third countries. As raised above, much commentary on FPEU08 has singled out this aspect, with specific respect to the multiple summits held in the course of the presidency, especially those convened in response to the crises that broke out in this period. This takes us into questions surrounding the definition of leadership in the unique context of the EU.

Practitioners of the presidency commented that it was characterised by '*la réactivité*'<sup>16</sup>, meaning that the style was responsive, flexible and proactive (unlike the English meaning of 'reactive'). This, the interviewee thought, worked for the French presidency in the circumstances it found itself in, since it gave free rein to Sarkozy's energy; how well, she wondered, might a highly-organised and well-prepared German presidency respond to such unexpected and sudden turns of event as the Georgia and banking crises?

The manner in which Sarkozy himself chaired the regular and emergency summits has been noted in positive terms: 'The manner in which he [Sarkozy] chaired the European Council – with less time permitted for declaratory statements by participants – was largely perceived as an improvement' (Dehousse and Menon, 2009: 10). The summits themselves were also kept relatively short, with Sarkozy apparently personally averse to marathon, late night sittings (but there were more of them as usual, as we

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<sup>15</sup> Comments from Quai d'Orsay official; echoed by Autret (2009).

<sup>16</sup> Comments from Quai d'Orsay official.

have seen); and the Elysée declared an intention to keep the European Council conclusions similarly short and pithy; results here were patchy, particularly towards the end of the presidency.

Lefebvre (Counsellor for Eastern Europe and Central Asia at the French Perm rep) (2009) puts the drama of the summits into perspective; seen from her office, and despite the intensity of the summit activity, ‘France also ensured the normal functioning of the Presidency, allowing the EU’s legislative work to go forward (...).’. Others deem that in the case of the climate change packet, France did play the honest broker role well, and brought real, ‘structural’, not transient change to EU policy.<sup>17</sup> The permanent, ongoing work of the EU bureaucracies also contributed significantly, as we would expect, to the achievements of the summit (and as our discussion of Goetz, above, predicted). Dehousse and Menon (2009: 105), for example, make the point that ‘the eventual agreement [to revise the Lisbon Treaty in line with Irish demands] owed as much to the ability of technical experts in the Council Secretariat to carve out a compromise as to political leadership.’

With reference to the summitry, Lefebvre (*ibid*) argues that it was a case of President Sarkozy making the best of his prerogatives as chair of the European Council, rather than setting out deliberately to weaken the other institutions and individuals involved with representing the EU internationally; specifically, the Commission President José Manuel Barroso, and the EU’s High Representative, Javier Solana. Although French governments and Presidents – and Sarkozy is no exception here – have a track record in undermining the Commission as an institution; and its President and Commissioners as individuals, Lefebvre observes that between July-December 2008, any Commission weakness was more a case of ‘followership’ on the part of the Commission presidency, rather than a deliberate campaign from Sarkozy’s team to weaken the EU’s executive and/or its president.

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<sup>17</sup> Quai d’Orsay official.

Yet it is not hard to conclude, as did Belgium's *le Soir* (reported in *le Monde*, 2008) that the French presidency of 2008 damaged the delicate balances that characterise the EU's provisions for leadership, thanks to its 'excessive presidentialisation' of the European 'regime'. Dehousse and Menon (2008) express similar reservations differently: to what extent, they ask, did Sarkozy's high profile diplomacy on the part of the EU amount to anything more than crisis-management? More specifically, has FPEU08 contributed to the institutionalisation of EU's capacity for leadership in a turbulent world? Jean-Pierre Jouyet himself, we note, emphasised in the title for *his* tale of the presidency, the crises that arose ('*Une présidence de crises*' is the title of his book), rather than any other aspect of a six-month period that should have been decisive for the EU's foreseeable future.

### ***III. Perspectives from Paris and 'Lisbon'***

Indeed, FPEU08 occurred in the shadow of the Lisbon Treaty: the Lisbon Treaty was waiting in the wings to strengthen the provisions for EU foreign policy leadership and capacity. By having a semi-permanent president of the European Council, the EU would finally have given itself the option of a conduit for a single voice in international affairs. This leader was to be ably supported by the EU's first very own 'foreign minister' – a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. S/he would straddle the Commission and Council, bridge the pillars and lean on a new collective diplomatic structure, the European External Action Service: a precarious balancing act if ever there was one. Enhanced structured cooperation protocols were to have facilitated collective military action by the willing, and more generally, maintain the momentum of the EU's ESDP, itself to be re-named as the CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy – a largely symbolic upgrade). All of these advances seemed to evaporate when the Irish electorate voted against ratification of the Treaty on 12 June 2008.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This paragraph extracted from Drake (2009).

## *Legacy I – Leadership at last?*

Yet one legacy of FPEU08 is to have modelled what a more credible leadership provision might look like, despite the Lisbon Treaty itself being in abeyance. One perspective on this eventuality reads as follows – from a firm supporter of France (Giuliani, 2008), and looking back on FPEU08 as France handed the baton to its team member, the Czech Republic: ‘In all, the Czech agenda is extremely traditional and in line with usual practice within the European institutions. But will it be adapted to the situation of international crisis and the rise of foreseeable tension (Iran, Afghanistan)? Doubt is running through all capital cities, since *France has shown that only an active, strong presidency can maintain unity in the face of adversity.*’ He continues: ‘The French presidency has demonstrated that *strong internal political leadership* that allowed the Union to overcome difficulties that diplomatic negotiation alone would have made insurmountable.’ And, to finish: ‘Thanks to its positive, committed action that *respects the Union’s essence whilst challenging practices and customs that are taken for granted*, the French Presidency has shown that this [a consensus that Europe should be a world power – a *Europe-puissance*] is possible’ (my emphasis).

There are other perspectives on this aspect of the legacy of FPEU08. As one Czech presidency official observed, and as discussed above, Nicolas Sarkozy demonstrated that the EU can act cohesively under strong personal leadership (albeit in a string of specific crisis situations) of the Council in its European Council formation. Thus, a semi-permanent European Council President, as provided for in the Lisbon Treaty, could be a strong post, with the right person in position. This, however, could come at the expense of the power of the Commission president, although not necessarily at the expense of his/her broader legitimacy; more in their representative function. In other words, the reformed European Council Presidency could play a stronger representative role than the EU is accustomed to. Significantly, though, this assumes that the member states will appoint someone sufficiently influential, and this is unlikely.

Thus, the new presidency stands a high chance of being undermined by stronger national politicians within the European Council.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Goetz suggests that the changes proposed in Lisbon to extend the European Council presidency to 36 months, and the troika-trio reforms are not just about ‘efficiency and effectiveness’ (*ibid*, 202) but ‘are also likely to *affect the inter-institutional balance of power*, as they suggest a lengthening of the time horizons of the political tier of the Council, counterbalancing the five-year mandate of the College of Commissioners’ (*ibid*, 203).

These observations raise the broader question of what we mean by leadership in the EU context. Beach and Mazzucelli (2006: 6) define leadership in this setting as ‘any action by one actor to guide or direct the behaviour of other actors (be they the whole group or only a smaller coalition). In contrast Thomson (2008: 594), to pick one example, focuses more specifically on the *influence* that is a consequence of successful leadership: ‘[...] a Member State’s influence is defined as the extent to which its actions result in decision outcomes that are congruent with its preferences.’ He finds that ‘Member States enjoy some additional influence over decision outcomes when they hold the Council presidency. The presidency gives incumbent states responsibility with power’ (611). From the perspective of Paris, the exercise of influence and leadership, following both these definitions, is central to the construction of a genuinely *political* Europe, and this is an ongoing ambition of French policy towards the EU. Did FPEU08 advance the cause?

#### *French Relations with the EU after FPEU08: a step closer to a ‘Europe politique’?*

Definitions of *l’Europe politique* vary. Ferrand clearly equates ‘political Europe’ with ‘federal Europe’, where the ‘European executive’ would have ‘direct democratic legitimacy’ (2009: 33). Nicolas Sarkozy has been more specific, and has also been consistent, although not necessarily conclusive. For example, in Sarkozy’s speech to the European Parliament on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2007, he raised the theme of

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<sup>19</sup> A senior official from the European Affairs section of the Office of the Czech Government.

a ‘political’ Europe, as opposed to the EU being a ‘machine...for issuing rules, regulations, directives...’. And at the Elysée on 10 February 2008 (Sarkozy, 2008), the French President declared his intention to ‘put politics back in Europe’ by breaking the stranglehold of the sorts of EU rules that Goetz (2009, above), has described as ‘irreversible’ : for Sarkozy, ‘...l’enjeu est de remettre de la politique en Europe, de ne plus abandonner l’Europe au seul jeu de règles automatiques qui ne laissent aucune place à la décision et à la responsabilité politique. Il faut pouvoir parler de tout comme dans n’importe quelle démocratie : de la monnaie qui n’est pas un sujet tabou, de la politique commerciale, de la politique industrielle, de la réciprocité en matière de concurrence ou des dérives du capitalisme financier’ (my emphasis).

Sarkozy is no stranger to challenging dogma and taboos of any kind, and we have to discount for the role of rhetoric in the above statement: these are words destined primarily for a domestic audience, no matter where they are uttered. Nevertheless, the theme of a ‘political Europe’, however, defined, has been a constant in French relations with the EU, and continue to shape discourse in this respect.

In particular, FPEU08 was held up in France, by the President and his government, as proof that the EU’s routines and habits *could* be challenged in the pursuit of a more ‘political Europe’. The UMP’s campaign for the 2009 European Parliament elections (in which the UMP did relatively well, winning 27.8% of the total votes translating into 29 of the 72 French seats in the EP) revolved significantly around this message. Early in the campaign, for example, French Prime Minister François Fillon had defined what he meant by a political Europe: ‘*L’Europe politique, c’est une Europe où le Conseil européen n’est pas paralysé par l’obsession du consensus.*’ (Fillon, 2009). The slogan of the campaign itself was ‘*Quand l’Europe veut, elle peut*’ (hard to translate, but meaning that if Europe chooses to [do xyz], it can [it has the power]). (<http://www.ump2009.eu/>). Of particular note is the link made in the UMP’s campaign literature between the ongoing French pursuit of a ‘political Europe’, and the gains that France had made in this respect during its EU presidency in 2008. For example, and citing from the campaign literature in this respect (<http://www.ump2009.eu/bilan>) (my emphasis):

[In relation to ‘une nouvelle gouvernance européenne’] ‘Sur le fond, les avancées de cette présidence ont été considérables : la Présidence française *a bouleversé un certain nombres d’habitudes.*’

‘Le *volontarisme* et la *réactivité* de Nicolas Sarkozy ont été unanimement salués et ont fait de la présidence du conseil une institution-clef de l’Union européenne durant la présidence française. Ils ont au moins montré que la paralysie européenne pouvait être dépassée, y compris et peut-être surtout sur des sujets difficiles et ambitieux.

L’unité européenne impose de rechercher le consensus, quitte à faire des concessions, mais sans renoncer aux objectifs premiers. Le choix du pragmatisme a donc prévalu et a motivé la recherche d’un consensus.

Sans parler de « divorce » avec ses citoyens, l’Union européenne éprouve parfois des grandes difficultés à les convaincre et à les intéresser.

La présidence française de l’Union européenne a eu le mérite d’amorcer *le retour de la politique au sein des institutions européennes.*

Ainsi, une vraie démarche politique, incarnée, expliquée et coordonnée a été perçue positivement par les citoyens.

Indeed, French public opinion did express more positive attitudes towards the EU, and France’s place in it, following FPEU08 in comparison to beforehand. Debié (2008) cites polls estimating that in January 2008, 61% of French had thought that FPEU08 would have a positive impact on France’s influence in the EU, against 30% who expected no effect, and 9% negative effects. In March 2008, 67% of French considered that President Sarkozy was defending French interests abroad ‘well’ (*bien*): i.e. expectations were high. Eurobarometer, a year later (Eurobaromètre Flash: 2009) discerned a positive response to the French presidency, with 63% of those polled indicating that FPEU08 had been ‘fairly good’ (*plutôt une*

*bonne chose*) for France; against 18% who deemed it ‘rather bad’ (*plutôt une mauvaise chose*). The poll notes close similarities between the ‘general perception of the French regarding European integration (*la construction européenne*)’ in 2009 and 2006.

In our understanding, and more broadly, *l’Europe politique*, over the course of French relations with the EU since the 1950s, refers to three inter-related ideas: first, the distribution of power in EU decision-making, as emphasised by Sarkozy and co.; second, the conceptual confusion this has sown in French political discourse on the EU’s institutional design; and third, the ‘project’ or purpose of European integration in the broader sense.<sup>20</sup> First, ‘political Europe’ denotes the process by which EU member states reach decisions, and thus refers to the power to decide, and in whose name. If Europe is to be an independent actor, it needs institutions that are both legitimate and powerful. The French preference here for a ‘political’ process relates to the right of politicians elected by sovereign peoples to exercise political will (*volonté*) over and above what President Sarkozy has called ‘automatic’ rules and procedures, by which he means supranational authority. The French hand in the creation of the European Council is one manifestation of this priority. We saw this above. The crux of the issue here is the right of member states to preserve and exercise their sovereignty within the Community of member states, and to retain control over their national citizens, yet enable the EU to move ahead collectively – as an international actor. The 1958 French Constitution explicitly states that the French people are sovereign; but EU membership and in particular the extension of EU-level policy competence has required equally explicit ‘transfers of power’ to be written into the French Constitution in the form of constitutional amendments under the provisions of Article 89, which in turn has brought ‘Europe’ into the forefront of political debate, not least by the referendums of 1992 and 2005.

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<sup>20</sup> This discussion is extracted from Drake (2010, forthcoming).

This takes us straight back to the long-standing tension inherited in French strategy from the superimposing of de Gaulle's preferences on the existing European Communities, with their provisions for supranational decision-making (by qualified majority); and to François Mitterrand's accommodations with increased supranational authority in the form, first of the Single Market Programme in the 1980s, and then the single currency in the 1990s. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty also undercut the traditional republican link between nationality on the one hand, and citizenship on the other. Under the terms of the treaty, EU nationals have certain rights in any member state of the EU, including the right to vote and stand for election in local and European Parliament elections. This was a controversial clause in France, derided by the 'sovereignist' opponents of the Maastricht Treaty.

Second, an unfortunate outcome of these tensions over institutions in France has been to dodge the political and philosophical question of the EU's nature as a federal polity. Robert Schuman bequeathed a 'federal vocation' to the Community process; Charles de Gaulle turned France's back on this notion so alien to French republican notions of state sovereignty. François Mitterrand did indeed strike a more daring compromise between state, nation and Europe. Frédéric Bozo has portrayed the Maastricht Treaty as a clash between Mitterrand's 'federalist declaratory policy', and a 'confederalist operational approach' (1995: 217). Jacques Chirac for his part campaigned in the 2002 presidential election in favour of an oxymoronic 'European Federation of Nation States', as did his Prime Minister at the time, Socialist Lionel Jospin.

Third, 'political Europe' relates to Europe having a 'projet' or even a '*finalite*' which is not reduced to economic notions of free trade and open markets (a vision typically associated in France with the UK's idea of Europe, and known as *Europe-espace*). The notion of a '*projet de société*' is commonplace in French political culture; scaled up to the European level, the thinking is that Europe itself has a distinct identity related specifically to values deemed by France to trump other global forces in the world, particularly those emanating from world capitalist markets and their 'Anglo-American' supporters. Here too, FPEU08 provided France with an opportunity to put their money, literally, where their mouth was.

## *Conclusions*

A first conclusion to draw from the above relates to the ‘perspectives’ of the title. We have seen that many different perspectives exist on the ‘story’ of FPEU08; different people, closely involved or at a critical distance (this paper included) have a tale to tell. Our conclusions regarding the legacy and lessons of FPEU08 regarding the EU’s leadership capacity, both pre-and post-Lisbon Treaty, for example, depend on one’s perspective: we have seen that current French discourse is to emphasise a ‘political’ Europe that (much in keeping with Sarkozy’s personal style) can act, decisively. Yet as Autret (2009) points out (as does Hayward, 2009), the EU was never designed to ‘arbitrate’ or *trancher* (decide one way or the other) in the manner allowed by the semi-presidential politics of the Fifth French Republic. Nevertheless, there appears to be a demand for such leadership; the Lisbon Treaty provisions take a step in that direction, although not conclusively so; the *Guardian* newspaper, for its part, (20/12/08 ‘A Leader emerges’), and writing from its usually sceptical position regarding Sarkozy, concludes nonetheless that ‘Mr Sarkozy proved that EU governments can act collectively and that the institution is still greater than the sum of its parts. In acting like a leader of the EU should, Mr Sarkozy provided the best possible argument for replacing the current rotating presidency with an elected president.’

Similarly, we have seen, in keeping with other scholarship on EUCP, the importance of keeping a single EUCP in perspective: the Council, and its presidency, exist within a network of intra- and inter-institutional, and inter-personal relationships. And from Goetz’s perspective on time, the changes a presidency can bring are trumped by the ‘ongoingness’ of the more permanent and stable aspects of the EU’s institutional machinery; this is definitely what we saw when we lifted the bonnet on the FPEU08.

Despite the complexities of institutional dynamics and EU-member state relations thrown into relief by the EUCP function, categorical and rosy perspectives on EU business are just as much part of the history of *la construction européenne* to which we are all contributing (scholars, journalists, practitioners and so on), as are more sophisticated analyses; and we finish on a classic of the genre, namely: ‘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. (Lefebvre, 2009).

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