

The French EU Presidency

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Under the motto "a more protective Europe", France takes over the rotating EU Presidency in the second half of 2008 with a keen eye on energy, climate change, defence and immigration policy.

Milestones:

- 15 June 2007: Creation of a secretariat general for the French Presidency .
- 27-28 Aug. 2007: Jean-Pierre Jouyet, secretary of state for EU affairs, outlines the priorities for the French Presidency at an ambassadors' conference.
- July-December 2008: French Presidency.
- 15-16 October 2008: EU Summit (Brussels).
- 11- 12 December 2008: EU Summit (Brussels).

Policy Summary

From 1 July to 31 December 2008, France will organise and chair the European Council meetings. The French government has already announced that its motto will be "a more protective Europe" (see EurActiv 06/11/07).

The concept of "protecting Europe" was introduced by Jean-Pierre Jouyet, secretary of state for EU affairs, at a conference organised by social NGO "sauvons l'europe" in October 2007 (see EurActiv France). The idea is to defend Europe's social and economic model from the pressures of globalisation.

For further information on the French Presidency's agenda, see its official website and calendar , as well as a summary of the Council's 18-month programme for the French, Czech and Swedish Presidencies. In-depth coverage of the French Presidency's priorities is also available in a dedicated section on EurActiv.fr .

Issues:

Sarkozy 'the European';

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When he first outlined France's priorities for the EU Presidency at an ambassador's conference in August 2007, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his secretary of state for EU affairs Jean-Pierre Jouyet said their aim was to make Europe "an absolute priority" for France.

The French Presidency occurs just three years after French voters rejected Europe's cherished Constitutional project, throwing the EU into a long-lasting political crisis. But on the very day his election as French President was confirmed, Sarkozy promised he would put his country "back in Europe" (EurActiv 07/05/08), notably by helping to resolve the bloc's institutional impasse with the adoption of the new Lisbon Treaty and by better involving citizens in EU debates (EurActiv 16/05/08).

Indeed, the Treaty's ratification procedure has already been completed in France and Paris will play a key role in ensuring that ratification goes smoothly in all other EU countries so as to ensure that the new Treaty can come into force, as planned, immediately after the French Presidency in January 2009.

Four major priorities

• Climate change and...

Following a wide consultation on environmental issues ("Grenelles de l'environnement") in October 2007, France wants to make Europe a global model for environmental protection. It intends to take advantage of its role as EU President to influence the outcome of a major UN climate change conference that will take place in Poznan, Poland, in December 2008 (EurActiv 09/04/08). The meeting will be key to deciding on a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, which the US is still refusing to sign.

France is also eager to make its case for nuclear power as a crucial energy source in the fight against climate change and will be pushing to ensure that climate mitigation measures adopted at EU level do not harm European companies' competitiveness.

Indeed, in January 2008, the Commission presented a major "energy-climate package", with the objective of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 20% by 2020. The package proposes a review of the EU's Emissions Trading Scheme while setting targets for the development and introduction of renewable energies, including biofuels.

A political agreement is due on this set of proposals under the French Presidency.

• ...energy: A push for nuclear

With oil and gas prices soaring higher than ever and increasing concerns about security of supply, energy, with its inherent link to climate change, will also hold a key place on the French Presidency's agenda.

As the world's second largest nuclear country, France will also seek to promote nuclear energy as an important energy source to ensure diversification and security of supply. A key focus will be on the development of nuclear equipment safety and the issue of waste management.

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France is also set to clash with the Commission on the so-called "third energy package", presented by the Commission in September 2007. Indeed, along with Germany and six other EU members, France is opposing Commission plans to impose functional separation of energy companies' production and distribution activities (so-called "unbundling"). Instead, it is arguing in favour of a softer option whereby regulatory authorities could only "request" energy-producing firms to give up their transmission assets and to carry out grid and infrastructure upgrades.

The package is currently being examined by the European Parliament, which is expected to hold a vote in plenary in June. No compromise has yet been achieved among the 27 member states.

• A European immigration pact

France wants to make progress on a common European immigration policy during its presidency, with the sensitive issue of illegal immigration top of its list (EurActiv 11/04/08). According to French Immigration Minister Brice Hortefeux, the planned "immigration pact" would rely on three pillars: the refusal of 'en masse' regularisations, a harmonisation of asylum policies and rules for the return of illegal immigrants.

Key to finding a collective solution will be the implementation of a partnership with Southern countries. France will therefore be driving a rapprochement between the EU and its Mediterranean neighbours, with the launch of a "Union for the Mediterranean" on 13 July.

Sarkozy had originally envisaged the 'Mediterranean Union' as an exclusive club, involving only the EU's Mediterranean countries and their neighbours. But this proposal attracted strong criticism from Germany, which feared the plan could split the EU down the middle, with the new union becoming a rival to the EU itself. In the end, Sarkozy was forced to back down and agreed to allow all 27 EU member states to participate (EurActiv 05/03/08).

• An EU Defence Union?

Despite the sensitivity of this topic in European decision-making bodies, the French Presidency will also address defence issues. Contrary to the former French President Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy thinks that the construction of a Defence Union is compatible with NATO membership. He further wants an increase of the EU defence budget to confer more credibility to European foreign and defence policies.

In addition, the entry into force of the EU's new Reform Treaty should enable the European security and defence policy to move forward, in particular with the introduction of new powers for the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

• Defending the Common Agricultural Policy

Amid highly controversial negotiations over the EU's financial perspectives for 2007-2013, EU leaders agreed to carry out, in 2008, a "health check" of the Common Agricultural Policy - which currently eats up nearly half of the bloc's total budget.

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On the insistence of France, which is one of the EU's largest farming nations, the debate on the Commission's initial proposals to review the CAP will be initiated under the French Presidency on 21-23 September 2008 (EurActiv 12/09/07).

The country's main concern is to avoid a major overhaul of the current system that would lead to a radical decrease in the level of spending. Indeed, France's farmers and rural population are large beneficiaries of European subsidies.

French Agriculture Minister Michel Barnier appears to hope the current global food crisis and soaring commodity prices will help him in defending the current model. "What we are witnessing in the world is the consequence of too much free-market liberalism. We can't leave feeding people to the mercy of the market," he said recently.

Other dossiers:

- Economic Policy and the ECB

France is also hoping to make the most of its presidency to push its view on the European Central Bank's economic policy.

Sarkozy has regularly angered EU finance ministers and central bank governors by attacking the ECB's monetary policy, accusing the bank of hampering growth in the eurozone under the pretext of containing inflation. A particular element of his criticism centred on the bank's actions to stem off the recent international financial turmoil.

Indeed, financial markets across the globe went into a tailspin following the US sub-prime mortgage crisis in early August, raising fears over economic slowdown and job losses in the EU. Recently, Sarkozy said he thought it "curious" that the ECB had injected large amounts of liquidity onto the markets without cutting interest rates, adding that such a policy was sure to benefit speculators while making life harder for entrepreneurs (EurActiv 17/09/08).

The situation in financial markets will continue to be closely scrutinised by EU leaders under the French Presidency. Indeed, they have pledged to increase their readiness to deal with similar situations in the future, notably, calling on banks and other financial institutions to reform or face increased regulation. Key measures to avoid a repeat of the turbulence include: increased transparency and the obligation for financial institutions to fully disclose information on losses they have incurred, reinforced supervisory mechanisms and a better valuation of investments (EurActiv 10/10/07).

- Future EU

During the ambassadors' conference, Jean-Pierre Jouyet evoked a range of areas that will shape "tomorrow's Europe", such as research, technologies, space policy (Galileo, European Institute of Technology) and European exchange programmes, including the strengthening of the Erasmus student programme.

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But the most controversial issue on the French Presidency's agenda for the future of Europe will be the discussions that France wants to hold on the bloc's final borders. At the European summit in December 2007, Sarkozy succeeded in launching a "group of wise men" ("conseil de sages") charged with making proposals on the EU's mission, values and relationship with its neighbours for the next twenty years (EurActiv 17/12/07).

This expert committee will have to hand in its conclusions after the European elections of 2009.

• Foreign policy

France will also focus on the foreign policy agenda, as elections in the US are scheduled for November 2008 and Russia has just elected a new President. The French EU Presidency will have the task of establishing Europe's relationship with the new leaders of these two important EU partners. In addition, an EU-China summit is scheduled during the French Presidency.

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