

FINLAND HAS MET ITS MAIN PRESIDENCY OBJECTIVES

Published at: 16-12-2006

Source: [Portal Europe](#)



Finlands six-month Presidency of the Council of the European Union will come to an end on 31 December 2006. Finland is satisfied with the results of its Presidency. Central focus was on enlargement, energy policy, the strengthening of competitiveness, combating climate change, immigration, the Middle East and cooperation between the EU and Russia.

The beginning of the Presidency was marked by the tense situation in Lebanon. As holder of the Presidency, Finland strengthened the EUs role in efforts to reinvigorate the Middle East Peace Process and, in particular, in activities to stabilise the situation in Lebanon. The EU played a central role in the negotiations aimed at bringing the hostilities to an end and, through its commitment, the Union showed leadership in the strengthening of the UN peace-keeping operation.

Two particularly broad-based pieces of legislation were approved during the Finnish Presidency, after years of negotiation. The REACH Regulation is an overhaul of EU chemicals legislation. Its purpose is to improve health and environmental protection standards, and at the same time safeguard the competitiveness of the EUs chemicals industry. The Services Directive constitutes a unique advance in the development of the internal market in services. It will strengthen the Unions competitiveness. Finland also sought a consensus for amending the Working Time Directive but regrettably no agreement could be reached.

The main themes at the Informal Meeting of Heads of State or Government in Lahti in October were energy policy, external relations and innovation policy. The spirit of the meeting was constructive. The Heads of State or Government agreed unanimously that the EU needed a closer partnership with Russia. In the discussion over dinner with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, the EU spoke with one voice. It was agreed at Lahti that issues relating to energy and climate should feature prominently at summits between the EU and third countries.

During the Finnish Presidency much attention was given to the challenge of curbing climate change. At the UN Climate Change Conference in Nairobi, the Union achieved its objective of advancing negotiations on the climate regime after 2012. Finland actively prepared the ground for the negotiations by raising the matter at summit meeting with third countries and in discussions on the environment in the Permanent Partnership Council. The Declaration on Climate Change was adopted between Asian and European countries and a dialogue was also launched with the United States on climate matters.

On 1 January 2007, Romania and Bulgaria will accede to the EU. The Commission finalised the comparison of Croatian and Turkish legislation with EU legislation during the Finnish Presidency. Finland endeavoured to ensure Turkeys progress in fulfilling its obligations under the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement. The parties held intensive talks in the autumn but circumstances did not permit a solution to be reached. In December, the Council decided that eight chapters concerning the Protocol to the Ankara Agreement would not be opened, nor any chapters closed until Turkey has met its

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obligations. Talks on other chapters will continue as normal up to the closing stage.

Finland held bilateral consultations with the Member States on the EU Constitutional Treaty. With this, the process for the reform of the European Union entered a more active phase after a year of silent reflection. The conclusions drawn from the consultations provide a basis for further work. The Finnish Prime Minister, Matti Vanhanen presented his assessment of the outcome at the December meeting of the European Council and Finland will give a more detailed analysis to Germany, as the next Presidency country.

With regard to Community financing, Finland has worked hard to ensure a smooth transition to the new programming period which begins at the start of 2007. During the Finnish Presidency, almost all of the funding programmes (numbering around 40 in total) were approved, which will guarantee an orderly start to the new programming period. One of the programmes on which agreement was reached is the seventh Framework Programme, crucial to the financing of EU innovation policy.

There was a considerable increase in the number of open Council deliberations. Most of the sessions on legislative matters were webcast live or could be viewed via the Internet after the event as recordings. In communications, speed and transparency were twin objectives and the Presidency website provided a comprehensive news service and a broad range of material.

Finland brought negotiations on the establishment of the European Fundamental Rights Agency and the Institute for Gender Equality to a successful conclusion. Vilnius, Lithuania, was settled on as the seat of the Institute for Gender Equality. A number of other major decisions and agreements were reached during the Presidency, including the agreement on charges for overflying Siberia, the new accelerated Schengen timetable and the decision to enlarge ASEM, taken at the ASEM Summit.

Cooperation was enhanced on migration and border control issues, particularly with African and Mediterranean countries. The Union will use the productive experience it gained from this in its eastern and south-eastern regions. Steps were taken to increase the effectiveness of Frontex, the EU's border management agency, in border control operations.

The European Council meeting during the Finnish Presidency is currently underway. The main themes of the meeting are enlargement and more effective decision-making in justice and home affairs.