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Europe at a Cross Roads

Reflections on the French Presidency of the EU

France took over the Presidency of the European Union on 1 July 2008; this comes at a critical moment for the Union. What is in the French in-tray?

- the aftermath of the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish referendum on 12 June
- the conclusion of the 'health check' on the Common Agricultural Policy, a matter close to the heart of the French
- immigration
- the European policy on energy and climate change
- the review of the European Security Strategy
- the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy with the framework anticipated in the Lisbon Treaty.

What will France make of all of this? And should we be concerned?

The Common Foreign and Security Policy

France is committed to make this a major priority. France's decision to apply to join NATO, coupled with a commitment to a European Defence Union will lead to an emphasis on capabilities development (and despite the words which include civilian capabilities, the detail seems to be all on the military side) and the review of the European Security Strategy; this review already begun during the first half of the year will come to a conclusion during this presidency. On the capabilities side, the development of a European carrier task force based on British and French aircraft carriers is indicated as an important priority, as is the closing of the existing gap in the availability of deployable helicopters. For the French presidency, this priority is coupled with a wish to move forward in terms of a European defence equipment market. This, too, is a priority shared between the French President and the British Prime Minister, who expressed their hope that this would 'pave the way for increasing industrial cooperation and optimizing supply chains'.*

Energy and Climate Change

France is committed to being a leader on environmental protection and the successor to the Kyoto Protocol, but it comes at a price: a major push for nuclear energy. France leads on nuclear energy in Europe with 59 working nuclear reactors and 78% of the country's electricity generation from nuclear power stations; there is a clear commitment to this form of energy generation as a 'green' source of energy.

Immigration

France wants to make progress on this issue which has been a long-running priority of the EU. It foresees work on three aspects: the refusal of 'en masse' regularisations (i.e. saying 'no' to regularising the status of illegal migrants who have lived in EU Member States for some time); a harmonisation of asylum policies of the Member States (which could have positive benefits in that it might make the system more transparent, but could also lead to deterioration in the policies adopted currently in those Member States who have better arrangements than others – a headlong rush for the lowest common denominator in other words); and harmonisation of the rules for the return of illegal immigrants (with similar dangers inherent here as with the asylum policies).

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* As quoted by EURACTIV at: www.euractiv.com/en/opinion/france-seeks-revitalise-european-defence/article-173103

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EU Development Aid in Action: On the Ground in Uzbekistan

There aren't many jobs in the world where one minute you are sitting in a European embassy, politely discussing Central Asian political developments, and the next you are heading for an orphanage on a school bus - having swiftly ditched the suit for Bermuda shorts, trainers and T-shirt. But this is the nature of working in Communications for UNICEF in Uzbekistan. It can be intensely rewarding – and it can be intensely harrowing. Whilst still beaming at the excitement of the reality shift between political commentary and grassroots development, I learn of one boy's story.

Umid (12) has lost a leg. He has a shiny bald patch in the crown of his thick black hair. When he was 6, his parents took him to Russia in search of work. His father left him on his building site where Umid found some explosives. He played with them for a few minutes - and had the messy remains of his left leg amputated afterwards. He does not say where his parents are now. Despite this, he laughs and smiles a lot. It is hard to smile with him - and impossible to swallow the boulder in my throat.

Giving this lone child a simple tool, just a camera, to record his life and provide some protection suddenly seems so much more important.

UNICEF remains committed to a policy of constructive engagement in Uzbekistan. We work closely with the government. Together, major positive steps have been made. The government is working on implementing the two recently ratified International Labour Organisation's Conventions against Child Labour. There have also been major steps forward in health, education, child protection, the full realization of child rights and other areas. The UN as a whole is currently working with the government on the country's next Development Assistance Framework, to run from 2010-15.

Relations with the West improved after 9/11, but went into a virtual shutdown after a government response to an uprising in Andijon city in May 2005. The vast majority of international NGOs were forced to leave following criticism of those events. Only UNICEF, a few other UN agencies and a handful of other organizations remained.

Three years later, relations are improving. The European Commission is in the process of creating an official delegation in Tashkent, to be up and running by the year's end. Within the EU Central Asia Strategy 719 billion Euros have been allocated for regional development programmes between 2007-13. It is from this budget that the EU is paying all 3.5 million Euros of UNICEF's Uzbekistan flagship healthcare project. There are almost as many health workers here per head as in Western Europe, but many more newborns die. So the emphasis is on improving healthcare to save more lives.

The project has been piloted for two years. An independent comparative assessment concluded that lives had been saved and care standards improved. One mother and pilot patient, Gazalkhon Karabeava, said that before the project, UNICEF's training staff mixed breast milk with sugar and tap water. They also administered far more drugs during labour than they do now.

Joint EU/UN communication guidelines for shared projects are strict and multifaceted. The EU places great importance on making its role in development work known to the people. This does not supersede the core aims of the project, so can only be a good thing. As our project goes national in scale, UNICEF is aiming to bring a number of MEPs, journalists and others to Uzbekistan, to see our joint work in action for themselves.

In essence, UNICEF's work in Uzbekistan is about long-term sustainable development and the promotion of children's rights. One of the beauties of this is that there are no moral grey areas whatsoever.

Working to protect the most vulnerable could never be immoral. Other development questions may require more careful deliberation, yet the EU's involvement in such crucial development work is unequivocally right. Having seen it with my own eyes, they deserve a hearty pat on the back for it.

Matthew Taylor

(If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to e-mail me at: mataylor@unicef.org)

Matthew Taylor is a former QCEA Programme Assistant. He now works for UNICEF in Uzbekistan.

Power to the People?

EU consults Civil Society on Climate Change

The European Parliament's second Citizens' Agora was held in Brussels over two days in June. Billed as an opportunity for representatives of civil society from across the EU to discuss climate change policy with Parliamentarians and guest experts, it is perhaps unfortunate that the term 'agora' was chosen to describe the event. In ancient Greece an agora was an opportunity for citizens (wealthy, land-owning men) to listen to the pronouncements of the king or governing council. Not perhaps the greatest example of democracy in action, but despite the inappropriate moniker, the Parliament's initiative to consult NGOs and community groups on climate policy seems a step in the right direction.

On the first day 500 delegates took their places in the Hemicycle, the Parliament's debating chamber, to listen to a series of statements from a variety of MEPs, Commissioners and experts. While most of these were rather theatrical and lacking in substance, the session ended with an energetic presentation by American campaigner Jeremy Rifkin. He called for the EU to lead a new industrial revolution and build a renewable, hydrogen economy. His input was useful in that it raised a number of crucial issues that the EU is currently failing to address. One really inconvenient truth Rifkin emphasised was the extraordinary contribution of meat and dairy production to greenhouse gas emissions – a full 18% of the world total, a fact established by the UN's report 'Livestock's Long Shadow' in 2006. This contribution is larger than that of transport, yet politicians are reluctant to acknowledge that we will have to cut back on the amount of meat and dairy we eat to reduce our collective carbon footprint.

Rifkin also warned that energy supply problems will present a challenge to energy policy-makers the world over. Many geologists, energy analysts and oil industry figures are predicting that the peak and terminal decline of global oil production will occur before 2015 and that this will force us to profoundly address the way we use energy in the coming decades. The EU is not planning with urgency for this inevitability. Beyond controversial biofuels targets, Europe does not have a coherent plan for a transition to the post-oil age. While many question the viability of a hydrogen economy, Rifkin was right to remind the conference that climate change and fossil fuel depletion are twin crises to be tackled together.

The substantive work at the Agora took place in a series of workshops led by Parliamentarians in which the views of NGOs across Europe were heard and formalised in a series of declarations on different climate change policy areas. The EU's current '20-20-20' plan, commits the EU by 2020 to reduce carbon emissions by 20% on 1990 levels and to ensure that 20% of the EU's energy is renewably generated, with an overall energy efficiency improvement of 20%. While the plan was broadly welcomed by participants as a starting point to build on, it was criticised for a lack of ambition inappropriate to the severity of the crisis. I attended a workshop on the economic impacts of climate change and the economic tools which could help mitigate the problem. The participants voted on a resolution which urged the EU to increase its emissions reduction target to 30%, and a 30% renewables target. The workshop criticised the EU for allowing nuclear energy to be counted towards renewables targets, and promoted Tradable Energy Quotas (TEQs), a comprehensive system of carbon rationing, as an effective alternative to the EU's Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS).

The majority message from civil society as represented at the Agora was that the EU is underestimating the climate crisis that we face, and should set targets consistent with the scale of the problem. Whether the EU will implement any of the Agora resolutions remains to be seen, but I think the Agora has the potential to become a useful contribution to democracy in the Parliament. At present it is unclear by what process the Parliament considers the Agora's resolutions. Karl-Heinz Florenz, MEP and Rapporteur to the Parliament's Temporary Committee on Climate Change said he would communicate the Agora's conclusions to the Committee. This informal arrangement may be a good start, but the Agora's value would be enhanced if its resolutions were guaranteed formal consideration, perhaps in the form of a Parliamentary debate on the points of difference between the Agora and the Parliament. At the moment however the set-up is still a little too close to the ancient Greek model.

Neil Endicott

(continued from page 1)

Concluding the Health Check on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

Running in parallel with the review of the European Budget, the health check on the CAP is due to be completed during the second half of 2008. The extent to which real reforms are implemented will determine both the future implications of the CAP on the well-being of farmers and economies in developing countries and the room for manoeuvre in terms of reshaping the budget. In light of rising food prices, there should be scope for an innovative, not to speak of radical approach, but whether this will come from France is another matter altogether.

The rejection of the Lisbon Treaty

During the planning stages of the French presidency, both the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, and on the foreign policy side, the establishment of the role of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs together with the much-talked about European External Action Service, were going to be two of the major achievements of the presidency. Now that the Irish have rejected the Treaty all this is open again, and instead the French presidency will have to broker a deal on where to go next.

QCEA will reflect on the progress in this area in the next edition of *Around Europe*, when after the summer there might be a little more light and a little less heat in the discussions.

Martina Weitsch

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